



Darrell Thomas White Eagle

February 26, 1942 – June 28, 1995

The body of Darrell Thomas White Eagle, 53, Fort Pierre, was discovered near Fort Pierre on Friday, June 30, 1995. Cause of death was blunt force on his head.

The funeral service held at H.V. Johnston Cultural Center in Eagle Butte, S.D. Deacon Dora Bruguier and Rose Moran officiated the service. Burial was placed at Episcopal Cemetery at LaPlant, S.D. Kesling Funeral Home in Mobridge, S.D., handled the arrangements.

Darrell Thomas White Eagle was born February 26, 1942, to Charles and Katherine (Pretty Bear) White Eagle at Cheyenne Agency, South Dakota. He attended the South Dakota School for the Deaf in Sioux Falls, S.D. He then lived at Eagle Butte, where he worked at the Eagle Butte newspaper. He moved to Fort Pierre, S.D. in 1975, where he was living at the time of his death.

Survivors include two sons, Tracy White Egle of Eagle Butte, S.D. and Daron White Eagle of Rapid City, S.D.; two brothers, Raymond White Eagle of Swift Bird, S.D., and Wayne White Eagle of Manadaree, N.D.; and two sisters, Sharon White Eagle of Lemmon, S.D., and Alma Tucker of Beatrice, Nebraska.

Editor: More information about his death is on the next page



1957-1958 SDSD Basketball season

Standing from L to R: James Still, Russ O'Neill, Arnold Fonder, Dennis Hoppe, Ken Merrill, Coach Henry Bjorlie Jr., John Dykstra, Ken Herrick, Arnold Stevens, Darrell White Eagle, and Dennis Smith.
Kneeling: Robert Carl, manager.

The Mysterious Death of Darrell White Eagle

After two years, investigators are still baffled by the unsolved mystery.



Darrell White Eagle

There's a mystery which surrounds Fort Pierre, S.D., a small, sleepy Missouri River town. And though nearly two years have passed since the body of Darrell "Johnny" White Eagle was found face down in a shallow swamp, no one is able or willing to discuss the strange and suspicious circumstances surrounding his death.

White Eagle, a deaf Native American, lived a very modest lifestyle and kept mostly to himself. He was liked among his few friends and peers. One who wished to remain anonymous stated, "Johnny was usually friendly and cheerful. He just wasn't the kind of person to get into trouble."

He was last seen alive in Fort Pierre on June 26, 1995 along with his little dog, a long-time companion of his. Apparently, that same evening, Johnny was brutally struck over the head a number of times resulting in massive head trauma. Autopsy reports also said that the severity of the injuries probably caused death instantaneously. Three days passed before his severely decomposed body was discovered by a local Fort Pierre resident, Derald Gross.

Gross was looking for his daughter's purse, which had been stolen the day before. He believed that some of the homeless people who often gather in an area behind Moose Lodge #1813, in Fort Pierre, might know some information about it.

Gross walked down to a heavily-wooded, swampy area located between the Moose Lodge and the Missouri River. The condition of the area made it

"Johnny was usually friendly and cheerful. He just wasn't the kind of person to get into trouble."

a favored dumping ground for litter, empty bottles and other trash. It was there that he discovered the body floating in about 2 feet of murky water.

The discovery was immediately reported to Fort Pierre Chief of Police Kevin Steever. After Steever's initial investigation of the scene, he summoned the Stanley County Sheriff Brad Rathburn and County Coroner Jerry Tibbs. The coroner was asked to help find the exact cause of death and to help with the identification of the body.

Sheriff Rathburn had pictures taken of the scene and conducted a survey of the measurements and patterns of footprints in the surrounding area. A local funeral chapel then removed the body so that Tibbs could conduct a more thorough investigation of the body.

After closer examination, the coroner was finally able to identify the

body as being that of Darrell "Johnny" White Eagle.

Although Police Chief Steever said that he was ruling out the possibility of any foul play, Tibbs felt that the circumstances surrounding the death were questionable. Within hours, Tibbs ordered an official autopsy which was conducted in Sioux Falls.

The results confirmed without doubt that White Eagle had been murdered. The coroner and police then returned to the "crime scene" in order to find more evidence. By this time, authorities had officially classified the case as a homicide.

The coroner's report revealed that White Eagle died from "...acute subdural and epidural hemorrhaging of the brain, as well as skull fractures on the right side of the head." The autopsy also confirmed that a blunt object caused the head trauma.

Police Chief Kevin Steever said he was conducting the investigation and would follow up on any leads. It did not take long before the County Sheriff's Office and the State Department of Criminal Investigation (DCI) became involved to assist Steever with his probe into White Eagle's death.

Interestingly, within three months the town's Council removed Steever from office—first by suspending him from the department with pay, and finally, terminating his employment permanently. Fort Pierre Mayor Jim Klemann announced that Steever was relieved of his duties because of his involvement and conduct in an unsolved murder. It was obvious that he was referring to the White Eagle case as it was the only recent murder and the only one which remained unsolved.

Death ruled homicide

By LETA CHILDERS
Capital Journal Staff

Law enforcement authorities are conducting a homicide investigation into the death of Darrell "Johnny" White Eagle, a 52-year-old Native American whose body was found June 29 in Fort Pierre.

According to Stanley County Coroner Jerry Tibbs, White Eagle died as the result of a "blunt head trauma." Tibbs said the cause of death was "acute subdural and epidural hemorrhaging on the right side" of the head as well as a skull fracture on the right side of the head.

Tibbs said the death was probably instantaneous.

White Eagle's body was discovered floating face down in a pool of swampy water behind the Moose Lodge.

Fort Pierre Chief of Police Kevin Steever said he was conducting the investigation with the assistance of the Stanley County Sheriff's Office and the Department of Criminal Investigation.

"Right now we are following leads and interviewing people," said Steever.

State Supreme Court Rejects Lawsuit Over Death of Former SDSD Student

by Joe Kafka
Associated Press

Pierre, S.D.—A lawsuit that alleges former Fort Pierre Police Chief Kevin Steever killed a man in June 1995 must be dismissed, the state Supreme Court ruled unanimously.

Steever and the city of Fort Pierre were sued by the eldest son of Darrell Thomas White Eagle, 54, whose body was found face down in a slough near the local Moose Lodge. An autopsy showed his skull was fractured by a blunt object, such as a large flashlight or a club.

Steever, who initially investigated the death, was suspended several weeks later and eventually fired. Officials said only that he was fired because neither the law enforcement community nor the public had confidence in him.

The lawsuit alleged that Steever assaulted White Eagle and the injuries caused or contributed to his death.

"He violently and negligently beat, struck and bludgeoned ... White Eagle," wrote Robin Zephier, a Rapid City attorney who represents White Eagle's son, Daron.

Steever used excessive force on an intoxicated person and violated his constitutional rights, the lawsuit alleged. The city was accused of failing to properly train and supervise the police officer and faulted for hiring him without learning about his "previous history and propensity to harass, threaten, assault, batter, beat, humiliate and bludgeon undeserving and innocent citizens."

No one has ever been charged in the death, and prosecutors have refused to publicly link Steever in any way.

But Circuit Judge Kathleen Trandahl of Winner, who ruled a year ago that the lawsuit against Steever and the city could continue, noted that the "criminal investigation centered on Steever."

Overturning Trandahl, the Supreme Court said the lawsuit was filed after the legal deadline to do so. ❁

EDITOR'S NOTE: Darrell "Johnny" White Eagle was a student at South Dakota School for the Deaf in the late 1950s.