



# Autopsy.

“Shirley Dermond”

## **[Part One. Introduction.]**

Lake Oconee. A reservoir some twenty miles in length and under a mile in width off of the Oconee River in Central Georgia. The average depth is twenty-one feet with a maximum depth of two-hundred-twenty-five feet. Along its shoreline, which runs approximately three-hundred-seventy-five miles, are numerous golf courses and residential areas where water meanders and snakes throughout.

It's May 6<sup>th</sup> of two-thousand-fourteen, and of all the places to be on Lake Oconee, on this date we find ourselves on a dock next to a boathouse with a blue roof. The boathouse contains no boat, as its owners did not own one. The dock eventually leads all the way up to 147 Carolyn Drive in Eatonton, Georgia, the residence of Russell and Shirley Dermond in the gated community of Great Waters on Lake Oconee.

Russell Dermond has been discovered dead and decapitated; his autopsy two days later will confirm him as a victim of homicide. His wife, Shirley, is MIA. An all-points bulletin is sent out statewide. The FBI is brought in with highly sophisticated underwater equipment and the immediate areas of the home and neighborhood are swept through with a fine-tooth comb.

Ten long days pass...

It is now May 16<sup>th</sup>. The Georgia heat that has already risen to the upper nineties this month has momentarily waned to a more comfortable seventy-two degrees this date. The search for Mrs. Dermond continues its normal run, but it would be two unassuming fishermen, some five miles from the Dermond residence who would make the tragic discovery.

And while the results of Shirley Dermond's examination would yield more conclusive results for her cause and manner of death than that of her husband, it would not, however, provide any useful leads into the who or the why of this very troubling and very frustrating crime.

Welcome to Part Two of the premier episode. I am Your Friendly Death Investigator. Let's do an Autopsy.

## **[Part Two. External.]**

“Date, time, and place of examination. I hereby certify that I, Jonathan Eisenstat, MD, in accordance with the Georgia Death Investigation Act, have performed an autopsy on the body identified by dental comparison as Shirley Wilcox Dermond in the morgue of the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, Division of Forensic Sciences in Decatur, Georgia on the seventeenth day of May, two-thousand-fourteen, commencing at nine a.m.

“Postmortem changes... There is no rigor mortis. Lividity is difficult to assess due to postmortem decomposition change. The body is cool. Evidence of moderate to marked decompositional change include the foul odor of decomposition, green-yellow-dark red discoloration scattered over the body, gaseous distention of the face, torso, and extremities, and skin slippage scattered over the body. Therapeutic intervention: none.”

As before, the beginning establishing statements give us the preliminaries. Shirley Dermond was discovered deceased by fishermen on May 16<sup>th</sup>; her autopsy commenced the following day. As before, the identification process for Mrs. Dermond gives us an idea of what we are in for, and soon after, a clearer picture is made. Mrs. Dermond is in the middling stages of decomposition. Many factors go into how quickly or how slowly a body may decompose. In the world of forensics, bloating and skin slippage is not considered latter stages of decomposition – that is, latter stages often suggest more withered and mummified findings, including skeletal remains. Therefore, in no certain terms, Mrs. Dermond is somewhere in the middle. She is, however, far enough along that Dr. Eisenstat is no longer able to confirm her identification via facial photo comparison. Instead, dental x-rays are taken by staff in the morgue and are compared to the most recent x-rays available from Mrs. Dermond’s trip to her dentist.

“Gaseous distention.” That is, methane gas is what causes the bloating previously noted. The gas is created as a result of the natural processes of the body breaking down inside. Much of this gas usually escapes later when the Y-incision pierces the abdominal wall. Dr. Eisenstat notes no therapeutic intervention to simply indicate that no resuscitative measures were given.

“Clothing and personal effects... On the body are the following: one brown/tan short-sleeved shirt with a floral pattern; one tan bra; one pair of bright green pants; one pair of tan underpants; two white socks; two white sneakers, Easy Spirit, size eight, with orthopedic inserts; tissues in the pant pocket; two breast pads. These are retained as evidence.

“Received within two plastic bags, which were secured at the scene by law enforcement, are two red concrete blocks enclosed within a blue mesh bag. The normally open end of the mesh bag is closed with a knot as well as a white cord. Tightly secured just distal to this knot is a multi-colored para-cord, which is secured twice around the bag and contains a knot adjacent to the bag as well as a

second knot approximately three-quarter inches distal to this. Emanating from this second knot are two pieces of this para-cord, one which measures four inches in length and has a relatively clean cut edge with internal strings visible and a second free floating portion which measures four and five-eighths inch in length and has a frayed edge with multiple internal strings visible.”

Retaining clothing as evidence is standard practice in homicide cases. And if you needed further evidence that what happened to this husband and wife was a preplanned action and that they were targeted, look no further. As we’ve heard, cinder blocks and para-cord used to weight Mrs. Dermond down under the water, have also been submitted. While it is not set in stone that Mr. and Mrs. Dermond’s lives both ended the same date, it’s an easier, though not impossible, sale that Mrs. Dermond was not kept alive days after Mr. Dermond. It’s also easier to suggest that whoever did this did not just happen to have a couple of cinder blocks in their boat as well.

“External examination... The body is of a well-developed, well nourished, moderately to markedly decomposed, five-foot three-inch, one-hundred and seventy-seven pound white skinned woman whose appearance is consistent with the given age of eighty-seven years. The majority of the scalp hair has slipped off due to decompositional change. The remaining hair appears light brown-blonde and up to approximately four inches.

“The eyes have opaque irides and corneas and the conjunctivae are without petechiae, hemorrhage, edema, or jaundice. The oral cavity has natural teeth in good repair and an atraumatic mucosa. The nasal bones are palpably intact. The neck is unremarkable. The torso is without evidence of acute injury. Both breasts have been surgically removed in the past. The external genitalia are atraumatic and of a normal adult female. The extremities show no scars overlying subcutaneous vessels. The nails are short and well kempt. There are no tattoos.”

Everything so far is as expected, given the decomposed state. I pause only to note that Mrs. Dermond has had a double mastectomy. She was a breast cancer survivor.

“Evidence of injury... There is evidence of blunt force injury of the head and binding. These will be described by mechanism; no sequence is implied. Blunt impact of head: A V-shaped laceration, with the apex pointing superiorly, is above the right ear. One arm of this laceration extends antero-inferiorly and measures one and one-quarter inches and the other arm of this laceration extends postero-inferiorly and measures one and one-quarter inch. There is undermining of the skin inferiorly. A two inch laceration, with irregular margins, extends from just right of the vertex to just superior to the above mentioned laceration. A one-half inch area of spared skin and soft tissue is between these two lacerations. Dark red-purple ecchymosis and contusion surrounds the

majority of the right side of the head, extending from the midline of the face to the right occipital region.

“Reflection of the scalp reveals patchy subscalpular soft tissue hemorrhage over the entire right side of the head. Depressed comminuted fractures involve the right temporal and parietal bones over a five by three inch area with a generalized somewhat circular appearance to the entirety of the fractures. There appears to be three distinct semicircular fracture margins anteriorly. Five fragments of fractured skull are identified, but these fragments do not completely fill the open area of the overall dimensions of the fractures thus few fragments are absent. The brain is markedly liquefied yet there is obvious hemorrhagic discoloration of the brain parenchyma.”

There is a lot of detail here describing what amounts to severe blunt impact injuries on the right side Mrs. Dermond’s head. So severe that the skull has multiple fractures. Five fragmented pieces of skull are noted but Dr. Eisenstat also notes that these pieces, once put back in place, still leave the skull incomplete. Several fragmented pieces are missing...

Now, at this stage in decomposition, the brain is almost always liquefied. In its normal state, brain matter has a consistency not unlike gelatin. Decomposed, however, its texture more resembles grayish, brownish mush. The most a pathologist can hope to identify in this state is any kind of red or reddish matter that could indicate hemorrhagic bleeding. In the case of Mrs. Dermond, that is exactly what Dr. Eisenstat notes. The hemorrhage also indicates that Mrs. Dermond was alive when the injury/fracturing occurred and was therefore the likely cause of death.

“Evidence of binding... A five-five-zero para-cord is wrapped tightly around the ankles, overlying the socks. It is wrapped five times around both ankles together and three times around each ankle individually. A knot is adjacent to the right lateral malleolus with a short extension of the para-cord distally. Another cut end of the cord is behind the left ankle. The cord is removed and submitted as evidence. Dissection into the soft tissues of the ankles fails to reveal any hemorrhage, consistent with binding occurring postmortem. These injuries, having been described above, will not be repeated.”

In short, the para-cord, secured to the cinder blocks, was tied around Mrs. Dermond’s ankles multiple times. Once the para-cord was removed, Dr. Eisenstat cut into the binding areas of the ankles to check for hemorrhage and found none. Thus this occurred after Mrs. Dermond was already deceased.

**[Part Three. Internal.]**



“Internal examination... Head: The remnants of the liquefied brain weigh four-hundred grams. There is no obvious organic lesion. Neck: The cervical vertebrae, hyoid bone, tracheal and laryngeal cartilages and paratracheal soft tissues are without trauma. The upper airway is not obstructed. The tongue is unremarkable.”

Lots of supportive information here. “No obvious organic lesion” is a way of saying that though the brain is liquefied and determinations are hard to reach with any exact proficiency, from what he could see, there was no evidence of prior injury or illness in the mush. The hyoid is intact and there is no evidence of strangulation. There is also no evidence of choking.

The doctor then moves onto the heart and cardiovascular system. Like her husband, Mrs. Dermond also has moderate atherosclerosis, that is, calcification and hardening of the coronary arteries and aorta.

Also like her husband, from this point on, Mrs. Dermond’s internal examination yields no significant findings. Suffice to say, all of her organs are in their proper place and, other than suffering decompositional changes, are unremarkable.

Toxicology is ran, though as there is no blood due to decomposition, other specimens are submitted, including spleen, liver, and decompositional fluid. No significant results are returned. A sexual assault kit is ran as well but also yields no results.

#### **[Part Four. Opinion.]**

As noted, Mrs. Dermond’s examination was much more conclusive than her husband’s. Her injuries, though severe and despicable, were fully accounted and quantified. And though we don’t know the murder weapon or what exactly happened during the incident or why, the cause and manner of death for Mrs. Dermond are still very straightforward. The doctor thus notes his opinion:

“This eighty-seven-year-old woman, Shirley Dermond, died of blunt impact injury to her head which fractured her skull and caused hemorrhage within the brain. The circular configuration of the fractures of the skull is suggestive of an implement with a rounded or circular end that struck the decedent. There were a minimum of two impacts to the head. The manner of death in this situation is homicide.”

Report date: June 13<sup>th</sup>, two-thousand-fourteen. Signed, Jonathan Eisenstat, MD.

#### **[Part Five. Postmortem.]**

For three months following the deaths of the Dermonds, the Putnam County Sheriff’s Office continued one of the most thorough investigations their

department had ever endeavored. The couple's home remained locked down as a crime scene and was checked through again and again.

There was no sign of forced entry. Expensive jewelry and watches were untouched. Though Russell Dermond was a World War II veteran and was in otherwise fit shape for his age, the home showed no sign of a struggle. The Dermonds had retired and lived at this residence for fourteen years. Their wealth was self-made: Mr. Dermond was first an executive for a watchmaking firm, then later moved to the fast-food industry, owning a number of Hardees franchises in and around Atlanta. After they retired, their two sons took over the businesses. They have three children total, all of whom were questioned, polygraphed, and cleared with clean alibis.

The investigation, in fact, mapped out Russell and Shirley's lives from their finances and credit, to their social habits, and all the way to their final known living whereabouts. May 1<sup>st</sup>, two-thousand-fourteen, Russell was found on security camera at a local grocery store. Later that night, they spoke with their children over the phone from their home. After that: nothing. May 3<sup>rd</sup> they were expected as guests at a party with friends, but they never showed up.

They had no known enemies. As near as anyone can tell, including family, friends, and the investigation itself, they were extremely kind and loving people.

And so the case remains open. Any and every lead that arises, no matter how small, is followed up. But it is now six years later and leads are even fewer and further between. The evidence and brutality suggests likely more than one suspect. The autopsies suggest multiple murder weapons - one very sharp; the other blunt and rounded.

There are truckloads of theories, speculation, and conjecture on what all of this evidence and circumstance adds up to. Some crazy; some interesting. But this is not an investigative report that traces facts and leads and deciphers what is opinion and what is valid.

This... is just an autopsy.

*Autopsy is an educational program. All information is culled from actual autopsy reports, and read, as written, out of respect for both the deceased, and the living who speak for them. Opinions and interpretations of these reports are solely those of the reader.*

**The End.**