

2 HELD IN NURSING HOME DEATHS \ PROBE OF DEATHS NEAR GRAND RAPIDS \ BRINGS CHARGES AGAINST EX-EMPLOYEES

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WALKER -- Two former employes of a nursing home were charged with murder Monday in what the Walker police chief has called "a complex case" that may involve the suffocation deaths of eight patients.

Catherine May Wood, 26, of Grand Rapids was arraigned Monday on two counts of open murder in the deaths of Edith Cook, 98, and Marguerite Chambers, 60. Wood was a former supervisor of nurses' aides at the Alpine Manor Nursing Home in suburban Grand Rapids, where eight deaths in the first half of 1987 are under investigation.

Former nurse's aide **Gwendolyn Gail Graham** , 25, was arrested Sunday in Tyler, Tex., on one count of murder in Cook's death.

Graham refused to waive extradition at her arraignment Monday in Tyler, about 100 miles southeast of Dallas. She was being held in the Smith County Jail on \$1 million bond.

Police Chief Walter Sprenger said at a news conference Monday there is no evidence to indicate the two deaths were mercy killings. But he refused to reveal a motive.

"A lot of this will come out during the trial," Sprenger said. "I cannot share evidence that will be detrimental to the case."

Police investigators said they believe at least some of the residents were suffocated in their beds, the police chief said.

"The motive is the key," he said. "It's a complex motive. . . . It's a complex case. It's so complex it's going to take a lengthy trial . . . to make a lot of sense," Sprenger said.

Assistant Kent County Prosecutor Dave Scheiber said of the possibility the women had been suffocated, "I wouldn't give it any credence."

Asked about a motive, he said, "I think I know, but I don't feel free to say."

The case is "so unusual both in the facts and the law that we've tried to be as thorough as we can, and it's not something that necessarily fell neatly into our laps."

Sprenger said autopsies on the two women, whose bodies were exhumed last week, did not show conclusively that they had been murdered. The charges against Wood and **Graham** rely more on statements from other nursing home employes or ex-employes, statements from other witnesses and some physical evidence that Sprenger declined to specify.

One of the witnesses is Wood's ex-husband, who contacted police in October with information about the suspected killings, Sprenger said. The ex-husband's statements prompted further investigation of "rumors that were swirling around" about deaths at the home, Sprenger said.

He refused to say if either woman had confessed or made any comment to authorities. He said more charges are possible.

"We'll continue now looking at the other six" deaths, he said. He said there did not appear to be other suspects in the case.

Based on interviews with nursing home employees, Sprenger said it appears the women discussed their alleged actions with others.

Graham, a native of Texas, had worked at Alpine Manor beginning in June 1986 and left in June 1987 to return to Texas. In Tyler, she worked at Mother Frances Hospital from September 1987 until Oct. 19, 1988. Beverly Mason, an assistant vice-president of Mother Frances, said **Graham** was fired after the hospital became aware of the investigation in Walker. She said **Graham**'s roommate, who also worked at the hospital, resigned Monday.

Wood worked at Alpine Manor from August 1985 through October 1988.

Sprenger said there was some indication that Wood left because police that month began investigating suspicious deaths at the home.

But Ginny Seyferth, a spokeswoman for Alpine Manor, said Wood left because Wood was going to school to become a nurse. Seyferth said Wood and **Graham** had worked together at the home and neither was involved in administering medication.

Seyferth said no one at the nursing home suspected the patients' deaths were not from natural causes and each of the alleged victims suffered from long-term disability and illness.

She said Wood had an excellent work record and that Wood and **Graham** were well liked and respected by patients and their families as well as other staffers at the home.

Of Wood, Seyferth said: "All her reviews were extremely positive. She was very much a favorite of many of the patients and families."

Wood showed little emotion at her arraignment before 59th District Judge Sherwin Venema. The judge denied a request by Wood's attorney, Christine Yared, that Wood be freed on bond. Yared also asked that Wood and **Graham** be kept separated. When asked later, Yared would not comment on the separation request.

Venema set a Dec. 16 preliminary examination.

"Alpine Manor is devastated but relieved . . . that something is being done," Seyferth said.

CUTLINE

Walker Police Chief Walter Sprenger and Alpine Manor Nursing Home spokeswoman Ginny Seyferth answer questions during a news conference Monday. Two women were charged in connection with two deaths at the nursing home in suburban Grand Rapids. (FILED UNDER WALTER SPRENGER)

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