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No conclusions after 4-month investigation in DeVries death

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Whether or not some new sort of evidence is turned up, there should be little room for doubt at the end of the Lucille DeVries death case that investigation was carried out to the fullest ability of all concerned.

From details allowed for publication now, the several groups cooperating in the work have

probed areas ranging from life histories to such items as a time clock card and a car door spring.

Four months' work, including many 16-hour days for police and fire department men with help of state agencies, has not yielded evidence of foul play in the death of the young woman found in her burning auto Oct. 10. Even those whose stories are being confirmed by lie detector tests cannot be called suspects.

Yet, the scarcity of new pertinent knowledge has not ended the investigation—although it reasonably could have some weeks ago.

What has been learned?

Most of the story is no different than was known at the time of the death, in spite of the constant review and work on a mass of physical evidence and statements by up to 100 persons interviewed for one reason or another. And there is no easy way to summarize four months of work readily.

The interrogation and medical evidence have told a lot about Miss DeVries.

She was a reasonably attractive, happy and hard-working girl 22 years old. While she had her moods, like anyone, she would not have been called moody or depressed. There were several persons in whom she

confided closely, yet from them and other sources there is no reason to believe she had troubles or enemies of any sort. Even finances were checked. She dated but was not greatly involved with any particular man.

For experienced officers with murder investigations behind them, the kind of person she was pretty much fails to fit the ordinary victim of homicide.

A great deal is known about the events in Miss DeVries' life just before the death. She began work at 8 a.m. Oct. 9 at The Iowa Co. where she was regarded as an extremely competent office worker. Her work day there ended at 5 p.m., and at 6 p.m. she began part-time duties at the Frontier Ballroom.

The medical examination did show alcohol in the blood, not sufficient for intoxication but possibly enough to add to fatigue-induced lethargy. Medical evidence on record also helps eliminate some possible motives for foul play. In fact nothing in Miss DeVries' physical condition hints at any foul play motives.

Several reliable witnesses saw the auto not long before the fire was reported, and one of the things seen created a puzzle for a time. One car door was reported to be open partway. Yet firemen who arrived to fight what they assumed was a routine car fire were sure they opened it to start their work.

At 1:30 a.m. Oct. 10 — 17½ hours after her work day had started — she ended work at the Frontier Ballroom. What she said and did through the day and night are known in broad outlines from statements of a variety of persons.

The young woman, tired without a doubt, but otherwise normal, left the ballroom alone. Then she arrived at the Wheel-In Cafe at the north edge of the city where she ate. Again, here were witnesses and it is known she left alone — about 1:45 a.m.

Then comes the blank that investigators have hoped to fill in.

At 4:10 a.m. there was a car fire reported beside 607½ rd NE where Miss DeVries shared an apartment with Judy

Siskow — a friend since school days in Thornton. Firemen extinguished the roaring fire inside the car and found the young woman's body in the back seat.

In spite of the public interest in it at the time, the location of the body is not considered a vital point in the investigation. In a fire and pain situation, motion without logic can be expected, one investigator pointed out.

In fact, the location would at least seem to indicate that if any foul play was involved it did not occur outside the car or even in the front seat. There would be no point, it is believed, for one to move a helpless or dead person into the rear of a two-door car when the front seat would serve the same purpose.

The examination of the body did show that the young woman was alive and breathing in a fire situation. The only way in which investigators can look for foul play, therefore, is by theorizing that she could have been rendered helpless or unconscious.

Even that becomes somewhat difficult because of the thorough medical examination that was possible in spite of the severe surface burns. There was, for instance, no skull fracture or concussion, no choking, no broken bones, no smothering sufficient to cause usual lung collapse — in fact nothing indicating other than a fire cause of death.

To keep investigation alive at all, in other words, there has to be an assumption that some less serious type of injury could have been sufficient to render the tired girl helpless.

Thorough examination of the auto, however, showed that the car door was burned in a manner indicating that it had been open. The extreme draft created by the fire, plus weakening by heat of the spring that holds a door in the opened position probably caused the door to swing shut by itself, it is believed.

If there is a single thing most disturbing, even now, it is the speed with which the fire seems to have been built up. Witnesses report seeing the car in the driveway, still not on fire, some 20 minutes to a half hour be-

To firemen, who have dealt with dozens of car fires and who have set various car-body test fires since, the fire developed too fast for normal circumstances. The motor, with its fuel, was not involved. Laboratory tests made on material from the car were aimed at discovering if something was present—accidentally or otherwise—that would have increased the fire speed.

Gasoline and other petroleum products were ruled out by a test completed Oct. 23. While material did show evidence that there could have been some other type of flammable liquid, the substance found also can be chemically present in clothing and other materials.

A second test, which was run in December, ruled out one such material — unvulcanized rubber such as is used in elastic. That still leaves dozens of normal reasons for presence of what was found. Testing cannot narrow the findings further.

The statements of witnesses who saw the car before it was burning have been reviewed as late as last week and seem to be positive. For one passerby, even a check of arrival at work was made on his time card and confirms the time stated—still leaving too fast a fire buildup to be normal.

Incidentally, two witnesses of the car before the fire report seeing it in different locations on the driveway in which it burned. It could have rolled, investigators said, or it could have been moved. The drive does have some slope.

Those having lie detector checks are doing so by their own consent to assure investigators that their stories are correct. Whether those tests will reveal anything remains to be seen. The investigators, of course, would be as satisfied to find a definite accidental cause for the fire as a criminal cause.

If it can be established that death was due to foul play, there will be a criminal involved who had extremely good luck, excellent planning or both.

His motive and previous contact with the young woman have not been obvious in spite of hours of conversations with her contacts. He—or she—was not seen traveling with Miss DeVries on the night in question. He would have had to disable her in such a way as to be sure she would not escape the fire—yet without killing or even doing obvious damage other than possible surface injury erased by the fire.

Still, the investigation goes on.