

Boelus restaurant owner shot, killed in his home

By Carol Bryant

The Independent

BOELUS The owner of the Golden Nugget was shot and killed Sunday morning in the second tragedy to strike the restaurant's owners in the past two years.

Mark Stutzman, 44, of Boelus, died early Sunday from a single gunshot wound in his trailer home behind the Golden Nugget, said Howard County Attorney Greg Jensen of Ord.

Jensen said Stutzman's wife, Kim, called the 911 dispatcher in St. Paul at 5:30 a.m. Sunday. He would not disclose what Mrs. Stutzman said.

When asked if the death was a homicide, Jensen said, "We don't know yet. I'm really not ruling anything out at this point."

"Depending on autopsy results, we don't know what charges are going to be filed, if any," Jensen said. "I have ruled out suicide at this point."

If criminal charges aren't filed, the death could be ruled accidental.

"We're waiting on the lab results, on the physical evidence we recovered at the scene and the autopsy results," Jensen said.

Meanwhile, residents of this southwest Howard County community of 228 said they were stunned by Stutzman's death, which was the second tragedy to strike a Golden Nugget owner in the last two years.

Kay Dick Whitefoot, 59, who founded the restaurant and owned it for 32 years, died June 2, 1993. His cousin, Gene Whitefoot, who owns Whitefoot Market across the street from the Golden Nugget, said his cousin's death was ruled a suicide.

The Stutzmans purchased the restaurant from Whitefoot's estate at an auction on Aug. 14, 1993.

"It's a real shock to a small town like this," Whitefoot said about Stutzman's death. "We've done business with him every day."

A sign posted on the Golden Nugget's door Sunday afternoon said, "Closed until Friday, March 24."

The restaurant gained notoriety for its inexpensive steak dinners. People such as CBS News correspondent Charles Kuralt and talk show host Dick Cavett had visited the restaurant. A \$4 sirloin steak dinner including potato, salad and vegetable was one menu item listed in 1993.

Stutzman's body was transported to Omaha Sunday for an autopsy, said Jim Jacobsen of Jacobsen Funeral Home in St. Paul. Service arrangements were pending, he said.

Mrs. Stutzman was staying with relatives Sunday night, Jensen said.

Jensen said Mrs. Stutzman was examined Sunday at the Howard County Hospital in St. Paul "for the purpose of gathering evidence," but she was not arrested. The county attorney said Kim and Mark Stutzman were believed to be the only people in the trailer at the time of the shooting.

"We haven't determined the time of death," Jensen said. "As near as we can tell, it was 5:30 or 5:15 this morning."

Jensen said emergency medical technicians from Dannebrog were first to arrive at the Stutzmans' trailer, followed by the Howard County Sheriff's Department.

Three investigators from the Nebraska State Patrol in Grand Island were inside the trailer gathering evidence Sunday: Investigator William Mach, Sgt. James Phinney and Trooper Lorri Rogers, Troop C's primary evidence officer.

"It's going to be a while before we know what's going on here," Phinney said. He said Jensen would make a ruling on the cause of death after autopsy results were returned. Autopsy results were expected Monday, and physical evidence was being examined at the state crime lab in Lincoln, Jensen said.

The trailer and a red pickup parked by the front door were surrounded with yellow plastic tape printed with "sheriff's line do not cross." The red Chevrolet pickup is registered to Stutzman's Drywall of Loup City. A brown Nissan pickup parked nearby was registered to Mark Stutzman.

Julia Lehn, 73, who lives across the street from the Stutzmans' trailer, said the couple moved their trailer behind the restaurant last fall and had lived there two to three months.

Lehn last saw the Stutzmans at midnight Sunday at a "Las Vegas casino night" fund-raiser for the Boelus Volunteer Fire Department and EMTs. Alcohol was served at the annual event, which featured a meal followed by casino-style games.

"It was full in there. I think they were still in there when I walked out" when the event closed at 1 a.m., she said.

Lehn was up until about 3:30 a.m. watching TV and did not hear anything from Stutzmans' trailer during the night.

"I just can't believe it," she said. "I didn't see them too much. They never caused any ruckus or anything."

Lehn worked seven years as a Golden Nugget cook when Whitefoot owned it.

"The worst part of it is this is the second time it's happened," Lehn said.

Mrs. Stutzman managed the restaurant, and her husband owned Stutzman Drywall in Grand Island, Lehn said. Son Travis and daughter Mabelle, both in their 20s, helped at the restaurant.

In an August 1993 article about the Golden Nugget in The Independent, Mrs. Stutzman said the couple had invested more than \$100,000 in the business. They were newcomers to the restaurant business, but were familiar with the restaurant because they owned a farm southwest of town. Mrs. Stutzman said she also had sold real estate and worked with her family in Honore Kennels in Grand Island.