

□ *Editor's note: The story below was written following the writer's visit to Perkins County. The story appeared in the Omaha World Herald on Dec. 16, 2008 and is reprinted here with permission. The slaying of Corrie Wood, 28, formerly of Imperial, is still unsolved.*

By John Ferak

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The unsolved beating death of a 28-year-old woman in southwestern Nebraska continues to frustrate family and friends.

With each passing week since Corrie Wood was found dead Sept. 20, the community loses faith that the person responsible will be arrested, said Doug Tatum, owner of the Barber Pole in Grant, Neb., a town of 1,220 that is five hours from Omaha.

Wood's boyfriend, Scott Petro, contacted authorities after he found her unresponsive in their bedroom. The night before, Wood, Petro and a few other friends met for drinks at a bar in a neighboring town. An autopsy later determined that she had been beaten to death. No arrests have been made.

"Questions are being asked, but answers are not being found," Tatum said. "You remain hopeful that today will be the day with the big break. It needs to be resolved."

Perkins County Sheriff Jim Brueggeman said it may be three to six months before an arrest is possible.

The case—the first homicide investigated in Perkins County in 22 years—has raised questions about whether the local authorities in the city of Grant and Perkins County hindered the investigation by not securing the crime scene until the autopsy was completed.

It wasn't until the third day that local authorities realized that the Grant woman was a homicide victim, prompting them to contact the Nebraska State Patrol for help in the investigation.

State Patrol Capt. Mark Funkhouser said that because local officials waited to enlist their help, investigators were forced to "play catch-up." Most rural communities, he said, seek immediate help from the state in death investigations in which the cause is unknown.

"This was a case they didn't recognize as a homicide," Funkhouser said. "In this case, the sheriff thought this was a natural death or accidental death."

But he said "it's not the norm" when a young woman who appears to be in good health is found dead in her bedroom.

Questions surrounding Wood's homicide come several months after The World Herald's series Fatal Flaws, which revealed that autopsy rates, the amount of training and the quality of investigation vary from county to county because the state sets few standards and offers no oversight.

In Grant, rescue workers and local authorities who found Wood dead in her one-story house did not suspect foul play initially, said Brueggeman, one of the first officers on the scene.

At first, officials theorized that Wood died from excessive drinking, the sheriff said.

"This was not a case with an obvious smoking gun," he said.

On the evening of Sept. 19, a group gathered at a Venango, Neb., bar to celebrate Wood's coming 29th birthday. One of the friends, Melissa "Red" Dutton, said Wood vomited several times outside the bar after consuming too much alcohol.

About 1:15 a.m., Wood asked Dutton to give her a ride home.

"Our understanding is that Scott Petro remained at the bar," the sheriff said.

Both women stopped briefly at Dutton's house in Venango to retrieve a sweater. They returned briefly to the bar to locate Petro, but he had already left. During the 18-mile drive to

Grant, Wood passed out in the passenger seat. Dutton said she had to wake her up when they pulled into Wood's driveway.

Wood staggered up to her house with Dutton's help. Wood crawled on top of the bed and passed out. She was wearing blue jeans and a white tank top. Dutton estimated that she left around 2:10 a.m. to meet some friends at a restaurant in Big Springs, Neb.

"When I left, Corrie was completely fine, so I figured everything was OK," Dutton said.

At 9:53 a.m. the next day, Sept. 20, Petro called 911 from the house he shared with Wood and reported finding her unresponsive after he woke up. An ambulance crew found Wood dead.

The sheriff and his deputies collected evidence and interviewed Petro and others. A local doctor examined the body. Perkins County Attorney Rick Roberts, acting as the coroner, ordered an autopsy. Several hours later, the house was released to Petro, and authorities left.

On Sept. 22, the autopsy results came back, indicating that Wood died of blows to her head and body.

The sheriff said he does not believe that releasing the house hindered the death investigation. He said authorities did not have enough evidence on Sept. 20 to continue securing the house.

When the autopsy results came back, the scene was secured again, he said.

"Absolutely, I was surprised," the sheriff said of the autopsy results. "The scene did not present itself as being a homicide. There was not a person there that had suspicions this was a homicide at the time. In fact, it was far from it."

At that point, Perkins County called for help from the State Patrol, which dispatched a team of investigators from North Platte, along with the mobile crime scene trailer, to search the house for clues.

In the following days, authorities served six search warrants around Grant to collect evidence, which is being analyzed at the State Patrol crime lab in Lincoln.

Petro has not been interviewed by the State Patrol, on the advice of his attorney. A court order required him to submit DNA and hair samples.

Dutton, the friend, said she submitted to a lie-detector test by State Patrol investigators and allowed them to impound her vehicle for forensics tests in September.

In an interview with the World-Herald, Petro said that he is not responsible for his girlfriend's death. Petro and Wood had dated for the past two years and co-owned a small construction business in Grant.

"I am not involved in Corrie's death," Petro said. "I am not an angel, but I am not a troublemaker anymore."

Petro, 38, has been on supervised probation since being released from federal prison in August 2006 for being a felon in possession of a firearm, after being earlier convicted of felony theft by deception.

On the advice of his lawyer, Petro said he would not discuss the time before his call to 911 on Sept. 20. Petro said he's well aware that he remains a suspect in his girlfriend's death.

"I knew I had to get a lawyer because they were looking very serious at me," Petro said. "It is such a shock, and it upset me and blew me away that they were looking at me."

Wood was a native of Imperial, Neb., where her family owned a farm equipment dealership. She graduated from Chase County High School in Imperial in 1998. She had recently worked for an optometrist.

Wood, who was divorced, left behind a 4-year-old daughter, who lives with her biological father in Venango.

Lt. Lynn Williams, a State Patrol investigator in North Platte, has taken over the investigation from the Perkins County Sheriff's Office. He said the crime lab analysis on numerous items seized during the searches is critical to the case.

"This is not yet a cold case," Williams said. "It remains a top priority for us."

For now, Wood's family continues to maintain faith that the State Patrol will gather sufficient evidence to make an arrest.

"The family is very disappointed that the investigation has not yet brought anyone to justice," said Jarrod Nielson, Corrie Wood's brother-in-law. "But we were warned by law enforcement at the very beginning that this could take a long time."

Can you help?

The Nebraska State Patrol is offering up to \$1,000 for information about the slaying of Corrie Wood of Grant, Neb. The patrol wants to hear from anyone who saw Wood on Sept. 19.

Anyone with information is asked to contact the statewide Crime Stoppers at www.nebraskacrimestoppers.com.