

Dardeen death ruled homicide; some evidence kept from jury

by John Racine
Benton Evening News
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The death of Russell Keith Dardeen was a homicide, a Franklin County coroner's Inquest jury ruled Wednesday evening after six minutes of deliberation.

Eight relatives of the Dardeen family sat quietly as the verdict was read at the Benton City Hall. One wept in another's arms, and some family members objected to the glare of TV cameras.

Family members, including Dardeen's mother, declined to comment. However, Franklin County Coroner Robert W. Lewis said that the proceeding may have given relatives some solace.

"That's part of the grieving process," Lewis said of the attendance by family members.

"They are trying to put their lives back together; it's not something you're going to get over like a head cold.

"We're talking about more than four murders. We're talking about the lives of two families which have been destroyed," he told reporters.

Foreman Lorraine Cochrane of rural Ewing read the ruling following brief deliberations by the five-man, one-woman jury. The inquest took less than 20 minutes, with only two witnesses called.

Lewis said that some reports traditionally included in an inquest were intentionally withheld for fear that the release of the information could hamper the investigation.

"We don't want all the information that we have (made) public at this point," he said.

"There are some reports that,

were they introduced as evidence, might be part of the public record."

Lewis admitted that some traditional lab and crime reports were not entered into the inquest record and that he had purposely not requested reports from other agencies for that reason.

The ruling came as no surprise to investigators, who said that the probe into the slaying of Dardeen, his wife Ruby Elaine and their two children was progressing slowly after nearly two months.

An inquest for the other three family members, whose brutally-slain bodies were found in November in their mobile home near Ina, will be held in the future in Jefferson County.

Dr. Steven Nuernberger testified at the inquest that an autopsy he conducted at 2 a.m.

Nov. 20, a day after Dardeen's body was discovered in a grassy field near Rend Lake College (just inside the Franklin County line), revealed that the Ina man died as a result of bullet wounds in the head.

The autopsy was conducted by the Collinsville pathologist at Good Samaritan Hospital in Mt. Vernon.

The murder of Dardeen is the only direct link to the brutal slayings of the family of four that involved Franklin County officials. Lewis said that the inquest completed his official role in the investigation.

State's Atty. Terry Green presided at the inquest but said his role is only a formality at this stage of the investigation.

Mike Anthis, a detective with the Jefferson County Sheriff's Department, said that the in-

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vestigation is continuing to collect information in a piecemeal manner.

"It's not crawling at a snail's pace, but it's not moving like a thoroughbred," the officer said of the investigation. "I don't think we've ruled out anything yet."

"There's a reason for the murders somewhere. It's just not a smoking gun situation," said Anthus.

Lewis used the inquest to ask area residents with information to come forward and to advise others to remain calm. A plea that was heard often in the days following the crimes.

"It's kind of like a roller coaster," he said. "People delight in frightening themselves."

Rewards totalling \$30,000 have been offered for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the person or persons responsible for the Dardeen family's deaths. Amounts of \$10,000 each have been offered by the American Publishing Co., owner of several area newspapers (including the **Benton Evening News**, **Carmi Times** and **Eldorado Daily Journal**), WSIL-TV in Harrisburg and the Dardeen family.

Hundreds of leads have been reported to police. Anyone with information about the slayings is asked to call one of the following numbers (all in the "618" area code territory): 438-4841, 244-2141 or 997-9431.

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