



INVESTIGATORS RECOVERED remains believed to be those of the missing woman behind the Keeler home on Milligan Road near the Ash community.

Keeler Accused Of Wife's Murder

BY TERRY POPE

Investigators who unearthed a human finger behind a home near Ash last week believe it belonged to Rhonda Diane Keeler, who has been missing since Aug. 17.

Warrants for arrest charging her husband, Timothy James Keeler, with first-degree murder and flight were drawn last Thursday.

Timothy Keeler, 31, hasn't been seen since Sept. 15. His whereabouts are unknown.

Keeler "premeditated and deliberated" the murder of his wife and then allegedly tried to hide her body in a low-lying swamp behind their home near the Ash community, District Attorney Rex Gore asserted Friday.

With the discovery of new evidence, SBI agents were immediately called in around 10 a.m. Thursday to assist in the case, said Brunswick County Sheriff John C. Davis. SBI agents spent two days behind the home recovering bones.

"We have found enough physical evidence to make us believe she is buried somewhere in the area," said Davis, at a news conference with Gore last Thursday.

"Small parts were found on top of the ground," said Davis, who would not describe them any further.

Davis and Gore held the briefing to announce the charges against Keeler and to call on media and public assistance to help find the suspect, who was reportedly last seen hitchhiking toward South Carolina.

The first clue of Ms. Keeler's death, a human finger with the fingernail attached, was discovered by Brunswick County Emergency Management Coordinator Cecil Logan in a small grave about 300 feet behind the couple's home on Milligan Road (S.R. 1351).

Sheriff's detectives and N.C. Forest Service officials began a grid search of the property around 9 a.m. Thursday, spreading out about arm's length and searching for clues along the ground.

Ms. Keeler was last seen Aug. 17 by her mother, Genevieve Rathburn, who reported her missing to the sheriff's department on Sept. 4. Officers had conducted a routine

search of the area by land and by helicopter, but had turned up nothing, said Lt. Donnell Marlowe.

A nearby creek bottom was also dragged prior to last week's more thorough search, he said.

"It's not a very easily accessible area," said Gore.

Gore said it was "pretty obvious" someone had tried to restore the earth to its original state at the gravesite.

The bones have been identified as human body parts, but identifying them as those of Ms. Keeler will take some time at the SBI crime lab, said Gore. However, evidence would indicate the remains are those of the missing woman, he added.

Detectives believe Keeler has fled Brunswick County. A source told officers they saw the suspect trying to thumb a ride on U.S. 17 south of Shallotte about the time he was last seen on Sunday, Sept. 15, when his landlord came to the home and collected the month's rent.

The next day, officers contacted Keeler and asked if he would agree to take a polygraph test relating to his wife's disappearance, said Davis.

"He had been cooperative. We went to pick him up and he was gone," Davis said. "He has not been seen since."

Keeler had told deputies that he and his wife were hitchhiking to Asheville last month to see their two children, who had been placed in foster care prior to her disappearance. When they stopped at a bikers' bar in Charlotte, his wife left him, Keeler said, so he returned to Brunswick County.

Ms. Keeler had an alcohol problem and had entered treatment centers before.

At the press conference, Gore would not discuss possible motives for the murder. "I think they had a history of a very volatile relationship," he added.

Detective Nancy Simpson said she became worried that something had happened to Ms. Keeler when she had failed to call her son on his birthday. Also, officers could not find a bikers' bar in Charlotte matching Keeler's description, she said.

Neighbors told detectives that on Aug. 17, they heard about nine gunshots and screams coming from the residence, both before and after dark. The next morning, Keeler reportedly went to the home of

Dorsey Parker, a neighbor, to borrow a shovel, saying he had to bury his cat.

This evidence was presented to Magistrate Cheryl Hughes last Thursday as evidence in obtaining a search warrant for the Keeler residence.

While being interviewed, Keeler took Lt. Marlowe to a spot where he said he had buried the cat. The detective also seized a small board from a back porch that appeared to have blood stains, which Keeler said came from a cat that had a miscarriage.

"It was cat blood," said Davis, who received the crime report on the blood test last week.

Officers seized some clothing, sofa and parts of a mattress from the home, according to the search warrant.

Investigators are also trying to find a living room carpet that had been ripped from the floor of the home, said Davis.

Keeler is originally from Saint Paul, Minn., and has served in the U.S. Marines while in Florida, where he still has some relatives, said Davis.

He is white, 5 feet 7 inches tall, weighs about 150 pounds, with hazel eyes, brown hair and a fair complexion. He has two tattoos, a tiger on his right arm and the word "Timmy" on his left arm.

Oyster Festival Slated For October 18-19

(Continued From Page 1-A)

Contest" of 1991 starts at 2 p.m., with no entry fee. Sign-up is possible until shortly before storytellers begin spinning their 10-minute tall tales on center stage. With Cecelia Gore as this year's emcee, the contest is again sponsored by the Brunswick County Veterans Service Office and T.J.'s Electric.

At 5 p.m. novice and professional oyster shuckers alike pick up their knives for the official North Carolina Oyster Shucking Contest, sponsored by Burger King of Shallotte. The winner will advance to national competition at the 1992 St. Mary's County Oyster Festival in Leonardtown, Md.

Instead of making a bid to keep her state title another year, reigning state champion and former national grand champion Cathy Carlisle of Brunswick County will be competing Oct. 19 at the national event. A mobile telephone hook-up Saturday evening will appraise local festival-goers of her progress in the women's preliminary competition in Maryland.

That leaves the field wide open for past competitors and newcomers to claim cash prizes and a title.

Contestants shuck 24 raw oysters against the clock, with attractiveness of the completed tray a major factor in judging. There is no fee to enter the competition; however shuckers provide their own gloves and knives. Information is available from the chamber; shuckers can sign up at the south end of the stage until 4:30 p.m. Saturday.

When Contest Chairman Dean Walters names a new state shucking champion, said Dameron, "the festival is over."

Lincoln Primary PTA Slates Fest

Lincoln Primary School PTA holds its annual fall festival from 5 p.m. to 9 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 17 in the school gymnasium at Leland.

Food, games and fun will be offered, said Cindy Collins, spokesman. Tickets are 20 cents, with proceeds to be used for purchase of supplemental materials and equipment.



SGT. WENDELL BENNETT of the Brunswick County Sheriff's Department checks a vehicle at a roadblock on N.C. 179 west of Calabash following the bank robbery Thursday.

Search Continues For Bank Robbers

(Continued From Page 1-A)

Seven officers stayed on the scene until after dark and searched woods in the general vicinity of the bank, Marlowe said.

Although only two men entered the bank, Peters said "there is a possibility that others were involved, but we don't know that for sure."

Peters said there were security devices inside the bank. "I can't comment any more than that right now."

The bank robbery was the first in

Calabash in nearly a year. A man armed with a handgun robbed the NCNB branch Sept. 28, 1990.

That was the only bank robbery in Brunswick County last year, but the fifth to occur in Calabash since June 1989.

The Security Savings & Loan branch was robbed three times, and United Carolina Bank's branch in Calabash was robbed once in 1989.

Calabash doesn't have its own police department. The town relies on the Brunswick County Sheriff's

Holden Beach Officials Defend Room Tax Record

BY DOUG RUTTER

Holden Beach officials defended the town's past usage of occupancy tax revenues at a workshop Tuesday and invited a disgruntled group of residents to participate in next year's budgeting process.

A handful of real estate developers and residents questioned whether the town has been spending its accommodations tax legally and said methods of accounting for those expenditures should be improved.

Town Manager Gary Parker, who conducted the workshop with auditor Menton Padgett, said the town has spent the money legally in the past, even though it might not have been spent the way some people wanted it spent.

To support his legal opinion, Parker handed out a letter from Robert E. Hagemann, assistant general counsel with the N.C. League of Municipalities.

Hagemann said the town's 1991-92 budget allocations in the occupancy tax fund are appropriate and comply with the 1988 state legislation that gave Holden Beach the authority to collect the room tax.

The town allocated \$60,000 for police salaries, \$50,000 for trash pickup, \$40,000 for administration salaries, \$20,000 for debt service on public buildings, \$10,000 for the fire department contract, \$8,000 for beach patrol salaries and \$7,000 for gas, oil and tires.

The law says occupancy tax funds cannot be used for services normally provided by the town unless they promote tourism and enhance the ability of the town to provide for tourists.

Parker, who admitted the legislation is open to interpretation, said he believes any services provided by the town can be supported with occupancy tax money because all services help attract tourists.

However, several people in the audience said the town shouldn't use the money to pay for services the town was providing before it started collecting occupancy tax in 1989.

Jim Griffin, a real estate developer, said the town is only using the room tax money to augment property taxes and other general fund revenues.

"I don't think that's the spirit of the law," he said the money should be used to attract tourists and to pay for services and facilities that are not normally provided to residents.

Alan Holden, whose business rents cottages and collects occupancy tax for the town, said he wants to be able to show renters where their money is being spent.

Holden said the room tax has been used as a "slush fund" or "grab barrel" in the past to pay for whatever services the general fund couldn't cover.

Other people in the audience were concerned about how the town has been accounting for the occupancy tax fund.

Harold Steerts, a residents and retired auditor, suggested the town ask the state Attorney General for a legal interpretation of the occupancy tax legislation.

Allan Dameron agreed. He said the town only received one legal opinion from the League of Municipalities.

Parker said the town could get legal opinions "from here to eternity" but wouldn't find an attorney who would say the town spent the money illegally.

The town manager encouraged people unhappy with the way the money has been spent to participate in the budget process next spring.

"What we're getting into here is an after-the-fact argument..." he said. "Don't beat us about the head for this year and the prior years."

West Brunswick Sets Open House

The staff of West Brunswick High School at Shallotte is encouraging parents to attend an open house Tuesday, Oct. 8, starting at 7:30 p.m. in the school gym.

After a brief general meeting, parents will follow an abbreviated school schedule for approximately one hour, a news release indicated. Teachers will be on duty to meet with parents, arrange conferences and answer questions.

For more information contact the school administration at 754-4338.

Deadline Nears To Enter Crafts

Entries for the arts and crafts show at the N.C. Festival by the Sea at Holden Beach will be accepted until Oct. 18.

The festival will be held Oct. 26 and 27 at Holden Beach, with activities centered under the bridge.

Jim Lowell, arts and crafts show chairman, estimates 120 to 150 exhibitors.

"We've got about 100 entered so far, so things are looking good," he said last week.

Those include 20 booths reserved for food or drink sales and booked against an earlier deadline.

The entry fee to reserve an arts and crafts booth is \$25, plus another \$5 for electrical hook-up.

Exhibitors will display assorted items that include handblown glass, paintings, jewelry and woodcrafts.

Show hours will be 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.

Lowell is the contact for those interested in exhibiting. He can be reached at L. Bookworm, 842-7380.

Expect Warm Days And Cool Nights

Temperatures are expected to fall in the normal range over the next few days as October comes to the South Brunswick Islands, with rainfall a little above normal.

Jackson Canady, a weather watcher at Shallotte Point, said he expects temperatures to average from around 60 degrees at night to around 80 degrees during the daytime, with about three-quarters inch of rainfall.

For the period Sept. 24 through 30th, he recorded a maximum high of 87 degrees Sept. 25. The minimum nightly low of 53 degrees occurred on both the 28th and 29th.

Canady recorded an average daily high of 82 degrees and an average nightly low of 61 degrees, about normal for this time of year.

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