

Canine finds woman's remains

Body positively ID'd as Elvira Burnson

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BOULDER CREEK — The body of a missing Gilroy woman discovered in a shallow grave has been positively identified as 64-year-old Elvira Burnson.

The county Coroner's Office used fingerprints to identify the remains found Monday off Logan Creek Road, in the mountains north of Boulder Creek.



PAULA BURNSON

Meanwhile, one of the neighbors who helped police end the 14-day search credits a dog with finding the well-camouflaged spot on a landing near Logan Creek.

Stephen Bettencourt, a caretaker for a nearby property, said he and another neighbor were with Santa Cruz police detective Kenny Deeg on Monday morning as the search narrowed to a 3-acre site.

Bettencourt said Deeg told him they were searching that spot because it matched the site identified to police by the couple arrested and charged in the killing.

Police have said they believe Paula Helene Burnson, 30, and her boyfriend, 43-year-old Robert Charles Beckwith, strangled Elvira Burnson on Jan. 7 after an argument at the couple's Kaye Street apartment in Santa Cruz.

Lt. Joe Haebe said last week that police believe Paula Burnson and Beckwith took Elvira Burnson's body to the remote, densely wooded area and buried her in a shallow grave, covered it with wood and set it on fire.

Please see **BODY** on **BACK PAGE**

A-10 SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL Friday, January 25, 2002

Body

Continued from Page A1

Haebe was unavailable to comment Thursday, and referred reporters to prosecutor Christine McGuire. She did not return phone calls Thursday.

Bettencourt said that after a couple hours of searching on Monday, hope began to fade and he suggested giving his dog a chance.

It took Lobo, a large timber-wolf mix, about 10 minutes. In an area the three men already had covered on foot, something caught his attention, Bettencourt said.

In an area hidden by debris on the floor of the redwood forest, the men uncovered Elvira Burnson's body.

Bettencourt's voice grew quiet and shaky as he recalled that moment.

Finding the body left him with many unanswered questions and thoughts of remorse for Burnson's family, he said.

"I feel very sorry for the family and for the lady. I read about her in the paper, and she seems like a very, very fine human being," he said. "I am sad and I hope the best for them, and I'm sorry."

Thinking about the previous two weeks, Bettencourt said he began to put

together a string of strange events in the area during the week Elvira Burnson disappeared. Bettencourt, who occasionally stays at the rustic log house that sits near the burial site, takes care of the 3-acre site and boards Lobo, a friend's dog, there.

The night of Jan. 8, when he went to feed Lobo and check on the property, Bettencourt said Lobo was strangely quiet, and he noticed that the wheelbarrow, a dolly, a pickaxe and a shovel had been moved from their spot near the house. And between the house and a footbridge that crosses the trickling Logan Creek, he spotted a rope and heavy chain stretched on the ground.

Inside the wheelbarrow was a white powdery substance Bettencourt thinks was lye, which is used to control odor and speed decomposition. He said he saw white powder in the shallow grave.

Bettencourt said he didn't think much of it then, but since the items have been confiscated as evidence, he wonders what the tools — which were his father's and hold sentimental value — might have been used for.

Yet, he said, he really doesn't want to know.

The suspects are due to enter pleas in court on Jan. 31.

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BECKWITH



ELVIRA BURNSON