



Detective Steve Hodel worked on the case for 26 straight hours.

NEWS FOCUS

Continued from page A-1

"Sure, I'll talk to you." His voice cracked, betraying nervousness. "Anything you want to know I'll tell you — come on in."

"No, Jim, we'd like to talk to you at the station," Hodel said easily. "Why don't you get your coat and we'll give you a lift."

At 4:05 a.m., Hodel showed Ford into Interrogation Room 110 at Hollywood Division headquarters.

It was a small room, sparsely furnished with a Formica-topped desk, four chairs and two metal ashtrays, and illuminated by two white fluorescent lights overhead.

Everything said in this room was being recorded on tape. And a large two-way mirror on the wall allowed observers in an adjacent room to watch the questioning.

The son began talking nervously about everything but his mother.

Hodel, with a yellow legal pad and his second pack of Pall Malls of the night in front of him, asked Ford to start from the beginning.

The son told of entering the unlocked apartment, hearing his mother gasping for breath and finding her on the floor just outside the bathroom.

"There was blood in her mouth. I hit her throat."

"You hit her in the throat?" asked Hodel.

"Yes, very lightly. I was trying to clear an air passage. Look, I've taken first-aid training." He opened his wallet and showed Hodel an advanced first-aid card.

"I saw her dinner nearby," Ford continued. "It was shrimp and wine. I thought maybe she could have choked on a shrimp tail. It's very easy to choke on a shrimp tail, you know."

Ford said he called the paramedics and watched them work on his mother for more than an hour before they took her to the hospital.

At 5:10 a.m., he broke down and cried for the first time when he described what his mother looked like when he visited her in the hospital.

"Her eyes were taped shut... I grabbed her wrist... I know she was in a coma and everything, but I think she knew it was me. She turned her hand over and held my hand."

Ten hours later, Ford said, the hospital called to tell him that his mother had died. "I wasn't surprised. They told me from the beginning that she didn't have much of a chance."

"Did you and your mother ever fight," Hodel asked cautiously.

"Oh, yeah, all the time," Ford admitted. "She didn't like my job or my friends. She wanted me to get my own apartment."

"Did you ever hit her?"

Ford moved nervously, his eyes averting Hodel. "Maybe a little slap on the arm."

"Did you ever hit her around her head or body?"

"Oh, no, never. She bruised easy, though. She was always getting drunk and falling down. A couple of nights ago I came home, and she was passed out on the floor. I picked her up and put her on the couch, and the next morning both her arms were badly bruised. My mother is — I mean, was — very fragile."

During a break in the interrogation, Hodel telephoned the coroner's office to plead with the duty doctor for a quick autopsy on Gloria Ford.

"It looks like a 187 (homicide), and we've got a possible suspect — her son — who is cooperating with us at the present time," he explained softly so Ford couldn't overhear him. "I'd sure appreciate it if you could schedule it for today. We want to put him on the polygraph before he boogies."

Hodel has worked homicide for nine years, and he's good at his job. A big, easygoing guy, he approaches his cases methodically and isn't given to brash moves that some cops make without thinking. Hodel is a thinker, not a cowboy.

He's solved dozens of homicides over the years and several of his convicted murderers are on death row. Yet Hodel is personally opposed to capital punishment.

The proud father of two small sons, ages 1 and 2, Hodel says his oldest son, Mike, "wants me to be a fireman when I grow up."

Two hours later, Hodel had Ford's entire story. The questioning had been polite, objective and detailed.

At the end, Ford had given permission for the police to search his apartment and handed over the door key. He had also agreed to take a polygraph test within the next few days.

Ford laughed uneasily as he stood to leave the room. "Boy, you guys are acting like you think I killed my mother."

"It's our job, Jim, to conduct an investigation when there's bruising on the body and when the cause of death is undetermined," explained Hodel.

Hodel told Ford he could leave and asked him to stay away from the apartment for an hour.

On the way out of the station, Ford ran into a uniformed officer who knew him from an earlier arrest.

"What are you doing here, Ford?" the cop asked.

"My mother just died," he explained. "They're acting around here like I killed her."

"I wouldn't doubt it," said the cop, walking away.

Ford came running back into the squad room, angry at the encounter and threatening to withdraw his permission for the search.

Hodel calmed him down and he finally left.

On the drive to the apartment, Hodel admitted he was disgusted with the behavior of the uniformed officer. "That's the kind of unpredictable thing that can cost us a case," he said.

Did Hodel think this was a homicide? "Some of his responses were those of a guilty man. But you can't believe these early green lights. You have got to keep an open mind."

At the Ford apartment, Hodel and Skiles searched through drawers, under beds and couches and noted several bloodstains where Ford said he had found his mother.

Nothing incriminating was found, and a police photographer and criminologist were called to the scene to complete the routine examination of the premises.

The neighbor across the hall said the mother and son used to fight a lot, but she had been home the night in question and heard nothing from the Ford apartment.

"What do you think?" Hodel asked Skiles.

"I'm thinking about those bruises on her forehead," said Skiles. "Maybe she could have gotten them from falling face forward on the floor."

"I'm glad to see you're keeping an open mind," said Hodel. "The crucial thing now is the autopsy."

In a real sense, Dr. J. Lawrence Cogan of the Los Angeles County Coroner's Office solved the Gloria Ford case for Homicide Detective Steve Hodel.

Cogan's autopsy, completed four hours after the interrogation of Jim Ford ended, showed that her death came from "spontaneous intracerebral hemorrhage... due to natural causes."

The bruises on her body were fresh and probably caused within the past 48 hours, said Cogan, but none of them were of sufficient nature to have been contributory factors in her death. They could have been caused by a "minor assault or accidental falling."

A secondary cause of death was listed as cirrhosis of the liver.

"So, Jim didn't kill his mother," Hodel said over an egg omelet brunch at Lou's Quickie Grill on Santa Monica Boulevard — his first meal in 18 hours. During that time, he drank more than a quart of black coffee and smoked two packs of Pall Malls. He was tired now, but he was also satisfied with the results.

"Why did he act suspicious?" Hodel asked rhetorically. "Because he had beaten her in the past, and he himself wasn't sure if he had contributed to her death. But the medical evidence shows he had nothing to do with her death. And I'll call and tell him that."

Hodel sat back and lit a cigarette. "This is why you always have to keep an open mind in this business. And you can see why 'beyond a reasonable doubt' is so important."

At 2 p.m. that afternoon, Hodel went home to bed after working 26 hours straight out of Hollywood homicide.

ANSWER LINE

By Marie Denunzio

The consumer

Car dealers do not have to follow sticker prices

I have been shopping for an economical small car and have found that most dealers totally disregard the manufacturer's sticker price and charge whatever they like. Are they allowed by law to sell the car for more than the sticker price when the car has no extra equipment?

C.H., Los Angeles

According to spokesmen for Ford, General Motors and Chrysler, the government requires the manufacturer to place a suggested retail price on each vehicle, but after that, it's up to the individual dealer.

Joe Tetherow, a manufacturer's representative for Chrysler in San Francisco, explained. "The sticker is only a recommended price. We can't tell a dealer, 'you've got to sell this car for this price.' The dealer can charge whatever he wants. If you've got a hot car, you get what you can for it."

According to an Associated Press survey, import car dealers are selling Hondas, Datsuns, Toyotas and the like for \$300 to \$500 above the manufacturer's suggested price in the San Francisco Bay area while the same cars at some Southern California dealerships are going for as much as \$1,000 above the suggested price.

Can't charge for painting

Last week I moved out of the apartment I lived in for three years. The landlord wants to deduct the cost of repainting the apartment from my security deposit. I took good care of the apartment and didn't damage the walls so I don't think I should have to pay for the new paint. Do I have any legal rights?

M.B., Los Angeles

Answer Line contacted Jerry Carapia, a counselor with the Fair Housing Congress, who said the landlord may not deduct the cost of repainting the apartment unless it is written into the rental agreement. Painting is not considered a normal cleaning cost and cannot be deducted from any deposit. If, however, the walls were damaged (other than normal wear and tear) you are responsible for the repainting costs.

If you have any other questions about this law contact the Fair Housing Congress at 930-0342.

Reporting crimes abroad

I'm going to Europe this summer and have been looking forward to it for months. My best friend, however, just returned from Europe

where she had all of her luggage, with several hundred dollars worth of presents in it, stolen. I have five grandchildren and was planning on making several purchases but now I'm paranoid. What should I do if this happens to me? I don't speak any foreign languages so it would be hard to explain the situation to the local police.

J.C., Long Beach

Many stores can arrange to have your purchases mailed to your home. This can save you the inconvenience of carrying the merchandise around with you. If, however, you have some kind of problem, American Express suggests you do the following:

Report the crime to local police authorities. Chances are, English will be spoken. But if you cannot speak their language and they have no interpreters on hand, try the tourist office or even a travel agency for help. If you need further legal assistance, the American Embassy can usually provide you with names of reputable attorneys.

If you must leave the country where the crime was committed, ask the local police to give your itinerary to the Interpol office in that country. Interpol, the international police agency, coordinates police activities across international borders. By making your itinerary available to Interpol you can be contacted should anything develop. Get a copy of the police report you've filed. It will be useful when replacing stolen documents.

Answer Line is a reader service cutting through the red tape to get your answer. If you have a question, call The Herald Examiner at (213) 748-1212 and ask for Answer Line. Questions are taped Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. and from 4 p.m. to 6 a.m. and continuously over the weekend. Or, you may write Answer Line, The Herald Examiner, P.O. Box 2418, Terminal Annex, Los Angeles, Calif. 90051. Please do not ask where to buy and sell items. Questions of most significant interest will be answered in Answer Line. We do not reply by mail.



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