

A&M linked to claims of solving mystery of alchemy

University professor took \$200,000 donation to investigate gold process

By Jeffrey Weiss
Staff Writer, Tribune News Service

DALLAS — For more than a year, several inventors were told that Texas A&M University had helped answer the alchemical riddle: Mercury and lead and dirt from played-out mines could be transformed into gold and silver and platinum.

From spring 1992 through spring 1993, William Tinsler, inventor, and Joe Champion, inventor, peddled their tale to investors, according to a report of Texas A&M University officials in California and newspaper accounts.

Police: 2 men still suspects in yogurt case

By Mike Burgess
Austin American-Statesman Staff

Austin investigators returned from Mexico on Wednesday saying that two men jailed there remain suspects in the slaying of four teenagers at a North Austin yogurt shop.

But Austin police gave no indication they were any closer to solving the case.

Lt. David Parkinson would not say whether investigators questioned Porfirio Villa Saavedra, 24, and Alberto Jimenez Cortez, 26, or whether they have become stronger suspects as a result of the trip.

"I can't categorize those guys," said Parkinson, who heads the Police Department's homicide unit. "I can't name them on a scale of one to 10."

"It's safe to say they remain suspects in the case," he said. Saavedra and Cortez have not been charged in the yogurt shop case. They are jailed in Mexico on charges of kidnapping a woman outside an Austin nightclub and sexually assaulting her in a car while traveling to San Antonio, where she was released.

Last October, Saavedra confessed to the yogurt shop killings and Cortez implicated him in the case. Saavedra later recanted his confession and said Mexican agents tortured him.

Parkinson, along with another homicide detective, an assistant Travis County district attorney and an agent with the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, went to Mexico City on Monday.

He said the mission of the trip was to establish a good working relationship with staff members of the new Mexican attorney general.

Austin police have traveled to Mexico City three other times to determine whether Saavedra killed Jennifer Mathews, 17, her sister Sarah, 15, Eliza Thomas, 17, and Amy Ayres, 13.

The four were found dead Dec. 6, 1991, in the I Can't Believe It's Yogurt at 2949 W. Anderson Lane. All four had been shot in the head, and three were burned beyond recognition in a fire set at the shop.

"They said that John O'M Brock, professor of chemistry at Texas A&M in College Station, was instrumental in confirming that the process worked."

Brock had investigated the claims, using a \$200,000 donation made by Tinsler to the university. Brock, 70, said last week that the claim had a grain of truth. In a few experiments that could not be repeated, minuscule quantities of precious metals may have been created, he said.

If true, even a minuscule amount would be scientifically amazing. But most of the assertions have proved hard to confirm.

A&M officials said they have been reluctant to learn that the school's name was tied to the project. But on several occasions during the past 18 months, university officials were told about the Champion-Tinsler claims, but they took no action to disavow their relationship with the university.

"I'm at a loss, frankly, to understand how this came about," said W. Michael Kemp, executive associate dean of the school of sciences. "This is not the sort of thing that should be happening at a university."

Tinsler is accused by the Securities and Exchange Commission of running an international fitness website, forging bank documents and defrauding more than 200 people of more than \$7.8 million.

Champion is in jail in Phoenix on unrelated criminal fraud charges. The man who contends that he can turn mercury into gold is represented by a court-appointed lawyer because he can't afford to pay a private attorney. His case that he's the victim of powerful people who want him to fall and that he can make good on his claims.

Brock is being investigated by the university for possible violation of university procedures. He says he did nothing wrong.

But he admitted recently that he had not told university officials how Tinsler's gift would be used. Brock scientific knowledge is customary, university officials said. But they understood the highly unconventional nature of the research considered worthwhile by many scientists, they might not have allowed it.

Brock also said that he did not tell the university for many months about exaggerated public claims Champion and Tinsler made about the A&M experiments. Or that he had known that Champion had lied about his credentials and past work.

He admitted that he had done only a cursory investigation of Champion's past.

In a critique to Brock's scientific integrity, one of his key researchers left the university, saying he believed that Brock was pressuring him to come up with positive results from experiments that continued to fail.

Brock's actions left the university in the dark and allowed Champion and Tinsler to operate unimpeded, said Michael Hall, chairman of the chemistry department.

"Certainly if I knew that this was what the project was for and that the people involved were these kind of people, I probably would have advised the university not to accept the money," he said.

Brock, also an electrochemist, was among those scientists whose work on cold fusion was well publicized.

had received an important award in 1986, during the start-up of cold fusion. Two Utah electrochemists claimed that they had duplicated the power of the sun inside a small glass beaker. Scientists from around the world, including many at Texas A&M, were scrambling to catch up.

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Austin American-Statesman

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Persons who wish to intervene in the proceeding or comment upon the action sought should contact the Public Utility Commission of Texas, 7500 Shoal Creek Boulevard, Austin, Texas 78757, or call the Commission's Public Information Office at (512) 458-0256 or (512) 458-0221 (telecommunications device for the deaf).

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