

AUGUST 9, 1951

THE REESER CASE

By JERRY BLIZIN

St. Petersburg's "cinder woman mystery" was officially listed as a accidental death in a statement issued late yesterday afternoon by Police Chief J. R. Reichert.

Thus, the death of Mary Hardy Reeser, 67, whose body was destroyed July 2 in an intense blaze which did only minor damage to her apartment at 1200 Cherry Street Northeast, was closed "unless new developments arise."

Reichert issued a lengthy statement yesterday based on a five - page report from the FBI laboratory, which spent weeks probing materials from the fire scene and charred bits of the woman's body.

In addition to a 500 - word statement to the press, Reichert handed out a personal statement on the fire death, one of the most widely-publicized local tragedies in years.

Reichert's statement follows:

"This is the most unusual case I've seen during my almost 25 years of police work in the City of St. Petersburg. Since we have had hundreds of suggestions as to how this incident may have happened, I am not closing the door on the case yet.

"We are, however, holding the case in abeyance for any other information or developments that may come to our attention. The facts in the case have been checked from every possible angle, and I feel that the facts as given provide the answer to the death of Mrs. Reeser."

No Incendiary

Basically, the FBI report boils down to one salient fact: No evidence of any incendiary

material or accelerant of any nature could be found in any of the materials tested.

The report said, however, that common combustible fluids and accelerants such as ether, alcohol, gasoline, etc. — would probably be consumed in such a fire and no trace of them detected afterward.

FBI analysts pointed out that the inflammability of human fatty tissue is intense, a fact little - known by most persons. Substances found in segments of the rug from the Reeser apartment were found to be melted human fat.

Police Statement

The Police Department's official statement, based on the Bureau report, is as follows:

"An examination of all specimens sent to the FBI laboratory for analysis shows no oxidizing chemicals, petroleum hydrocarbons or other volatile fluids commonly used as accelerants or any chemical substances used to initiate or accelerate combustion.

"There is conclusive evidence that the deceased body could be consumed by fire, as in this case, if the body had become ignited.

"We have had nearly 100 cases quoted in personal letters of various opinions and suggestions. In order to clarify some of these suggestions we have disregarded the theory of lightning, although there was a slight electrical disturbance on the particular night involved. There is no indication in this case where lightning struck the building in order to kill the victim and set the body afire. In most cases lightning leaves tell-tale evidence, either of entrance or exit.

"Due to the fact Mrs. Rees-

er had taken a considerable amount of sedatives at night, and we do have evidence that she told her son, Dr. Richard Reeser, she had taken two seasonal (sedative) capsules at 8 p.m. and was going to take two more, there is every possibility that Mrs. Reeser while sitting in the overstuffed chair in her apartment, could have become drowsy or fallen asleep while smoking a cigarette, thus igniting her clothes.

Inflammable Gown

"At that time she was clad in a rayon acetate nightgown and a housecoat. The nightgown being highly inflammable, could have been ignited by a burning cigarette, causing immediate death, if the deceased was in a semi-conscious condition.

"Naturally, when her clothes became afire they would also set the chair afire creating intense heat which completely destroyed the chair and a nearby end table. Once the body became ignited, almost complete destruction occurred from the burning of its own fatty tissues. For once the body starts to burn, there is enough fat and inflammable substances to permit varying amounts of destructions to take place. Sometimes this destruction by burning will proceed to a degree which results in almost complete combustion of the body, as in this case.

"While such cases are not common, there are on record numerous instances of bodies burning with almost complete destruction. There is, however, no evidence from any of the cases on record to show that burning of this nature occurs

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other than when the body is ignited by some external means.

"The unusual aspects of such cases of burning have been heightened by the fact that in many instances little damage from burning occurred in the room or area directly surrounding the victim.

Fire Only Smoldered

"In this case, the absence of any scorch or damage to furniture in the room can only be explained by the fact that heat liberated by the burning body has a tendency to rise and form a layer of hot air which never came in contact with the furnishings on a lower level. This situation could have occurred, particularly if the fire had smoldered, rather than burned freely."

In effect, this summation of finds by FBI pathologists and chemists, rules out spontaneous human combustion as suggested by a Times reader, and explains the "level of heat markings" found in the Reeser apartment.

At the time her body was discovered, police and firemen found a line of black smoke and soot around the upper walls of the room, with buckled electrical wall switches and melted candles, while lower down on the same walls, outlet plugs were intact and furnishings unmarked by heat.

Book Confirms Findings

Yesterday, this reporter found confirmation for the ready burning of human fat in the book "Homicide Investigation," by Dr. LeMoyné Snyder, medico-legal director of the Michigan State Police and member of the American Medical Association and American Bar Association.

Snyder, trained both in medicine and law, states: "One would think that the human body would be very resistant to destruction by fire; but this is

not actually the case. Underneath the skin is a layer of fat which may be quite thick in heavy individuals. This burns readily and the destruction of tissue after a comparatively small fire may be great . . . In many cases it seems the destruction of tissue by burning is out of all proportion to the intensity of fire which caused it."

This would confirm what police previously discounted. It also follows a theory outlined early in the case by Dr. Richard Reeser's wife, who told The Times that her mother-in-law's own tissue probably burned after she fell asleep in the chair while smoking.

The deceased was a heavy woman, weighing about 170 pounds. When found, however, all that was recognizably human was one foot — curiously intact — and still clad in one of the black slippers Mrs. Reeser customarily wore as house shoes.

Some Loose Ends

Despite the findings of the FBI, several unexplained angles still remain:

1. No odor of fire or burning flesh was ever detected by the landlady of the apartment or neighbors.
2. No time of death has ever been established, making it impossible to determine whether the blaze burned rapidly or smoldered all night.
3. No smoke was ever detected by neighbors or workmen in the area.

REPORTER'S OPINION:

"While people may discuss the Reeser case at still greater length than has already been done, we must not overlook the tremendous amount of work poured into the baffling case by investigating officers. Police Chief Jake Reichert, Detective Lieut. Cass Burgess, Detectives R. H. Lee and Ross

Boyd and others all did back-breaking work. Whether the verdict convinces arm-chair sleuths or not, City police were not lax in their pursuit of answers."

Reeser Background

Police and firemen found the charred remains of Mrs. Mary Hardy Reeser, 67, at 8:07 a.m., July 2 in her apartment at 1200 Cherry Street Northeast. Although little damage was evident only human remains found were a skull, shrunken to the size of a cup, a piece of backbone and an intact left foot in a satin slipper. Her overstuffed chair was destroyed except for the coil springs.

Discovery was made as a telegram was delivered for Mrs. Reeser at 8:07 a.m. and the landlady, Mrs. P. M. Carpenter, went to give it to her. Mrs. Carpenter found the door hot and summoned the aid of two painters working across the street. It was then the blackened walls were first noticed and the few remains found. Firemen were called and extinguished last embers with a hand pump.

Mrs. Carpenter, who lived in an adjoining apartment, had been up, at five a.m. and six a.m. to get new newspaper, but had not noticed anything amiss. Smoke smelled at five a.m. was thought to be coming from an overheated water pump. Mrs. Carpenter turned off the pump and went back to bed.

The Western Union boy who delivered the telegram didn't notice any smoke, despite the fact the windows were open. A Times carrier boy who delivered papers to the area earlier in the morning also noticed nothing amiss.

Mrs. Reeser was seen by her son, Dr. Richard Reeser, his wife, and the landlady, Sunday night, July 1, the last time at 9 p.m.