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Murder-suicide motive mystifies police ** Penn Forest father and son left little record for four years.

Author: David Slade Of The Morning Call

Article Text:

A 36-year-old Penn Forest Township man killed his father sometime before an hours-long standoff at his home Thursday evening that ended when the man took his own life, police said.

But they don't know why Michael R. Vandergrift fired the fatal shots, and it appears there are few people to ask about Carbon County's first murder in more than four years, police said.

"That's the next step," state police Trooper Shawn Noonan said Friday. "Trying to contact people who knew the two of them and finding out what led to this."

Police say they are confident Vandergrift killed his father, Robert M. Vandergrift, 65, because he told them so, before producing a gun and threatening to kill himself Thursday evening.

"He told us he killed him earlier," Noonan said. "As we were making the first contact with him, he told us he had killed his dad."

A state trooper had gone to the home at 916 Mohawk Trail in the gated Indian Mountain Lakes development around 6:20 p.m. because the Vandergrifts' landlord had not heard from them and asked police to check on their welfare.

Noonan said it appeared no one had been in or out of the house for days, and no one answered the door.

But when a trooper entered using the landlord's key, he encountered Michael Vandergrift, who made his startling admission, then produced a handgun.

The ensuing standoff lasted until about 11 p.m.

Police were able to briefly talk to Vandergrift on the phone and unsuccessfully tried to persuade him to put down the gun and come out, Noonan said.

He said Vandergrift never threatened the many state and local police surrounding his home, and the police officers heard no shots.

But when a police tactical team entered the house, they found the bodies of Vandergrift and his father.

"By 11 it was over," Noonan said. "Our SWAT team made entry to the house and observed both bodies."

He said Robert Vandergrift's body was found in an unheated addition of the home, and it wasn't immediately clear how long his body had been there.

"It didn't look like the father knew it was coming," Noonan said. "There weren't any signs of struggle."

The son's death was ruled a suicide, and the father's a homicide, following autopsies Friday. Noonan said investigators have had little success finding anyone who knew the Vandergrifts. They have no family in the area and just moved to their rented house in the Indian Mountain Lake development a year or so ago, Noonan said. The only relative who recently lived with them is in a psychiatric institution, he said.

Many of the homes in the sprawling, heavily wooded development are vacation and rental homes, so neighbors don't always know one another. The development spans four municipalities in Carbon and Monroe counties.

Noonan said Michael Vandergrift recently was laid off as a concrete-cutter for a company in the Allentown area, but police have been able to learn little more.

"From looking at documents, it's almost like they didn't exist for the past four years," Noonan said.

While police have identified the two men as the Vandergrifts, even the spelling of their names is uncertain, and that complicates efforts to search records for information and relatives.

Michael's name was spelled Vandergrift on his Pennsylvania driver's license, while Robert's driver's license said Vandegrift, according to Noonan.

Michael registered to vote in Carbon County a year ago as Vandergrift. But when Robert Vandergrift's wife, Sandra, died in 1998, an obituary published in The Morning Call spelled the family name Vandegrift. At the time, the family lived in Slatington.

There is no mention of Michael or Robert Vandergrift, or Vandegrift, in court records, police records, or telephone books in Carbon County.

Noonan said that, though police are confident they know what happened, the investigation will continue.

"We treat it as a whodunit until everything tells us that it wasn't one," he said. "The 'why' is what we're working on now."

Carbon County has not had a murder since Jan. 24, 1999, when Stephen Heller killed his girlfriend, Erin Pindris, 24, in a drunken, jealous rage at the couple's Jim Thorpe apartment. Heller, 26, is serving a life sentence.

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Reporter Bob Laylo and librarian Diane Knauss contributed to this story.

Caption:

** 1. MICHAEL R. VANDERGRIFT fatally shot his father at 916 Mohawak Trail in Penn Forest, then turned the gun on himself, police say. ** 2. MAP: INDIAN MOUNTAIN LAKES DEVELOPMENT -- MAP shows location where murder-suicide took place.

PHOTO by Ed Koskey Jr., The Morning Call and MAP by Craig Larimer, The Morning Call

Memo:

Due to newsroom front-end system production difficulties the entire text could not be electronically captured for the online archive, please see microfilm for complete map.
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Police: Murder-suicide motive may never be known ** Carbon man who killed his father seemed to be in a good mood.

Author: David Slade Of The Morning Call

Article Text:

Investigators say they have been unable to learn why 36-year-old Michael R. Vandergrift killed his father and then, following a standoff with police, killed himself last week in the Penn Forest Township home they shared.

"I spoke to about 20 people, and nobody seemed to have any idea why it happened," said state police Trooper Shawn Noonan, at the Fern Ridge station. "We were unable to establish a motive and possibly never will."

Vandergrift, a recently laid-off concrete cutter, killed himself with a handgun the evening of March 6 at his home in the Indian Mountain Lakes development, police said.

The hourslong standoff began after a state police trooper went to the home to check on the father and son, who had not been seen in a while. Vandergrift told the trooper he had killed his father, then brandished a gun.

"I even spoke to a guy who saw [Vandergrift] the night before it happened, playing chess with him and having a good time," Noonan said. "The father was probably already dead in the next room."

Noonan said Robert M. Vandergrift, 65, was shot to death one to three days before the standoff, based upon autopsy results.

The father and son had few family members in the area and police were able to learn little about them immediately. Even the spelling of their surnames is in question, with some official

documents spelling the name Vandergrift and others spelling it Vandegrift.

Susan Eckhart, who lives near Reading and said she has known the Vandergrifts for years, said she has no idea what may have prompted their deaths.

"We were totally shocked," Eckhart said. "There are only two people who know what happened, and they are both dead."

Eckhart said her younger brother saw Michael Vandergrift just days before his death and got no sense something was wrong.

Robert Vandergrift's death was Carbon County's first homicide in more than four years, and as murder-suicides go, it's a somewhat unusual case, officials said.

While most murder-suicides take place inside homes and are committed with guns, they typically involve a male perpetrator and female victim, and are precipitated by the breakdown of an intimate relationship, according to one recent study by a Washington, D.C. antigun group.

The Violence Policy Center studied the nearly 300 murder-suicides, in which 662 people died, reported across the nation during the first six months of 2001.

Among the study's conclusions was the determination that "a male victim being specifically targeted by a male offender in a murder-suicide is relatively rare."

The study notes that Pennsylvania accounted for 17 of the country's murder-suicides during the first six months of 2001, ranking fourth behind California, Florida and Texas.

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