

Officials check link between school principal's arrest and woman's death

by CHRIS ROBERTS
Associated Press

KING OF PRUSSIA, Pa. — One night last August, an administrator in the local school district was spotted in a shopping center parking lot, crawling about in a hood with eyes and brandishing two loaded pistols.

Police arrested Jay C. Smith, the principal at Upper Merion High School for 12 years.

Officers said a search of his car uncovered two more loaded pistols, equipped with home-made silencers, along with a bolt cutter and drugs.

A search of his home turned up reference material on sociology. The educator, it turned out, was looking into the possibility of using dogs as sexual surrogates to cope with a spiraling divorce rate.

On June 15, Smith was sent to prison on firearms and disorderly conduct charges.

THAT SAME day, police discovered the nude body of Susan Bennett, a 37-year-old divorcee who taught English at the same high school. The body was sprawled to the back of her 1978 Plymouth Horizon hatchback, parked outside a motel near Harbortown.

The search for her killer and for her two small children — a search that has involved other teachers — has raised eyebrows still another notch in this middle-class Revolutionary War-era community of neatly kept, cookie-cutter homes.

Parents, already stunned by the bizarre circumstances of Smith's arrest, now find police questioning their children's teachers about a murder and a possible link to the jailed educator.

"It's dreadful, absolutely horrible," said Mrs. Lowell Pockman, who has one son attending the high school and two other children who are graduates.

"I'm afraid it's just a reflection of our culture — the violence, the sick people who need help. It's a shame that because the school is turning around now, it has some excellent teachers."

SMITH, 51, served as principal at Upper Merion until June of 1978 when he was reassigned to the post of special services coordinator for the school district.

Since his arrest last August, he also has been convicted of robbing a Sears store and attempting to rob another while masquerading as a Bank's guard. In addition, he's accused of stealing \$1,000 worth of equipment from the high school.

Talk has turned now from his life of crime to Susan Bennett's tragedy. It seems everyone is asking: Who killed her? Where are her children? And why did she take out a reported \$1 million in life insurance shortly before her death, naming a fellow school teacher as beneficiary?

On Friday night, June 22, Mrs. Bennett and her two sons, Karen, 11, and Michael, 16, left their home at nearby Ardmore, driving off in the Horizon. They left packed suitcases behind.

"I talked to her the day they disappeared," said Florence Bennett of Proseville, the dead woman's mother-in-law. "She had planned on going to a Parents Without Partners meeting in Allentown (about 30 miles away) the husband had would call on Sunday night when she got back."

Florence Bennett remained close to her daughter-in-law and grandchildren after the 1973 divorce. A week before they vanished, she had watched Michael play in a Little League baseball game, and on June 10 she and her husband, John, a machanic at Phoenix Steel, had attended the boy's 10th birthday party.

"EVERYTHING seemed fine," she recalled. "She never indicated she was in any kind of trouble. Our main concern is the children. We know we can't help her."

How did Susan Bennett die? "Homicide by suffocation," answers Dauphin County Coroner William H. Bush. "She was certainly assaulted." He won't say much more.

One published newspaper report, quoting a police source, said Mrs. Bennett had been choked before she died.

Investigators say the life insurance policies named William Bradford, a bearded English teacher at Upper Merion High School and an ally witness at one of Smith's trials as the primary beneficiary.

STATE POLICE trooper John Hertz and state police Sgt. Joseph VanNort recently questioned Bradford at St. John's Lodge in Landis, Pa., N.M., where he is taking summer courses.

"No, I would not say we have any definite suspects," Hertz told a reporter several weeks after they returned.

Bradford, president-elect of the Upper Merion teachers' union, began seeing Mrs. Bennett prior to her 1978 separation, according to Kenneth Bennett, her former husband. At least one police source has said Bradford, who is 46, and Mrs. Bennett planned to marry in the fall.

At Smith's trial in May for the Sears holding, Bradford testified that Smith was in Ocean City, N.J., on Aug. 27, the date the crime was committed — a contention the jury apparently didn't buy.

Bradford, according to his attorney, Charles Fitzpatrick of Philadelphia, was in Cape May, N.J., with school teacher friends the weekend Mrs. Bennett and her children disappeared. Police have questioned the friends.

INVESTIGATORS hold out a fragile hope that the children still

are alive — that in a case with bizarre twists anything is possible. "Police say they're optimistic," says Bennett, the children's father. "But I don't think they want to build up my hopes."

Those who knew her said Mrs. Bennett, who recently received a

sizeable inheritance from her late mother, was a "quiet, studious woman" — an unlikely target for murder.

She and the children had such a tremendous relationship, said one teacher.

When police searched Smith's home after his arrest, they discovered a collection of books he kept for research on homosexuality and bisexuality, according to a copyright lawyer in Today's Post, a Montgomery County newspaper.

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