

The killing of a 'sweet lady'

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By Gene Erb

(Tribune Staff Writer)

WAUKEE, IA. — Emma Lewis, 80, was a shy, friendly woman. She was only about 5 feet 3 and weighed no more than 100 pounds.

Her eyesight was failing. In fact, she was legally blind. According to friends, relatives and neighbors, she wouldn't hurt or say harsh words about anyone. She used to invite neighbor children to pick flowers from her garden.

The widow of a coal miner, she was a woman of modest means. She always kept the doors locked. Clifford Applegate, a neighbor, said: "I don't think I was in her house but once or twice in the 15 years we've lived next door."

Yet, a week ago Monday, between 7 and 7:30 p.m., someone entered her small, well-kept white frame house here and beat her to death — apparently for what little money she might have had in her purse.

Emma's body was found by a close friend, Phyllis Hinkson, 57, of Waukee, lying face-up on the floor near the bathroom.

The time was shortly after 9 p.m.



Emma Lewis

Emma had "drowned in her own blood" from multiple face and head wounds, an autopsy showed. Blood from the wounds had blocked her nasal passage and windpipe.

Police, Dallas County sheriff's officers and Iowa Bureau of Criminal In-

vestigation (BCI) agents have been baffled by the slaying.

They said they have no suspects. No weapon was found. There were no signs of forcible entry. The only indication of a motive is Emma's still-missing purse.

Sheriff Robert DeCamp said investigators haven't determined whether Emma was beaten with fists, or bludgeoned to death.

The slaying and dearth of clues have upset some of the 1,500 residents of this community about 12 miles west of Des Moines. A few — mostly widows like Emma — are afraid to stay alone at night.

"They (law enforcement officials) didn't find a thing in that house out of place," said Applegate, 62, Emma's neighbor. "They didn't even find any suspicious fingerprints, I don't think. All they told me was that they had some palm prints that couldn't be used for identification."

Applegate, who is retired, said the last time he saw Emma alive was about 2:30 p.m. that Monday when she

left the house to do some shopping. He figures she was home by 3:15 "because she never stayed uptown more than 45 minutes."

Applegate said he and his wife, Alene, 59, went to Ankeny at about 5 p.m. to visit some friends, and when they returned home around 10 o'clock there were "police cars everywhere."

They were there in response to a call from Phyllis Hinkson, who had phoned Emma about 8 p.m. to remind her of a doctor's appointment the following day. There was no answer. When Hinkson called at 9 p.m. and there was still no answer, she became worried and drove over to the house.

Door open

She found the porch light on and the front door open.

Said Applegate: "I just don't understand it. She was very cautious. Even myself, if I went over to see her about something, she would talk to me through the door."

Brick Volkmer, 32, who works for a Des Moines food store and lives across the street, said, "I can't figure out why they'd beat her that way. She was just a little bitty gal."

Applegate's wife, Alene, said: "She always said she hoped to stay in her home until she couldn't see to take care of herself, and then she supposed she would have to go to a nursing home."

The Applegates' daughter, Beverly Rafschol, 25, visiting from Minneapolis, said everyone she grew up with liked Emma because Emma "liked all kids." Beverly said that just a few weeks ago Emma invited her 19-month-old son, Aaron, over to her yard to pick some flowers.

Applegate said there are a number of coal miner's widows living alone in Waukee, and many of them are upset and nervous about what has happened.

"We all are, and will be glad when they pick someone up. But I think it has to be hardest on the older women living alone, and there are at least five of them in our neighborhood," he said.

One widow in the neighborhood, Helen Leimer, 70, stays in her son's nearby home at night, and she will until the killer is found.

Mrs. Leimer, one of Emma's close friends, described Emma as a timid woman.

"I'd go to the senior citizen's center, but I never could get Emma to go," said Mrs. Leimer. "It made her nervous, the crowds. She wasn't one to go out.

"She was a very quiet woman. I don't

think she ever did anybody any harm. But she was very independent, too. She didn't want anything from anybody for free.

"I remember one time a young person took us into town (Des Moines) for shopping, and Mrs. Lewis gave me a dollar for the ride. I said, 'You give it to him.' And she said, 'Well, you know him better. You give it to him.'

"I always told the young people to take the money she offered because it made her feel better."

Emma was born Sept. 2, 1896, in Hiteman, a small coal mining town near Albia in Monroe County. Her father was killed in an accident in the Hiteman mine when she was 6 years old.

Her two surviving sisters — Sigurd Johnson, 82, of Albia and Vera Fisher, 70, of Newton — remember Emma as "a very shy person who never attended social affairs and never would have hurt anyone."

Emma married Ivan Lewis, a coal miner, in Centerville in 1921. They lived in various Monroe County coal mining towns before moving to Waukee in the mid-1940s. Ivan died about 13 years ago. They had no children.

"She was just one sweet little lady," said Applegate. "I don't know how else you could describe her."