



C.R., Marion, Hiawatha churches set special services

RELIGION

The Gazette

Saturday Dec. 14, 1996

FORECAST	
TODAY	SUNDAY
Afternoon mix	Snow flurries
Wind: NE 5-10	Wind: N 8-16
High 35	High 30
Low 23	Low 22
Weather Details 8C	

Elderly couple found in sad, peaceful scene

Daughter says she expected end like one in Marion field

By Rick Smith
Gazette staff writer

Cindy Pieper never put much stock in the theory that her elderly parents had picked up a crazed hitchhiker Dec. 2 in a late-evening snowstorm.

Pieper had come to fix on a simpler image, a less-violent one.

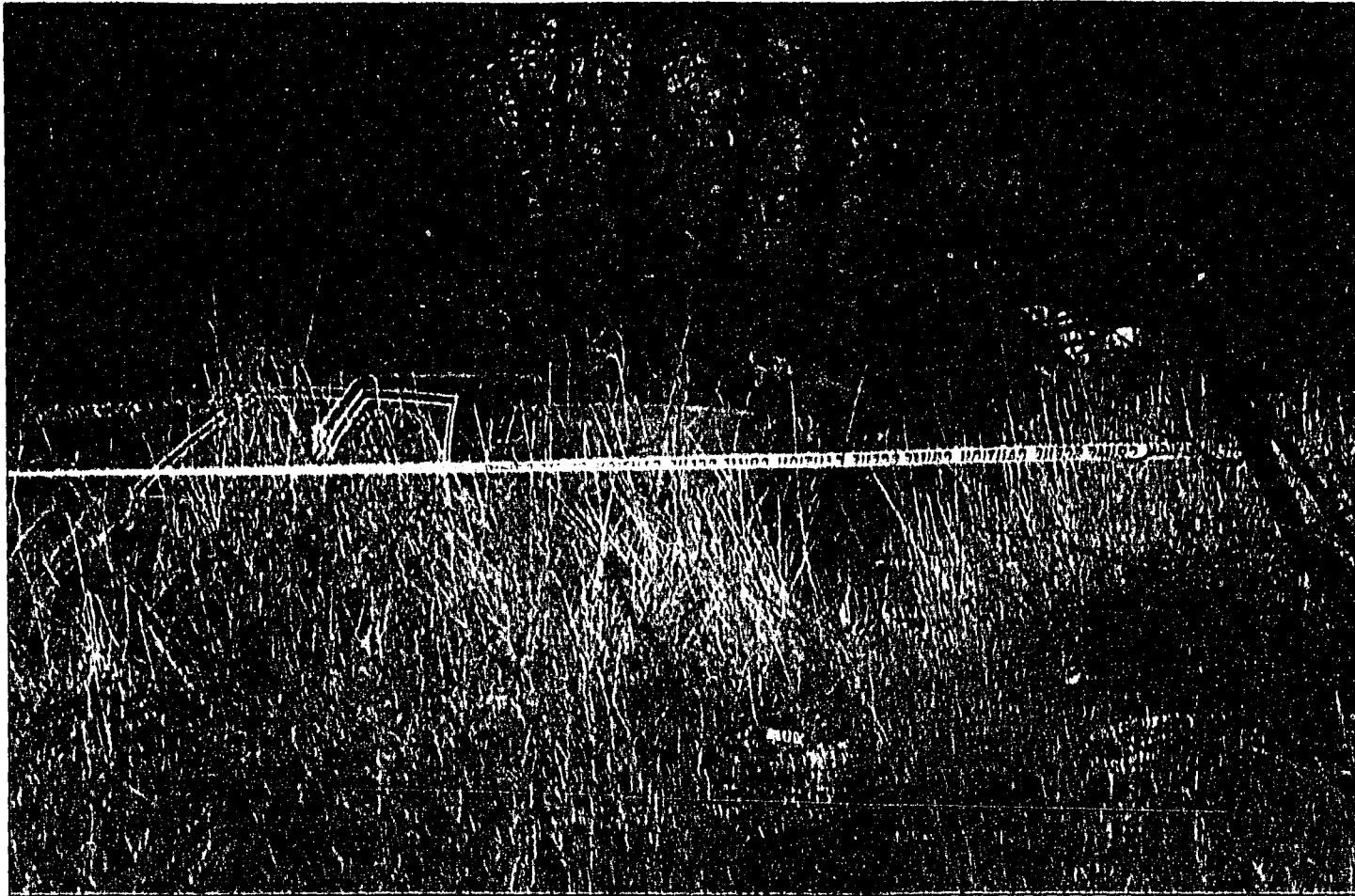
With each passing day that her parents remained missing, Pieper figured they had wrecked their car in the snow and died inside it. Together.

About 9 a.m. Friday, a Marion man apparently found just that, ending the relentless 11-day

Francis Smith, who was driving, died of a heart attack.

Mike Vance, out to let his Brittany spaniel practice flushing birds from high weeds, discovered the Smiths' car up against a tree and the couple, leaning on one another, dead inside.

The Smiths' much-hunted gray 1984 Mercury Marquis had come to rest about two miles from the Smiths' Marion home, near a street of houses and, ironically, across busy Seventh Avenue and down the hill from Marion's police and fire stations. The car, sitting in a stand of trees along a drainage ditch, could not be seen from either station, about a quarter mile



Authorities from the state Division of Criminal Investigation examine the gray 1984 Mercury Marquis containing the bodies of an elderly Marion couple, Francis and Frances Smith. The car was found Friday morning at the end of Willowood Avenue in Marion. The couple disappeared Dec. 2 after they left the rural Mechanicsville home of a daughter and son-in-law during a snowstorm.

away. An autopsy Friday afternoon showed Francis Smith, 75, had died of a heart attack, according to Marion police. The cause of death for his wife, Frances Smith, 74, could not be determined until further laboratory tests are completed.

"Neither the body nor the scene revealed any evidence of foul play," police said.

The man who found the Smiths said it appeared that Francis Smith, who was driving, may have mistaken an entrance to a parking lot for a street and then ventured into an overgrown field, down a hill and into a tree.

Pieper, who lives in Anamosa, said the family — herself, a sister and two brothers — was "relieved" the elderly couple had finally been found.

"We were, of course, losing

hope," she said. "We hoped we would find them together. We're glad they were together."

"That's how I imagined it would always be, ever since they were missing," Pieper added. "The car was in a place you could not see, and for whatever reason, if anyone survived the crash, one would stay with the other one. That was the type of people they were."

Pieper said her dad, if able, might have left the car to seek help. But her mother would not have left her husband if he was injured, she added.

"She would never have parted from him if he was already gone," Pieper said.

At a press conference Friday afternoon at the Cedar County courthouse in Tipton, family members said they'd accepted the Smiths' deaths.

"This is not the ending I had planned for my parents or had prayed for," said Mike Smith of Springville, the couple's eldest son. "But we are at peace."

The Smiths had visited their daughter and son-in-law, Becky and Gary Baker of rural Mechanicsville, the evening of Dec.

Turn to 6A: Search



Mike Vance and his dog, Rose, were walking Friday morning when they discovered Francis and Frances Smith dead in their car in a field on Marion's east side.

Man who found the couple: 'Like they fell asleep'

By Rick Smith

What comfort the family of Frances and Francis Smith can take today is due in part to Mike Vance.

Vance and his Brittany spaniel found the Smiths, missing since Dec. 2, on Friday morning, sitting in their 1984 Mercury in an overgrown field on Marion's east side.

The car was about two miles from the Smiths' Marion home. They were dead inside.

It was Vance, a religious man, who rubbed the frost from the wrecked car's windows. And it is from him that the Smith family will always have the first, best picture of how the Smiths died.

"They looked peaceful," Vance said after finding the Smiths about 9 a.m. "They both were leaning against each other. He was resting his head on hers, just comforting her."

"To me, he kind of had a smile on his face. They looked like they fell asleep and went to a better place."

A short time before, Vance, 36, a customer service representative at IES Utilities, had dropped off his car at a repair shop along Marion's main street, Seventh Avenue, and was headed to his nearby house with his dog, Rose.

The overgrown field surrounded by development was the perfect spot for the spaniel to practice flushing birds, Vance thought.

As he set out, Vance could see a car down the hill that seemed to match the description of the Smiths' car that had been publicized in the news and on fliers for days.

"It looked out of the ordinary to see a car there, but the way it was situated, it looked as if it was almost parked," he said.

As Vance walked, he could see that the car had driven through the field and had come to rest after smacking into a scrub tree, 5 to 6 inches in diameter.

"After I knew it hit the tree, I knew for

Turn to 6A: Vance

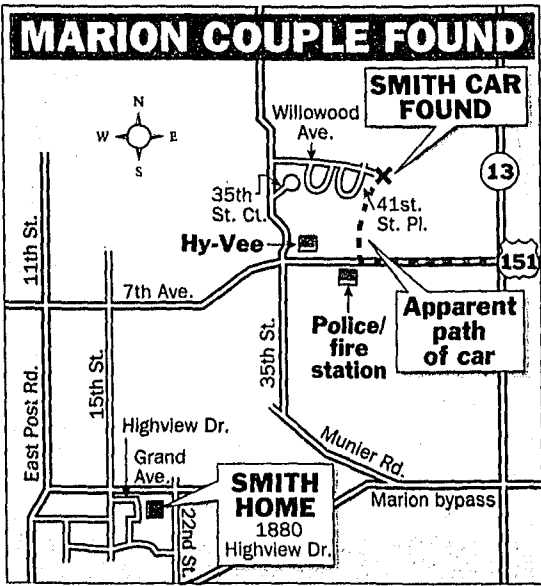


Frances and Francis Smith



"We hoped we would find them together. We're glad they were together."

Cindy Pieper, daughter of Smiths



Gazette map

BRIEFLY

Lady Gators gobble Hawks

The University of Iowa women's basketball team was defeated by Florida, 68-58, in the first game of the Big Ten/SEC Challenge on Friday. "It seems we fix one thing, and something else blows up on us," said Iowa Coach Angie Lee. Details on 1C.

Loomis Brothers will close

The Cedar Rapids construction company at 1619 F Ave. NE will shut down at the end of the year after nearly 100 years in business. Details on 5C.

Munsters invade Christmas

"The Munsters' Scary Little Christmas" will offer ghoulish holiday fare. The TV movie will air Tuesday night on Fox. Details in TV Vision.

Ministers warn of racism

A Cedar Rapids official of the United Methodist Church signed a letter calling for action against "latent racism" that's been aimed at Hispanic illegal aliens. Details on 1B.

More Cabinet posts filled

President Clinton selected Chicago lawyer Bill Daley as his new commerce secretary and Rep. Bill Richardson of New Mexico to serve as United Nations ambassador. Details on 3A.

C.R. kids helping pets

Students of Harding Middle School and Kenwood Elementary School have volunteered at the Cedar Valley Humane Society, feeding and exercising abandoned pets. Details on 1B.

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Detective says Van Wyhe's death treated as a homicide

By Lynn M. Tefft
Gazette staff writer

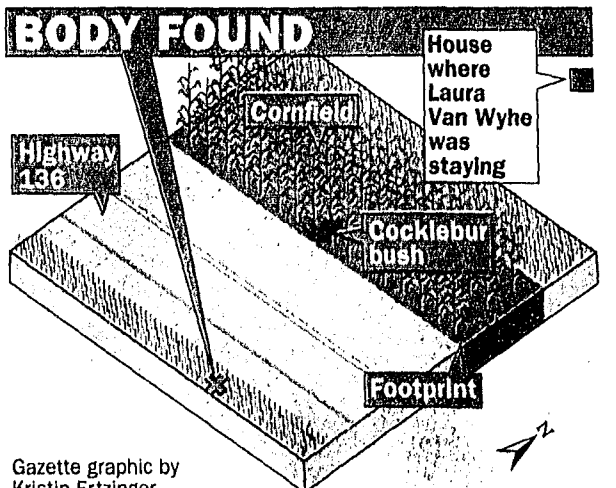
QUINCY, Ill. — The lead detective investigating the death of Laura Van Wyhe, the Iowa City woman found critically injured along a Missouri highway, said he considers it a homicide.

"She was left with life-threatening injuries," Trooper Bruce Clemonds of the Missouri State Patrol said. "At the very least, it's a manslaughter case."

Clemonds made his comments Friday at a coroner's inquest held here, where Van Wyhe died in a hospital Oct. 26, a few hours after she was found lying alongside Highway 136 in northeast Missouri.

The trooper followed his formal testimony with a Gazette interview in which he detailed "suspicious" and bizarre elements surrounding Van Wyhe's death, including his theory that she was in the process of fleeing; that she was found barefoot carrying baby items, with cockleburs stuck to her body; and that her tote bag was discovered in a nearby tree.

Turn to 7A: Van Wyhe



Gazette graphic by Kristin Ertzinger

The coroner's jury, after conferring 20 minutes, declared Van Wyhe, 21, had died of brain trauma, massive blood loss and "blunt force trauma" to the head and legs. The six-person jury concluded it didn't know how Van Wyhe had been injured