

Smith murder case: No leads, no suspects, nothing

By Gregg Zoroya

Police have no suspects, no clear-cut leads and no motives in the case.

Three weeks and two days have gone by since young Gary Smith visited his father's Ventura home on a Sunday afternoon to help mow the lawn.

The 12-year-old boy was the first to discover the bodies of his father, prominent attorney Lyman R. Smith, 43, and stepmother Charlene, 33, who had both been beaten to death in the bedroom of their expensive hillside home.

That first week, four police investigators and a sergeant spent nearly 80

hours each over seven days trying to crack the case.

But since then, investigators have been working closer to an eight-hour-a-day, five-day-a-week work week.

One of the detectives, Dick Haas, regarded by many police officials as one of the best detectives, if not the best, in the Ventura Police Department, has left for an investigative position with the District Attorney's Office. It is still not clear whether he will be able to continue to investigate the Smith case from that department.

But three investigators and a sergeant remain on the case full time, which has meant placing a heavier load on other detectives in the investigative bureau.

Detectives on the Smith case have put in more than 200 hours of overtime interviewing more than 100 people.

"Any kind of a complicated crime investigation can be frustrating. However, we're still optimistic that we'll solve the case," said Capt. Paul Lydick, head of investigation.

"Usually, if you have a clear-cut motive in the case, that will lead to a suspect or suspects. But in the absence of that, it just makes it that much more difficult," Lydick said.

Police believe the couple died approximately three or four days before they were found. When Smith and his wife went to bed, Thursday night, March 13, they set the alarm for an early hour, because Friday Smith had an appointment at his law firm of Romney, Smith & Drescher in Santa Paula.

Sometime during the night someone got into the house without force, took a log from near the fireplace, and in the darkness slipped into the bedroom where the couple were sleeping.

It took only one blow to the head of each from the large piece of wood to kill Smith and his wife, police said.

Nothing was taken from the house, there was no mutilation of the bodies and no sexual molestation.

But the hands of the victims were bound.

According to sources, the autopsy indicated initially that the couple's

hands were bound after they died. However, it is no longer clear whether the binding occurred before or after death.

But there is evidence that Smith and his wife probably died instantly.

Authorities say that in nearly every autopsy of a homicide, the medical-examiner coroner searches for one small human organ that can give some indication of the emotional state of the victim at the time of death — the adrenal gland.

According to Dr. Peter Speth, assistant county medical-examiner coroner, this case was no exception.

A small, fleshy gland, about the size of a half-dollar when it is heat-

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thy, the adrenal gland secretes adrenalin and adrenal cortical hormones into the bloodstream — the fight or flight hormones — at times of stress.

"In that sort of situation, hormones would be secreted in large quantities into the bloodstream," said Dr. Ronald Kornblum, Ventura County Medical-Examiner Coroner, explaining the process. "These (reactions) are part of the autonomic nervous system. It happens whether you want it to or not.

"Presumably (when someone has died under stress) the gland has shrunk, because it has excreted all of its contents into the bloodstream," said Kornblum.

The Smiths' adrenal glands indicated Smith and his wife were not terrified, that they did not suffer, but died instantly, authorities said.

Kornblum stresses that such evidence is not conclusive. The gland is too small and varies too much in size from one person to another for precision.

But examining it is helpful, he said. "It goes along with your subjective opinion. But it would have to remain that, suggestive, speculative."