Murder, Suicide? McCook Death Still a Bizarre Puzzle

By Frank Santiago

McCook, Neb. — It begins as a house fire, a routine call to a quiet, tree-lined neighborhood.

A McCook firefighter breaks down a door and crawls inside, inching his way up a flight of stairs to open some windows to ventilate the house.

Going downstairs again, he moves deeper into the house, walking cautiously through the smoke toward the dining room. Despite his caution, he stumbles into a hole in the floor and falls to his waist. That jolt is followed by another: Near the hole is the body of a woman lying face up. There is a knife in her chest.

The discovery of Ida Fitzgibbons' body in her home April 23, 1973 could have been the opening chapter of an Agatha Christie thriller. Miss Christie might have called it "The Case of the Spinster's Body," sending detective Hercule Poirot through a maze of personalities and intrigue to discover, finally, the mysterious cause of the woman's death.

The case of Ida Fitzgibbons is not fiction, but it is no less bizarre than what might have come from Miss Christie's pen.

Right Leg Broken

Ida Fitzgibbons, who was 80 and lived alone, was found with a kitchen knife in the left side of her chest. Wrapped around her neck three times was a length of plastic clothes line. Her right leg was broken. All burners on an electric stove in the kitchen had been turned on, apparently in an attempt to set nearby curtains afire. A fire, which had burned the hole into which the fireman fell and which blackened much of the downstairs, had been set.

Police said it was a suicide. A coroner's inquest was deadlocked 3-3 and couldn't decide suicide or murder. A subsequent investigation by the State Patrol supported the suicide findings. Gov. J. J. Exon, skeptical at first, said later he agreed with the patrol. But friends and relatives and others close to the investigation disagree.

To this day, five years later, the dispute continues: Was Ida Fitzgibbons a suicide or was she murdered?

This week, or shortly thereafter, the debate may heat up further when a legislative committee, after months of study, will report its findings.

The panel is the same controversial group headed by State Sen. John DeCamp of Neligh which has been studying the State Patrol's activities. The committee has been under attack by Exon, who has defended the patrol. Earlier this month, the panel unveiled a bill calling for revising the patrol's hierarchy and other changes, including appointment of a state coroner who is a pathologist.

Motive

Although the committee has kept a lid on its work, the report is expected to charge that there have been serious errors in the investigation and pathological work in the Fitzgibbons case.

One committee source said: "If we can get bits of information we need, the committee may conclude Miss Fitzgibbons was murdered. It is also working on what may be one of the more startling points: a motive.

The source said "there have been rumors" that Miss Fitzgibbons' death may be linked to the murders of Mr. and Mrs. Edwin Hoyt of Culbertson, Neb. The Hoyts were slain five months after Miss Fitzgibbons was found. Their bodies...
Death of McCook Woman Remains a Bizarre Puzzle

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had been cut up and dumped into nearby Harry Strunk Lake.

Randi Nokes, also of McCook, is serving two
life terms for the killings. Nokes' wife, Ena, pleaded no contest to two counts of illegally dis-
posing of the bodies. After serving time, she was
paroled.

She said the source: "The problem we've had in
making the link is that we've had trouble get-
ing people to go on record."

DeCamp said recently in an interview: "I have
an open mind about what Miss Fitzgibbons was murdered."

He declined to elaborate. He added: "We
found the pathology was poor and insufficient,
that there was an inadequate chain of command.
There are problems with a coroner's inquest.
They are conducted under laws written back in
the 19th century."

DeCamp's analysis of the case: "It was bot-
hed."

The State Patrol and local authorities deny
any ploy.

Transcript

Recently, by Ecco's order, a transcript of the
inquest was made public. The 280-page docu-
ment indicates the jury argued through five
sessions before it quit in a deadlock.

With the inquest proceedings available, the
State Patrol wanted to discuss the case and pre-
liminary reports coming from the legislative
committee, more information about the case has
become available.

What emerges is a mixture of facts and in-
consistencies that make it difficult to present a
compelling argument for either suicide or murder.

Sitting in his downtown McCook private law
office, Starrett said: "We did all we could think
of. It was a racooned inquiry. But I don't know if
it was a murder or suicide. I didn't know then
and I don't know now. I'm not sure there can be anything fur-
ther that can lead to the answer."

When Starrett asked: "Who would believe an
80-year-old woman who apparently was in good
health would kill herself? People who knew her
she just wasn't that type anyway." He

added: "Somebody went out of their head in that
place."

Ida Fitzgibbons had been a resident of North
Platte where she operated a beauty salon for
years. She moved to the house at 902 West First
in McCook in the mid-1960s to care for an ailing
80-year-old woman who apparently was in good
health.

She probablly turned on the stove to start the
fire, he said. Miss Fitzgibbons' purse was.on a
bed and the man, who was not made out the will
now available. But his wife confirmed John
Fitzgibbons' account.

"Surprised"

My husband had handled the estate of her
sister. Miss Fitzgibbons had been in the office
and mentioned she didn't have a will. My hus-
band said she should make one out sometime
and she said she had the time then."

When Stevens later discovered Miss Fitzgib-
bons was dead. Mrs. Stevens told The World-
Herald, he was "surprised."

About 3:30 p.m. on April 23, 1973, Miss Fitz-

ligibbons was seen by a neighbor entering the
house at 902 West First alone. It was the last
time she was seen alive.

At 6:30 p.m., a neighbor, Marie Cashen, saw
smoke billowing from away of the house and
called the fire department.

Grieb said the knife apparently came from the
kitchen. The fire had damaged the handle and
fingerprints were impossible to recover.

He said he had been dealing from the right side
because of the angle of the handle. Miss Fitzgib-
bons was right-handed. DeCamp called "hesitation"
marks. "They look like they were made with a knife."

Quite often in a suicide there are hesitation
pains to test the pain and the sharpness of the
knife."

Loose Rope

The rope was loosely tied around the neck, he
said. "You could put two fingers between it and
the neck."

Because the ends had been damaged by the
fire it was impossible to determine if the rope had
been tied or not. "Someone could have put the
empty oatmeal box in the basement."

Stevens said the woman broke her leg after she
died when the leg fell into the hole in the floor.

There was no bleeding at the break.

Quoting from the autopsy report, Grieb said
the woman died of internal bleeding. The knife, he
said, "mangled" the heart.

"She said a test of the lungs indicated there was
no deposit of smoke in them. Grieb said the find-
ing suggests she didn't inhale smoke, he said,
the woman may have died long before the
fire had gotten under way.

Tests revealed that there was "no acceler-
ant" such as gas to start the fire, he said. Miss
Fitzgibbons' purse was on a nearby bed and un-
touched. She was not intoxicated and there were
no signs of a struggle. Her glasses, which she
wore occasionally, were still on her head.

"We have no entry into the house, no motive,
no struggle."

What happened?

"She probably turned on the stove to start the
fire. Then she tried to choke herself with the
rope. When that didn't work, she made the fire
between the living room and dining room, lit the
match and stabbed herself."

"Recluse"

Could she have done all that in the 1 hour-15
minute span from when she was last seen until
the fire was discovered?

"She could have done it in 15 minutes."

"About the comments of friends and relatives
that Miss Fitzgibbons wasn't the type to kill her-
sel, Grieb said: "We found that nobody knew much
about her. She had never made an official
request to be a recluse in the last few years of her life. It
took me three months to just find out that she was
right-handed."

Despite the reports, questions remain:
Would a person making plans such as Miss
Fitzgibbons' pursue a nearby bed and un-
touched. She was not intoxicated and there were
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Would an individual making plans such as Miss
Fitzgibbons' plan to move, suddenly commit
suicide? Could the police have been more
suspicious about the house being completely locked?

In the confusion of firefighters and police, could
valuable evidence have been destroyed? Police
knew there had been several people in the house
recently to buy furniture Miss Fitzgibbons was
selling. Could someone have stayed behind and
waited for her? The police were called into the
house two months after the body was discovered.

Was the trail too cold for them to pursue?

"Clyde Starrett said that despite the unans-
swered questions, many in McCook would like to
forget the whole affair.

"They're tired of it and want to forget it
upon bad wounds."
The Fitzgibbons house... as investigators found it.