

# IOWA TODAY®

IOWA CITY CEDAR RAPIDS

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## NEWS JOURNAL

### CEDAR RAPIDS

#### Station robbed at knife-point

A man armed with a knife robbed the downtown Citgo service station early Friday morning. The man entered the business at 100 First Ave. NW about 2 a.m., displayed a hunting knife to the clerk and demanded money. He fled on foot after taking cash, four packs of cigarettes and a 12-pack of beer. Police are looking for a 5-foot-10, 200-pound black male in his mid-20s, who had a shaved head and wore a gray T-shirt and light tan pants.

#### Trial set in Ely robbery

Trial has been set for one of four young men charged in the June 17 robbery of a rural Ely couple at their home. Rusty L. Carter, 17, of 5664 Deerwood St. SW, has pleaded innocent to a first-degree robbery charge. His trial is set for Sept. 8 in Linn County District Court. Carter, who turns 18 on July 25, is charged along with Randy R. Elliott, 16, of 3106 Tamara Dr. SW; Jason J. Hall, 20, of 3000 J St. SW; and Clinton D. Keenan, 19, of 62 Devonwood Ave. NW. The four are accused of being masked and invading the Marshall Strait home on Palisades Access Road at about 10 p.m.

They allegedly threatened Strait with a 2-by-4 and a handgun and took his wallet and some prescription pills. The suspects were arrested when deputies stopped their vehicle at the corner of Ivanhoe and Joppa roads.

The Straits have been foster parents for 30 years and said this was their first bad experience. Nancy Strait speculated that a foster youth who once lived at their home knew Keenan and Hall and may have set up the couple.

### IOWA CITY

#### Arson hotline available

People with information about the recent arson fires in Iowa City but wanting to remain anonymous can call the arson hotline 1-(800) 532-1459. "We need that kind of help," Iowa City Fire Marshal Roger Jensen said. Authorities continue to investigate fires that were set at 500 S. Dodge St., 535 S. Johnson St., 901 Walnut St. and 1104 Marcy St. over the last several days.

A cause for another fire at 910 S. Summit St. has not been determined due to lack of evidence, but the fire is being considered with the others.

Jensen said he and other investigators are following several leads. He said he has been given descriptions of suspicious people in the area but declined to release them because they conflict with one another.

### TIFFIN

#### Power cut in accident

A minor accident Friday afternoon in rural Johnson County knocked out electricity for 15 customers. By nightfall, power was restored.

Details of the accident, which happened around 2:30 p.m. on County Road F-28 near Tiffin, two miles west of Interstate 380, were not released by the Iowa State Patrol.

A motorist apparently struck a utility pole and did enough damage that a crew from IES Utilities had to replace the entire pole, IES spokeswoman Diane Ramsey said Friday.

## Murderer dies in jail

Man who killed C.R. woman, her 2 children suffered heart attack

By Douglas Neumann  
Gazette staff writer

A prisoner serving three life sentences for the 1982 murder of a Cedar Rapids mother and her two young sons died Friday morning after collapsing on a handball court at the State Penitentiary in Fort Madison.

Prison officials said Bruce Farris, 38, was pronounced dead about 10:15 a.m. at Fort Madison Community Hospital, an hour after he collapsed from a heart attack.

Farris was convicted of fatally stabbing Jacalyn May, 29, and her sons Jason, 4, and Justin, 2, at Hawthorne Hills Apartments in southwest Cedar Rapids on Nov. 15, 1982.

According to Gazette articles about the crime and trial, Farris became a pen pal with Jacalyn May while he was in prison in Anamosa for a theft conviction. They lived together on and off after he was released.

Prosecutors said Farris killed May because she had information about some money and other items

he stole from her apartment. He stabbed her and slashed her throat in a back bedroom, then returned to the apartment and killed the two boys in another bedroom. The bodies were found three days later by the apartment manager after neighbors reported newspapers and mail piling up.

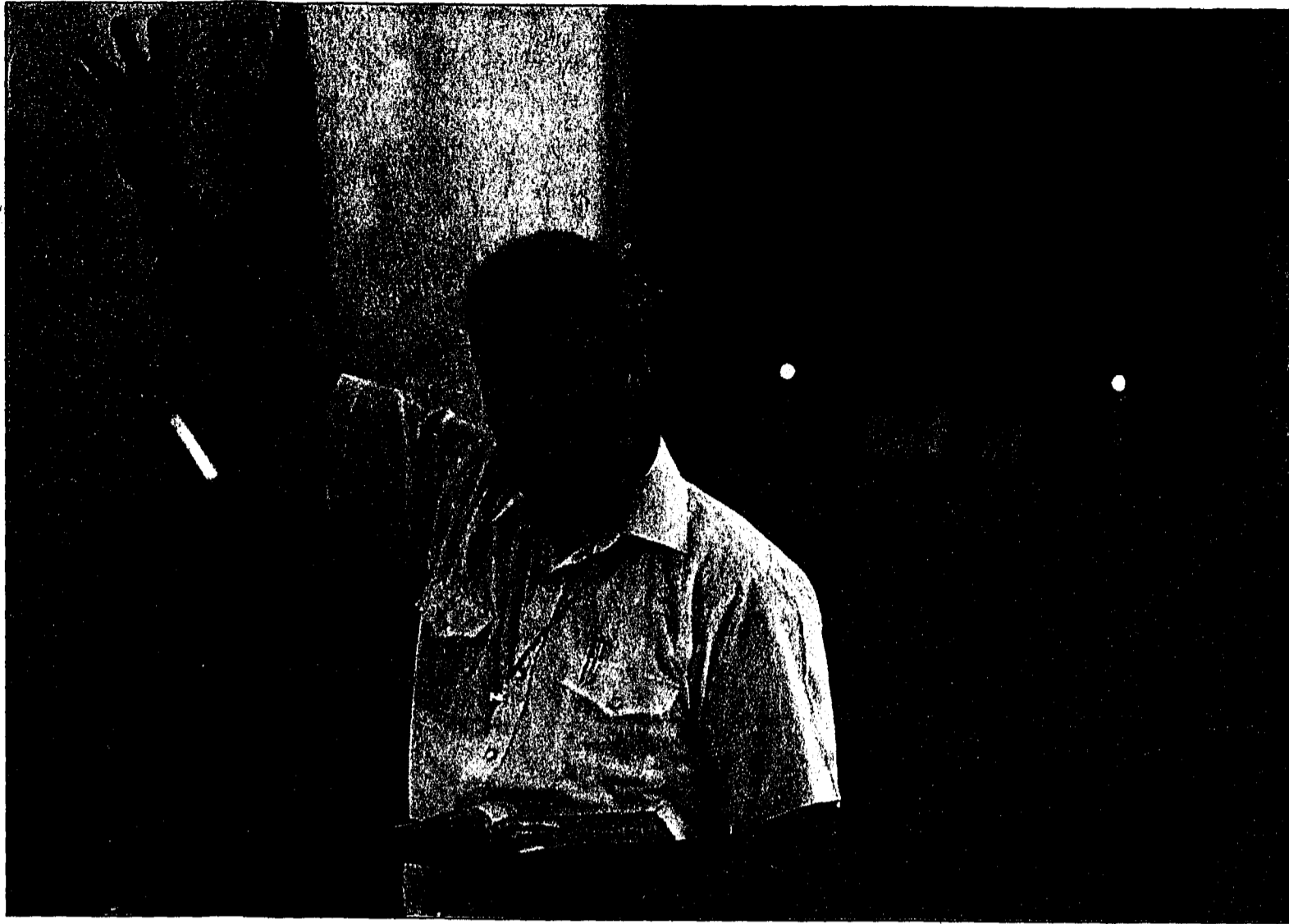
A second suspect, Michael Rohn, was acquitted of first-degree murder and other charges stemming from the crime. Investigators believed Rohn was in the apartment when Farris killed May and that Rohn knew Farris killed the two boys but kept information from police.

Farris testified at his own trial, saying Rohn committed all three murders. Rohn, who was acquitted before Farris' trial, testified for the prosecution against his friend.

Two women served prison time after pleading guilty to concealing information from police during the investigation.

"I think historically, in many of these small, dying communities, you'll see that we were the first there and we (now are) the last to leave."

the Rev. Bruce Ough



The Rev. Torger Johnson preaches last month during a service at the United Methodist Church in Ohio, Iowa. After the service, he and his family headed to a service in Ladora. The Ohio and Ladora churches share Johnson with churches in Guernsey, Victor and Koszta.

## Bringing back bygones

Revised circuit-riding preacher takes message to 5 small churches

By Rick Smith  
Gazette staff writer

GUERNSEY — Turn off Highway 21 some Sunday morning just south of Interstate 80 and it's as if you have this tiny place to yourself.

There's you, a few shaded houses and streets, the clapboard post office and the little white church next door.

Who could dispute — so picture peaceful is it all — the signboard message at the church door: "Love is the Reason Behind Everything God Does." It is a still moment that can't last.

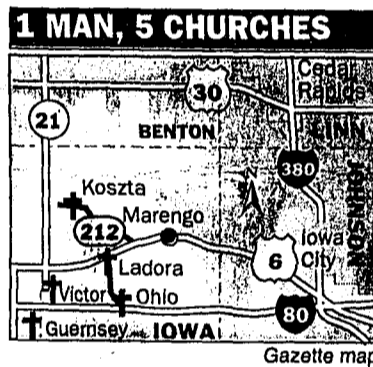
At 8:15 a.m., the church organist pulls in. By 8:20 a.m., a dozen or so cars are arriving, and before you know it, someone is tugging on the rope of the church bell.

The clang cuts through the morning air, showering reality on the idyllic scene.

Just 25 United Methodist Church parishioners, most elderly or middle-age, are in the pews when a last car hurries to a stop.

Out pops the Rev. Torger Johnson, his wife and their two teen-agers.

Greetings are quick. There's business to get to. Pastor



Johnson is only the Guernsey church's to share. To share with churches at Ohio, Ladora, Victor and Koszta.

"When I was first told there were five churches down here, I thought, 'Five churches?'" Johnson says.

Now the pastor finds himself readying for his fifth year as a lab rat of sorts for the Cedar Rapids District of the Iowa Conference of the United Methodist Church.

Putting five churches into one parish with one ordained minister and some part-time help is an imaginative stab at keeping churches open and congregants happy.

Confronting grim demographics can be a giant task.



The Rev. Torger Johnson is greeted last month by Odessa Hladky before a service at the United Methodist Church in Guernsey. Methodists, who created a system of circuit-riding preachers in frontier days, are portraying Johnson as a modern-day circuit rider.

Rural populations are aging and declining, sapping the membership and resources of country churches.

In small towns like Ladora and Guernsey, United Methodists, armed with the idea of sharing a minister, are making a stand.

"I see the church playing a huge role in helping people to

find identity," Johnson says. "Yeah, once there was a school here, but that's not the way it is now. And so we have to find who we are today, and how we can continue to be people of God."

Some of this effort may be grounded in obstinateness.

Turn to 6B: Circuit rider

## Cat with rabies causes push for vaccinations

By Krista Larson  
Gazette news intern

FAIRFAX — Pet owners are being reminded to properly vaccinate their pets after a cat in Fairfax tested positive for the rabies virus this week.

The Cedar Valley Humane Society was notified July 11 about a stray cat behaving strangely near Park Start in Fairfax. The cat was captured and euthanized, according to the Linn County Health Department.

A tissue sample sent to the University of Iowa Hygienic Laboratory tested positive.

"We want to remind citizens that cat and dog rabies vaccinations are required by Linn County Ordinance Chapter 28," said Keith Erickson, director of the Linn County Health Department.

Owners need to be aware that if their pets are allowed to run at large, they could be bitten by rabid skunks, foxes, raccoons or bats, Erickson said.

"Wild animals can transmit rabies to a pet and a pet could transmit it to its owner," Erickson

said, noting that an owner could potentially contract rabies from being licked or scratched by a rabid pet.

While it's not unusual to have a wild animal test positive for rabies, it's a cause for concern when a domestic animal tests positive, Erickson said, noting the potential for transmission to owner.

Only a handful of domestic animals have tested positive for rabies in Linn County in the last year, Erickson said.

The last fatal human case of rabies in Iowa was in 1951 in Des Moines, according to Russ Currier of the Iowa Department of Public Health.

Erickson encouraged pet owners to contact their veterinarian to have their pets properly vaccinated against rabies.

No bite reports have been received from the Fairfax area for several weeks.

Bite reports are required by law from anyone involved in a bite incident or from any medical personnel who treat a bite victim.

## 21-year-old man dies after liquid propane inhaled

By Adam Lowenstein  
Gazette staff writer

Merle J. Nichols, a 21-year-old Bertram man, died Thursday after he inhaled liquid propane, Linn County Sheriff Don Zeller said Friday.

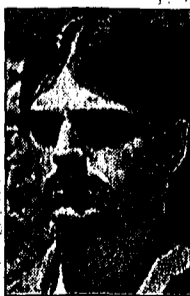
The exact cause of Nichols' death has not been determined. Linn County Medical Examiner Percy Hinkle performed an autopsy Thursday and is waiting for the final results, which should be available next week.

Around 2:30 a.m., Nichols and a few friends gathered in Bertram by the Big Creek bridge. One brought a 20-pound LP cylinder normally used to power a propane grill. Nichols was the first — and last — of the group to "grillly chuff" some of the gas from the cylinder, which costs \$25 to purchase and \$10 to fill, Zeller said.

"It was strange because I had never heard of anybody trying to inhale LP gas in order to try and obtain a high," Zeller said. "I guess this is proof that it doesn't work. Or if it has (worked), the people who have done it were fortunate."

Nichols was rushed to Cedar Rapids' Mercy Medical Center, where he was pronounced dead. The Sheriff's Department was called around 3 a.m., Zeller said. No one has been charged in connection with the incident.

Services for Nichols will be 10:30 a.m. Monday at Papich-Kuba Janaba Chapel West in Cedar Rapids. (See obituary, 2B.)



Bruce Farris lived on and off with woman he killed.