

Family suspects foul play

Police say every avenue investigated

By Terry Craig
of The StarPhoenix

When Neil Stonechild's frozen body was found in a vacant field in north Saskatoon last November, family members immediately suspected foul play.

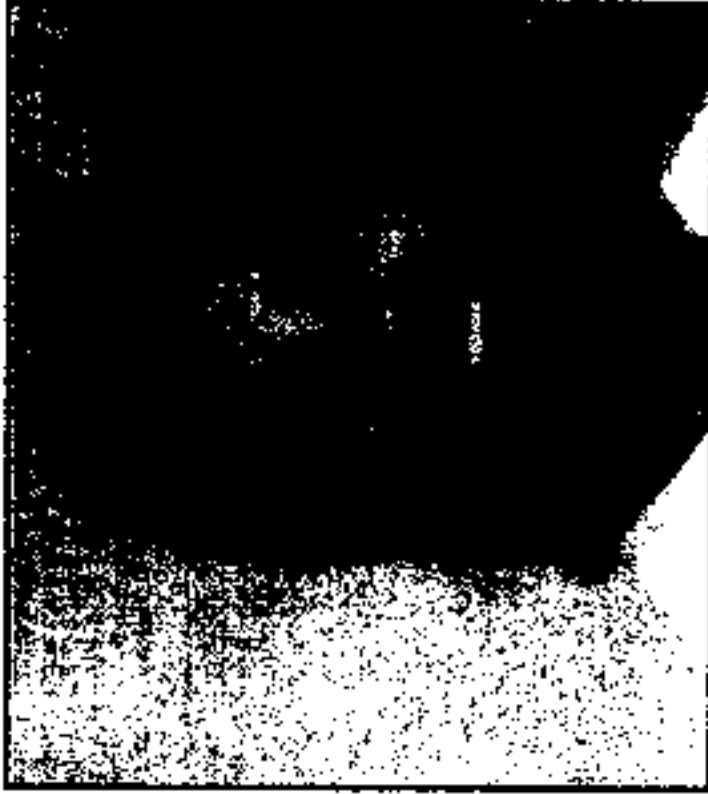
Three months later, they still subscribe to that theory, even though the police file on the case has been closed.

The official cause of death was listed as hypothermia. Aside from some scratches on his nose, there were no marks of physical abuse. His blood-alcohol level was 15, almost twice the legal limit for impaired driving.

Stonechild's mother, Stella, and sister, Erica, are the first to admit Neil had a problem with alcohol but they say in the months before his death, he was coming to terms with his problem.

They also say that, had Stonechild been white, police would have been more thorough in the investigation of his death.

"It makes me wonder if Neil was the son of the mayor or commissioner,



NEIL STONECHILD

er, police would still be investigating," Stella said.

A senior officer within the department guardedly agreed.

But department spokesman Sgt. Dave Scott vehemently denies Stel-

la's assessment of the investigation. "I don't agree. A tremendous amount of work went into that case," he says.

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Family cites altercation with 'gang'

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Pointing to a hefty file, Scott says investigators pursued every avenue. The courier's report said no evidence showed Stonechild, who was 17, was beaten before his death.

"The profile we have at this time was death by hypothermia. It was an unfortunate incident," Scott reports.

Nevertheless, the Stonechild family is convinced Neal was killed.

He was found Nov. 28 lying face down in a field behind 830 57th St. West. According to the pathologist's report, Stonechild could have died Nov. 28.

It is where the body was found that puzzles his relatives.

"Why was he found way up in the north industrial area with only one shoe?" asks his mother. "What kid goes out with only one shoe?"

The temperatures in Saskatoon the week Stonechild disappeared and until the body was found

ranged from a low of minus 28 on Nov. 25 to a high of five on Nov. 29.

He was last seen alive Nov. 24 at a confectionery at 33rd Street and Confederation Drive. He was very drunk.

Stella and her daughter don't believe the police theory Neal was walking to the provincial correctional centre to give himself up. At the time of his death, Stonechild was a fugitive from a community home, where he was serving time for a break and enter.

"I know my son very well. I know he wouldn't go out there by himself," Stella said. "Even though he was on the run, he always called (home)."

"It was a stormy night (Nov. 24). I told him to please be careful. He said he was going to be all right."

"If he was so intoxicated at the time, how did he get to the north end?" Erica asks. "He doesn't know anyone. It was too late for the buses to stop. There were no houses."

Both women believe Stonechild was driven to the area and abandoned.

"He was thrown out there," Stella said. "I know him. He would have broken into some place to get shelter."

She feared for her son because of a recent run-in with some hardened young offenders.

In the weeks before his death, he had an altercation with a gang. He suffered a beating — the result of a deal gone sour over the sale of some handguns Stonechild acquired during a break and enter.

"He got a kickin'. He was beaten with the guns and baseball bats," Stella said. "Sure, he was drunk but he had enough sense to run home."

He was assaulted at an inner-city location but managed to stagger his way to his mother's home on Confederation Crescent.

Stonechild was a familiar face to Social Services youth workers, who described him as a likeable, pleasant boy. His major downfall was alcohol.

He enrolled in an Alcoholics Anonymous program a few weeks before his death and had attended regularly.

"He was learning that a life with alcohol was bad but he was

dealing with the issues in his life," a social worker said. "He was a smart kid with a lot of potential. He had a terrific personality. He could have been anything. His death is a terrible waste."

Stonechild was also a highly regarded wrestler. Wendell Wulke, coach of the Westside Wolverines wrestling club, described the youth as exceptional "with more potential than 90 per cent of the kids I see."

Stonechild was a bantam provincial champion when he worked with Wulke.

His high school wrestling coach, Gil Wift at Bedford Road, was shocked when he learned of the death.

Wift said Stonechild was "trying hard" to overcome his problems when he enrolled at the collegiate last fall.

As Stella ponders the tragedy, she declares: "Not a day goes by when I don't shed a tear for my boy."

"It's heartbreaking to know my son is gone."

"I can't let him rest in peace knowing he didn't die naturally. Whoever did it is still out there."

DECADE-OLD DEATH RESURFACES

N... 02/22/2000

Publication: StarPhoenix**Category: Front Page****Day: Tuesday****Published: 02/22/2000****Page: a 1****Keywords:** saskatoon police, freezing death, stonechild, crime, exclusive**Caption:** SP Photo by Richard Marjan - Neil Stonechild's body was found 10 years ago in this field in the city's northern industrial area, near the 800 block of 57th Street**Decade-old death resurfaces****Neil Stonechild's family questions why he froze to death in this field****Byline: Leslie Perreault of The StarPhoenix**

It was a -28 C November night in 1990 when a drunk, Native 17-year-old named Neil Stonechild created a ruckus at an apartment building and then disappeared.

Five days later, Stonechild turned up frozen solid on the northern edge of the city. A victim, it seemed, of drunken meandering on a frigid night.

His mother suspected foul play immediately.

"Why was he found way up in the north industrial area with only one shoe?" Stella Bignell asked three months after her son's death. "What kid goes out with only one shoe?"

Bignell's doubts were fuelled last week by allegations that some Saskatoon police officers may be dumping troublemakers outside of town in cold weather. The RCMP is investigating the allegations of one man, and the exposure deaths of at least two others.

"I thought right away of my son. I always knew there was something wrong with this," Bignell said recently from her home in Cross Lake, Man.

"I always believed the police were there for me. I just can't understand this."

Her suspicions had been confirmed long ago by Stonechild's 16-year-old friend and drinking partner on that cold night. The friend was the last known person to see Neil Stonechild alive.

The friend has always maintained he watched the cops drive away with Stonechild in the back of a Saskatoon city police patrol car.

As the car drove away, the friend says Stonechild was screaming, "They're gonna kill me."

Weeks later police concluded Stonechild died trying to walk across the city to turn himself in at the correctional centre. He attempted this, they said, in the wee hours of a Saturday morning, while drunk, in -28 weather, wearing sneakers, a jean jacket and a lumberjack coat.

For 10 years the friend, a young man with his own lengthy criminal record, has consistently repeated his account of the incident to friends, to family and to a youth detention staffer who worked with him 10 years ago.

The friend repeated the story again in an interview Monday. His hands shook, his eyes watered and he was visibly terrified during the interview. He asked not to be identified because he is afraid of the police.

Neil Stonechild and the friend were both young men in trouble with the law on Nov. 23, 1990 when they went out drinking.

Convicted of break and enter earlier that year, Stonechild was supposed to be in a group home

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for young offenders. He had walked away earlier in the week and a warrant was out for his arrest.

Just after midnight on the 24th, Stonechild and his buddy went to an apartment building on 33rd Street West and Confederation Drive where their friend, Lucille Horse, was babysitting.

The pair weren't sure where to find Horse, so they knocked on doors and rang dozens of buzzers in the building, annoying a host of neighbours.

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Horse didn't let her friends into the apartment because she was babysitting and they were drunk, especially Neil.

"I still have some regrets about that to this day," Horse said. She later learned that someone in the building called police.

The friend was cold and tired and he tried to convince Stonechild to give up the hunt. Stonechild refused, so the friend headed in the opposite direction toward a drinking buddy's home.

A few minutes later while the friend was walking south along Disfenbaker Drive, he says two police officers drove up to him from an alley. The officers asked for his name and they asked if he knew the young man sitting in the back of the car. The young man in custody was Neil Stonechild.

The friend says he gave a false name to police and denied he knew Stonechild, who was sweating and bleeding in the back seat. The friend says he lied because he was wanted by police at the time and he already had a lengthy criminal record.

"Neil was screaming my name, telling me to help him. Seeing him sitting in the car like that, I was in no position to want to get in that car with him. So I lied," he said.

"I know it was him. I couldn't be more positive. He was screaming my name. It couldn't have been anyone else."

As the car drove away, the friend says Stonechild swore and screamed: "They're gonna kill me, they're gonna kill me."

Five days later, on Nov. 29, 1990, Stonechild's frozen body was found in a field in Saskatoon's north industrial area, near the 800 block of 57th Street. He'd somehow lost a shoe. An autopsy confirmed he died from hypothermia. His body showed no signs of a struggle, except for several "scratches" across his nose, police said.

When the body was first found and before it was identified, police said the young man was 30 to 35 years old.

Early in 1991 police concluded Stonechild probably died trying to walk to the correctional centre to surrender himself.

The police noted that the young man was extremely drunk and was last seen just after midnight at a convenience store at 33rd Street and Confederation Drive, contrary to the account of the friend.

Stella Dignell wondered back in 1990 about her son's death. She always suspected foul play, although initially she thought a gang may have killed her son.

Then she heard from the friend.

Dignell, Lucille Horse, and another son Jason Stonechild, each recently confirm the friend has been steadfast in his account on various occasions since 1990.

The friend says he spoke to police twice about his allegations. He says a police officer took a statement from him shortly after Stonechild's funeral. He also says he approached homicide investigators several months later. He never heard from the police again about the incident.

Saskatoon police could not confirm or deny the claim Monday.

The friend also says he told his account to a staff member at Kilburn Hall in 1991. The staff member confirmed that assertion Monday.

The friend has now hired Saskatoon lawyer Don Worme for advice on what to do next.

Bignell wondered whether her son's death would have been more completely investigated had her son been a white person, or the son of the mayor or a police commissioner.

Police Chief Dave Scott, then a sergeant in the police force in 1991, insisted then that the case was investigated thoroughly but no evidence of foul play was found in Stonechild's death.

"A tremendous amount of work went into that case," Scott said in 1991. At the time he had on hand a thick investigative file. "It was an unfortunate incident."

The RCMP has assumed the investigation of two recent freezing deaths of Native men on the outskirts of Saskatoon.

The RCMP is also probing allegations that police dropped another Native man outside of town in freezing weather. Two officers have been suspended from the force in that case.

The StarPhoenix reported last week an allegation from a Native man who says he was picked up by police while drunk and damped northwest of town about a month before Stonechild's death. That man walked back to the city.

RCMP Sgt. Rick Wychreschuk says the RCMP task force is not currently looking into the Stonechild case.

City police Staff Sgt. Glenn Thomson says the Stonechild file will be reviewed and may be forwarded to the RCMP task force, as well.

"We're aware of it, we're looking at it, and we'll have to see what we do with it. If the file is turned over, any information will have to come from the RCMP."

Mug(s): Neil Stonechild