Watkins' inquest jury makes decision (originally published 12-22-09)

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An inquest into the death of Chandlerville resident Steven Paul Watkins was held at 9 a.m., Jan. 20, in the Beardstown Courtroom. After the presentation of facts and findings, the jury determined the death was a homicide.

Cass County Coroner Wyatt Sager presided over the session, reminding those in attendance, "This inquest is not conducted as an inquiry of guilt or innocence, but to determine the manner and cause of death."

Sager stated the details: The incident in question occurred on Nov. 25, 2008, at #11 Horseshoe Drive, Ashland. ¡On that date, Sager was called at 5:58 p.m., and arrived on the scene at 6:22 p.m. Upon arrival, he found Steven Watkins lying on the floor, dead of an apparent gunshot wound. The body was taken to Memorial Medical Center in Springfield. The crime scene was processed by an Illinois State Police technician. Ashland Police Chief Jim Birdsell is conducting an investigation.

Sager introduced Police Chief Jim Birdsell and said, "Jim Birdsell is here to assist this process in finding the manner and cause of Steven Watkins' death. He has received advisement from the states attorney's office, and if he does not answer it does not mean he is hiding something.

Accept his answer of 'no' as a way to remain silent for the ongoing investigation."

Police Chief Birdsell stated: When he arrived at the residence on Horseshoe Drive, he saw a body on the floor to his left, approximately 20-30 feet from the front door. As he approached the deceased, he saw a wound on the back of the head which appeared to be a gunshot wound. The body was laying in the dining room, on its side with the head turned to the left.

Sager asked Chief Birdsell who was in the house when Birdsell arrived. The police chief said, "Jennifer Watkins, the wife of Steven Watkins; Jennifer and Steven's daughter; Jennifer's grandparents Shirley and Kenny Skinner; and Jennifer's parents Debra and Bob Webster."

At that point in the proceedings, Birdsell presented pictures of the scene to the jury. When asked what kind of weapon was involved, Birdsell stated, "A 9mm Glock 17-C". Birdsell said there were packing boxes lined along the south wall of the room, 5 to 8 feet from the front door, to the left of the door. The gun was lying on one of the boxes.

Police Chief Birdsell attended the autopsy. Wyatt Sager asked if Watkins was shot from behind and the answer was "yes".

The pathologist's report stated that the gunshot came from more than two feet away; the weapon did not make contact with the body; the gunshot came from a lower position and was fired upwards to the victim's head. There was no exit wound.

Coroner Sager added, "Steven Watkins was there for a court-appointed visitation, which was on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Watkins was 69 inches tall and was shot by someone sitting or who was much shorter than him."

He asked Chief Birdsell what the pathologist's determination was and was told, "the gunshot would not have been self-inflicted."

The pathologist was John W. Ralston, M.D.

Sager said to the jury, "It should be noted that no drugs or alcohol was found in Watkins body. From the photos you can see where the bullet hit Mr. Watkins. The pathologist gave details which I do not find it necessary to discuss.

"It has been determined the death came from a gunshot wound to the head. You have four choices for the manner of the death—accidental, undetermined, natural, or homicide. It is the jury's decision."

Aside from members of the jury, those in attendance were asked to leave the room. Sager remained with the jury and called the family, press and police officials back into the room after a brief closed session.

When asked for the jury's decision, the spokesman responded, "homicide".

Coroner Sager told the family, "My personal condolences to your entire family for what is a horribly drawn out nightmare you have relived countless times. I promise you can be assured that Officer Birdsell and others have worked long hours to bring this to a conclusion. I am sorry it took this long to get you a permanent death certificate. But, we did not want to jeopardize the investigation."