



THE NEWS RECORD

SERVING THE PEOPLE OF MADISON COUNTY

81st Year No. 2

PUBLISHED WEEKLY IN THE COUNTY SEAT AT MARSHALL, N.C.

THURSDAY, January 14, 1982

15c Per Copy

Reactions To Hoaxes Differ Among Victims

By NICHOLAS HANCOCK
Editor

Asheville and Buncombe County realtors and moving company representatives say they were called by at least one woman and one man during December requesting appraisals on their property and estimates on moving them to other cities.

Each time, the callers identified himself or herself as a resident of Hot Springs.

Reactions from the businessmen to the hoaxes vary from being astonished that anyone would pull such a stunt to "who has the time to do that sort of foolishness?"

In addition, callers falsely placed ads in The Asheville Citizen and The Mountaineer in Waynesville advertising the sale of the homes of three Hot Springs residents.

Victims of the hoaxes have said they feel they are being harassed because of their support of certain candidates in the Nov. 3 town elections and a local gameroom operator.

Mrs. Jack Bartlett, of Bartlett Moving Co. in Asheville, said she will hardly forget the incident which caused her and her husband to make a three-hour trip to Spring Creek to estimate the cost of moving Mrs. Alberta Stroud to Raleigh.

"We thought it was on the up and up. It was a shock when we got there and found out Mrs. Stroud really hadn't called us," she said. "She (Mrs. Stroud) was real upset about it," but wondered, "Who has the time to do that sort of foolishness?"

She remembered getting a call from

someone who identified himself as Mrs. Bus (Mary Lee) Smith of Hot Springs. "The lady said she had a very bad cold and couldn't talk well. She mentioned the cold at least three times," Mrs. Welch said.

She said the conversation was very short and the caller wanted the estimate to be made at the beginning of the following week. Agent Henry George called Mrs. Smith on Monday, Dec. 14 and found Mrs. Smith hadn't called the company.

Mrs. Welch added that she thought the caller could have been a man "trying to sound like a woman."

The pattern of the hoaxes followed much the same lines with two realtors, Beverly-Hanks & Associates and Gerukos Realty Co. were contacted by callers who requested appraisals of their property and said they wanted to put their homes up for sale.

George Gerukos had a record of a call on Dec. 11 at 4:45 p.m. from someone identifying themselves as Mrs. Bus Smith, and Beverly-Hanks received a call from someone pretending to be Burlin Ricker. Both hoaxes were revealed by confirmation calls.

Classified ads to sell the homes of three Hot Springs residents were falsely placed in The Asheville Citizen and The Mountaineer beginning Nov. 13.

Martha Stroup of The Mountaineer said a caller placed an ad under the name of James Gentry of Hot Springs. She said she thought something was a little strange when the caller stated the ad should read "Two nice homes. Both for \$15,000." Mr. Gentry called the newspaper and explained that he hadn't ordered the ad, she said, and the ad was discontinued.

An error in the Jan. 7 article, "Three Hot Springs Residents Targets of Phone Threats," listed Mr. Pat Gentry as co-owner of Gentry and Gentry Hardware. Pat Gentry is not co-owner of the hardware store, and has no official connections with the business, according to store owner Mr. James Gentry.

Don Freeman, classified advertising manager for The Asheville Citizen, said two house-for-sale ads were called in to his department — one for Richard Waltz and the other for Clyde Huntsinger. Freeman said a woman placed the first ad and a man called in the second.

Freeman was notified by Waltz and Huntsinger that the ads were hoaxes and both were discontinued after having run three days. The callers gave incorrect addresses for Waltz and Huntsinger. "I don't know who got the bills," he said.

Freeman, a Madison County native now living in Leicester, said he thought the hoax "was kind of down and dirty."

Generally, reaction to the hoaxes was one of disapproval. And, when told that three residents had received arson threats, one individual contacted said, "Well, you know how it is in Madison. If you go against the strong boys, they don't like it."

At least nine other Hot Springs residents have reportedly received annoying phone calls during November and December, calls thought to be connected to the hoaxes and threats — but these parties could not be reached last week for comment.

Graham Pleads Not Guilty

The owner of Graham's Boarding Home entered a plea of "Not guilty" Wednesday in District Court to a charge of operating a nursing home without a license in Madison County.

Mildred Graham appeared in court to answer the charge, but Judge Robert H. Lacy of Newland ruled that the case would be continued on Feb. 3 and ordered both defense and prosecuting attorney to present trial briefs no later than Jan. 29.

The charge was filed by the district attorney on behalf of the state after an August, 1981 investigation by the local Department of Social Services and the state Department of Human Resources determined that the facility was functioning as more than a boarding home.

The charge carries a maximum penalty of two years in prison and a court fine.

Defense attorney Devere Lentz contended that the state law which Mrs. Graham is allegedly violating was not in effect on Nov. 1, 1981 — the date specified in the charge which said that on that date she "did unlawfully and willingly operate an unlicensed nursing home."

District Attorney Forrest Ball told Judge Lacy that the article in the general statute had merely been recodified and was still in effect on Nov. 1.



Mildred Graham

Judge Lacy granted a defense motion for continuance and commented, "There are apparently several conflicts in the law relating to this matter."

Meanwhile, the Department of Social Services is keeping a close eye on the boarding home operation located in the Sandy Mush area of southwestern Madison County. According to DSS attorney

Larry Leake, social workers are making unannounced visits and inspections of the facility several times a week.

The August investigation revealed the boarding home was providing "personal care and limited medication services to some 16 patients who required close supervision and a protective environment," DHR officials have said.

"The quality of care and the conditions under which it is provided fails to insure the health and protection of the residents," they added.

The Division of Facility Services of DHR notified Graham that if she did not cease operation of the home by Sept. 30, 1981 she would face legal prosecution by the local district attorney. Facility Services issues licenses for nursing home operations in the state. State officials said Graham failed to respond to the notice which said she could apply for a license within 30 days or notify DSS officials that certain occupants at the facility needed to be relocated to "appropriate licensed nursing homes."

The boarding home became the object of public scrutiny when a resident was reported missing on Nov. 29. Dean Rogers, 57, was found dead approximately one mile from the home after an intensive four-day search. An autopsy report stated Rogers died from exposure.

Opportunity Corporation Gets Axe

The Opportunity Corporation, one of the county's oldest community services agencies, is feeling the bit of the Reagan administration's economic cutback program according to Lonnie D. Burton, director of the service.

Burton announced that effective Jan. 1, Opportunity Corporation has had to lay off half its existing staff and leave unfilled four other positions

vacated by retirements. Only twenty of last year's forty-one staff members are now at work, and some of them have taken pay cuts of up to 25 percent.

Federal funding for the local agency's administration was cut by more than 44 percent when the Reagan administration decided to abolish the Community Services Administration, substituting

Community Block Grants to individual states. Local funding last year was \$523,000. This year, it is anticipated to be \$292,500.

Hardest hit, according to Burton, will be programs providing transportation to the ill and handicapped, and emergency assistance to families without heat and electricity to heat their homes.

Other projects including a

nutrition program, a summer youth recreation program, and a summer lunch program were all completely eliminated by the Administration's budget chopping. However, the agency will continue to operate the Head Start and weatherization programs, though the latter will have only half of last year's funding.

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Sign



Photo by N. Hancock

THE TIME and temperature sign on Marshall's Wachovia Bank Building relayed the story of the Arctic air mass invasion of Madison County over the weekend. The temperature registered 1 degree at 9 a.m. on Sunday, and it fell to an unofficial -6 degrees

early Monday morning. While area residents were bothered by dead auto batteries and some frozen water pipes, no weather related deaths or injuries were reported in the county for the three-day period.

Robbery Suspect Extradited Saturday

The third suspect in the June 16 robbery of a Hot Springs bank was extradited from Miami, Fla., Saturday to the Madison County Jail, according to Sheriff E.Y. Ponder.

David Wayne Jones, 20, went before Judge Robert Lacy in a first appearance hearing Monday in Marshall. Lacy set a \$100,000 bond for Jones and bound him over to criminal Superior Court which convenes Monday, Feb. 8.

Jones was arrested Nov. 10 in Miami in connection with the robbery of the Hot Springs branch of Wachovia Bank and Trust Co.

In that robbery, three armed men locked

three bank employees and a customer in the bank vault before they made off with approximately \$51,000, the sheriff said.

Two other men, Spencer Dale Allison, 55, and Charles Williams, 20, both of Morehaven, Fla. have been convicted by the Madison County Superior Court in the case, according to Ponder.

Allison was sentenced to 50-60 years in prison, and Williams is free on \$50,000 bond while awaiting sentencing by the court.

Jones faces six charges — armed robbery, conspiracy to commit a felony and four counts of kidnapping.

Merchants Want More Details

Police Force Fate Linked To Marshall Water Woes

By NICHOLAS HANCOCK
Editor

The fate of Marshall's police department remained up in the air following the January board of aldermen meeting and a special meeting last Thursday with town merchants.

Mayor Lawrence Ponder has proposed that town police protection be contracted out to the Madison County Sheriff's Department in order to save the town some \$20,000 to \$25,000 in expenditures. That money, according to Ponder, could be better spent on capital improvements.

Following the Jan. 4 aldermen meeting, the mayor and two aldermen met with merchants to get their opinions on the proposal, but the merchants concluded they would have to have more details as to the cost of contracting and the form of protection provided before giving the plan their stamp of approval.

Ponder told the merchants that he would meet with Sheriff E.Y. Ponder and county commissioners soon to provide those details for the town businessmen.

Ponder said Marshall's five-man police force costs the town nearly \$50,000 annually, producing a serious drain on town's annual tax revenues of \$86,000.

"We can't afford it; it's plain and simple," he said. "I'm not pointing a finger at anybody in the police department. I'm not making fun of anybody. If we had a new water and sewer system, then we could perhaps afford the police department."

Police Chief William R. Lisenbee and his men have been criticized recently by some downtown merchants for what they say is too much time spent patrolling businesses on the Marshall Bypass. But, Ponder said some of the stores on the bypass are within the municipal limits and are entitled to police protection by the town.

Part of the town's financial troubles stem from delinquent water bill accounts, Ponder said. An estimated 44 percent of the town's 430 water customers have not been paying their bills, but Alderman John Dodson told the merchants that town has not a firm

policy of collecting delinquent water bills and is taking action to insure beefed up revenues.

"Letters have been sent out and people are paying," Dodson said.

Showing dissatisfaction with past police protection provided by the town, the merchants questioned Ponder and the aldermen about current police department salaries, supervision and duties.

"It's premature to approve the proposal now. We need to know how it can be worked out," said Dean Shields, owner and manager of WMMH Radio. "But I don't see what duties they (the police department) are performing now," he added.

The town fathers were asked by the businessmen to contact Sheriff E.Y. Ponder and present a firm proposal for a contract between the town and the county.

Once the terms of such an agreement are decided, a town meeting should be called to allow the public to express their sentiments on the proposal, the merchants suggested.