

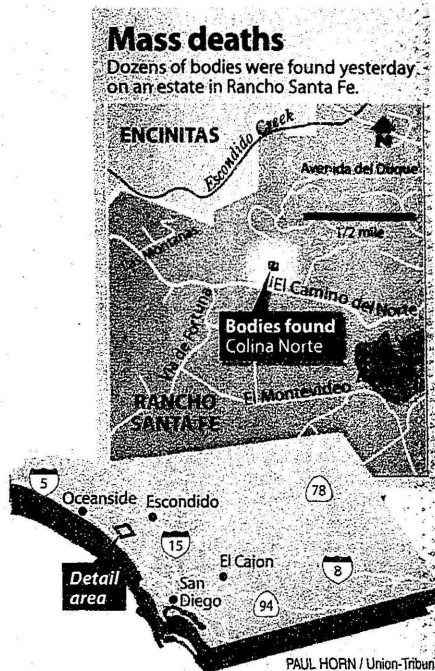
Union-Tribune.

"I've never seen anything like this in my life."

LT. JERRY LIPSCOMB, *homicide detective*

Mansion of death yields 39 bodies

- Members of religious group discovered dead in Rancho Santa Fe
- Deaths appear to be a mass suicide, according to sheriff's deputies



Grisly discovery: Law enforcement investigators gathered yesterday outside the home on Colina Norte in Rancho Santa Fe where the bodies of 39 people, all reportedly members of a religious group, were found. The dead were scattered throughout the rambling two-story house, officials said. Authorities said they believed the group had been dead at least three days.

By Ruth L. McKinnie
STAFF WRITER

RANCHO SANTA FE — At least 39 members of a religious group, who referred to themselves as angels, were found dead yesterday inside a rented million-dollar-plus estate.

Sheriff's investigators, who began searching the house only late last night, said the deaths appeared to be a mass suicide. If so, it would be one of the largest such incidents in U.S. history.

The men and women, many between the ages of 18 and 24 but some older, had been dead at least three days, authorities said.

The bodies were found by a sheriff's deputy sent to the house just after 4 p.m. yesterday in response to an anonymous caller's tip to check on the welfare of the people inside the secluded house on Colina Norte. A similar call was received by Beverly Hills police and routed to San Diego sheriff's officers.

The first deputy to enter the home found several bodies and stopped counting at 10. He left the house and waited until another deputy arrived. Together they counted 39 bodies.

The dead were scattered throughout the rambling two-story house, sheriff's officials said. Some were on their backs on the floor with their hands at their sides, while others were lying on cots or mattresses. Sources said all but two had their heads and shoulders draped with purple, silky scarves, with one corner on the forehead and two corners on the shoulders.

There were no survivors.

Initially investigators thought all of the dead were young men, but they revised that report early this morning.

"They were all in a prone position on their back with their arms at their sides," said sheriff's Cmdr. Alan Fulmer. "All appeared as if they'd fallen asleep."

All the dead were wearing dark trousers, sneakers and light-colored shirts. There were no obvious signs of injury on any of the bodies,

Inside:

■ **State of shock:** Rancho Santa Fe residents grew agitated as news of a mass suicide filtered through their community yesterday. **A-3**

■ **The Ranch:** A profile of Rancho Santa Fe. **A-3**

■ **Determining the cause of death:** Autopsies on bodies will begin this morning at the county Medical Examiner's Office. **A-4**

■ **History:** A look at mass suicides and slayings that have horrified the world since the late 1970s. **A-5**

See **HORROR** on Page A-5

Cults exert pull on those with 'extreme need'

Experts look for increase with the approach of the millennium

By Sandi Dolbee
STAFF WRITER

Rich or poor, young or old, they are seeking an anchor in a storm-tossed society that threatens to overwhelm them.

They feel inadequate and yearn to be a part of something bigger than themselves.

They join a cult.

"There's usually some feature that is very attractive to them," said the Rev. Peter Barnes, a minister at Clairemont Emmanuel Baptist Church and an expert in cults.

"Invariably," Barnes added last night, "they are people with an extreme need."

Barnes and other experts who study the

spiritual seduction of cults say that in these rapidly changing times, people are especially vulnerable to such exclusionary groups.

But understanding cults, particularly the destructive ones, means more than dissecting why people join them. It also means being aware of the sophisticated recruiting and retaining techniques that cults employ.

"It's not a question only of seekers seeking and then finding the group, it's the group finding the people," is how Marcia Rubin, a New York cult expert, once put it.

Rubin, and others, single out deception in recruitment, mind-control techniques and other forms of abuse as among the behavior they watch for in defining a destructive cult.

And once members are in, they said, they are in forever.

"There is no salvation outside their group," is

the way Darrel Johnson, an adjunct professor at the San Diego campus of Bethel Theological Seminary, explains this allegiance.

"So once you are out, you are out. You are dead when you go outside anyway so you might as well stay inside and die with the group."

Among the characteristics of destructive cults:

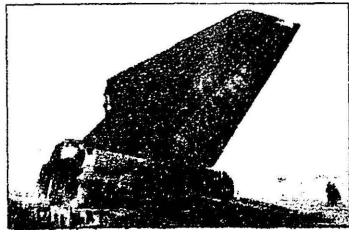
■ They demand that followers cut off ties with their families and former friends. These social bonds are then transferred to the cult.

■ There are no checks and balances for resolving conflict. Indeed, members who complain are often punished severely.

■ They demand conformity to the values of the group.

See **CULTS** on Page A-5

Inside



Twenty years after the worst aviation disaster, survivors recall their horror. **Page A-25**

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Weather

Today

Mostly sunny skies;
early morning fog.
66-50 Coast — 75-56 Inland

Tomorrow

Mostly sunny skies;
early morning fog.
66-50 Coast — 72-54 Inland
See Page C-3



A Copley Newspaper
7 Sections, 146 Pages

HORROR IN RANCHO SANTA FE

Upscale village in a state of shock

Neighbors face dread, dismay in wake of the horrid tragedy

By Patricia Dibsie
and Jeanne F. Brooks
STAFF WRITERS

RANCHO SANTA FE — Residents of this quiet, gold-plated village grew progressively more agitated as a mixture of news accounts and rumors of a mass suicide filtered through their community yesterday.

In the parking lot of a neighborhood market, in the bars of restaurants along Paseo Delicias and on the eucalyptus-lined streets — wherever residents met, they asked: Have you heard?

"Things like that don't happen here," offered a middle-aged man who hurried along a village road, late for a seminar on finances. His face took on a look of relief when he was told that the victims were renters.

"Oh, then they're not really people from the ranch; real people from the ranch don't commit suicide," he added, scoffing at earlier rumors of 10 bodies.

He said "that's small potatoes compared to Guyana," where more than 900 members of the California-based People's Temple drank a cyanide-laced fruit drink in 1978.

Few were able to talk about anything else.

Keith Arendsee, a financial consultant with an area brokerage firm, had been working at his office when phone calls alerted him to the tragedy.

"I'm shocked," he said. "Unbelievable."

He continued walking along the sidewalk outside his office when he bumped into Chuck Courtney, one of the area's golf pros.

"You hear, as many as 49 people?"

"Um," Arendsee replied, "God. I don't know."

"Yeah, weird."

Courtney said he knew where the house was and that he hadn't heard about anything weird going on at the place. "Jesus," he said.

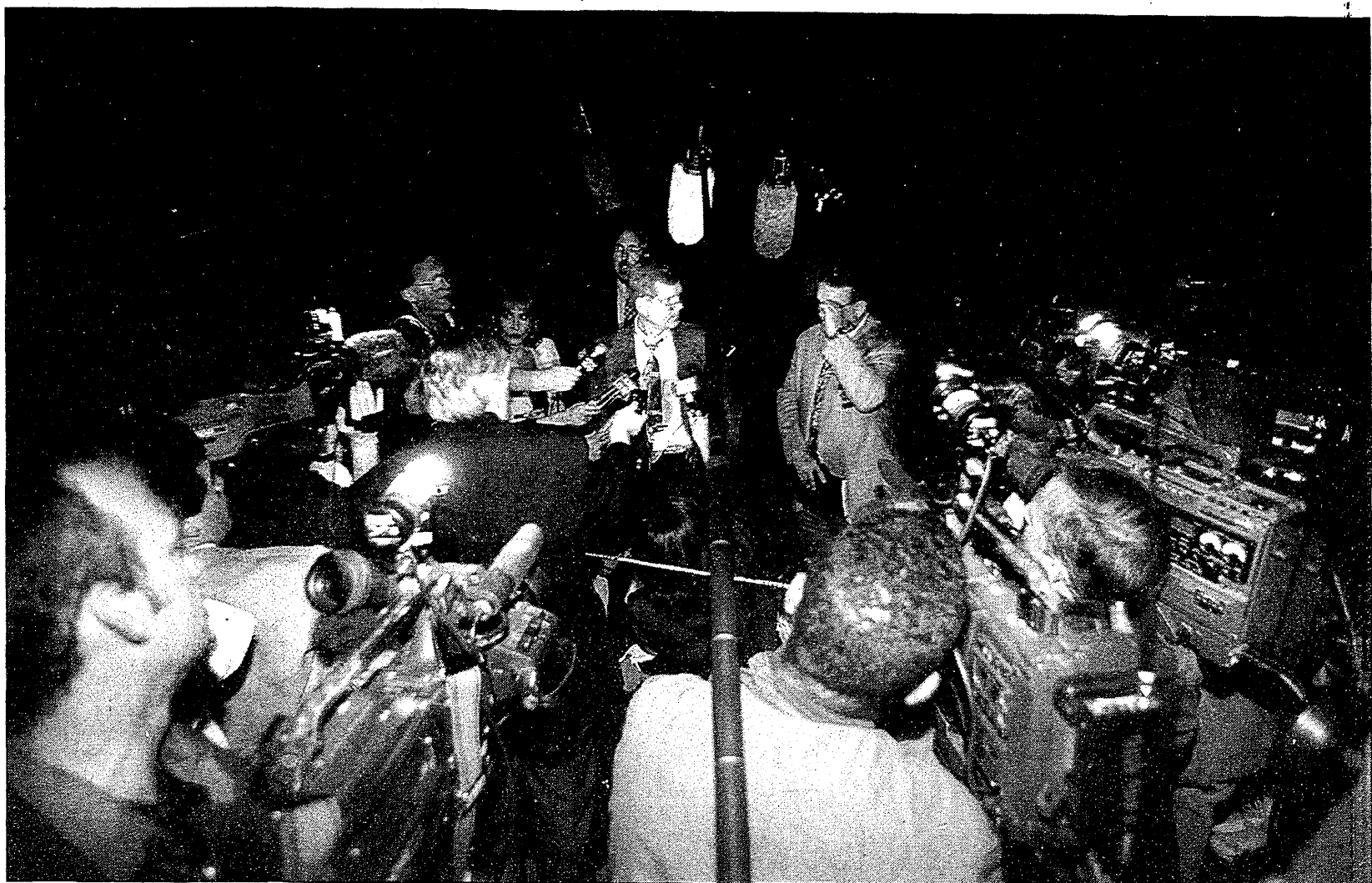
No one was questioning why, just where. They couldn't believe it had happened in their community.

Customers in one bar pored over a photo copy of the house from a listing in a real estate book. The conversation started back at the beginning every time someone new joined the group.

As the death toll soared from 10 to 39, the bar became quieter.

On a sidewalk outside a market, Jan Miller walked her dog and compared news with other strollers. The 25-year resident and former TV show writer shook her head as she heard the latest tally — 39 dead.

"I understand that they were renters, so they weren't really Ran-



SEAN HAFEEY / Union-Tribune

Media attention: San Diego County Sheriff's Cmdr. Alan Fulmer (center) briefed reporters last night after the discovery of the bodies of 39 people, found lying in matching dark pants and tennis shoes in a million-dollar mansion in Rancho Santa Fe.

cho Santa Fe people," she told a clerk. The two stood talking until the tiny dog grew impatient and pulled on the leash.

A woman who said she lived on the top of a hill near the house where the 39 died swore she had heard screams coming from the house late at night over the past couple weeks.

"Up on the hill, you hear things," she said, adding that she had dismissed the incidents after her husband said she always made too much of nothing.

"I wanted to call a friend in the FBI," she said. "I would hear things in the distance and it gave me an eerie feeling. It gave me the creeps but my husband says I'm silly about things like that and so I didn't."

Mille Fleurs Restaurant manager Stephen Poskus said people were coming into the restaurant and heading straight for the TV in the bar to find out what was happening. He said nobody at the restaurant seemed to know the people at all.

"We're all shocked and more than a little surprised," he said, adding, "it's not exactly what you'd expect to have happen in a community like Rancho Santa Fe."



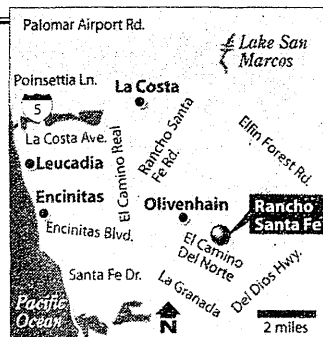
SEAN HAFEEY / Union-Tribune

Neighbor: Bill Strong, who lives next door to the property where 39 men and women were found dead yesterday afternoon, is approached by a television photographer. Strong holds a card with the name of the owner of the house where the bodies were discovered.



TONY DOUBEK / Union-Tribune

Town talk: Jan Miller, speaking outside Rancho Santa Fe's Village Market, discusses the mass deaths.



Rancho Santa Fe

ATA GLANCE

Population:	12,180		
Age breakdown:	Households by wealth		
Under 6	6%	<\$25,000	14%
6-17	16%	\$25,000-\$49,999	5%
18-24	8%	\$50,000-\$99,999	11%
25-34	9%	\$100,000-\$249,999	27%
35-44	16%	\$250,000-\$499,999	24%
45-54	20%	\$500,000+	19%
55-64	10%		
65+	15%		

Median age: 42.5 years

Average household income: \$98,880

Average price for a single-family detached home: \$1,552,104

SOURCE: 1996 U.S. Census

MARK NOWI / Union-Tribune

Usually, 'The Ranch' Is Serene Retreat

Wealth and luxury blend comfortably into the casual, picturesque setting

By Dwight Daniels, STAFF WRITER

RANCHO SANTA FE — People who live here call it simply The Ranch.

And with its rolling hills, signature eucalyptus trees, and gated estates — many with neatly fenced pastures to accommodate horses — the name is apt.

An unincorporated area formed under a "covenant" nearly 70 years ago, Rancho Santa Fe is the oldest planned community in California, by far the wealthiest community in San Diego County and one of the wealthiest in the United States.

The minimum size of a lot in the town is 2.86 acres. It has the highest median income in the county, \$93,000 a year, and also the highest median household wealth, \$212,000, according to marketing statistics. The median home price tops \$1.4 million.

"We've got people here who had very active roles in their professions, people of great accomplishment," said recently re-elected Rancho Santa Fe Association President Mel Sawelson in an interview last night. Some are recently made fortunes; others have been around forever.

"But we believe in being understated," he was quick to add. "People who come here want their privacy, and none of us really cares that much what anybody did in the past. We just want to enjoy each other for who we are now."

Residents give a wave or a nod to the likes of actors Martin Milner and Victor Mature or sportscaster Dick Enberg when they see them around town.

The late Ray Kroc, the founder of McDonald's, and his wife Joan have been well-known Rancho Santa Fe residents. Legendary NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle

lived here until his death in December.

Astronaut Walter Schirra, real estate developer Ralph DeMarco, film and television writer William Simon, actors Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford and Robert Young, and author Joseph Wambaugh are among others who have called The Ranch home. Pop singer Jewel recently bought an estate here.

Padres owner John Moores bought his home here about 10 years ago, and he calls the community "absolutely enchanting."

"People are just people here," he said of the neighborly, small town feel of the place. "It's not like Rodeo Drive. A lot of people are like me... they've gotten to a point where they could afford to live anywhere, and they've concluded this is best place on the universe to be."

Events such as the mass deaths discovered yesterday "are as far from indicative of our community as you can get," said Sawelson, who spent 40 years as an executive in motion pictures and television.

"Around here, hopefully the most serious thing that happens is that somebody trips on the sidewalk."

There are some 5,000 residents of the covenant area, a tract of 6,200 acres. The area was mapped out in the original 1928 covenant agreement, which was designed to preserve the rural character and natural landscape of the community.

The swank enclave's downtown, known as the Village, has a lone gas station that charges among the highest prices for a gallon of fuel in the state. Many of the original building's are in the Mexican adobe style of Lillian Rice, the architect who implemented the master plan for the community in the 1920s.

"And some of our eucalyptus trees date back to the

'20s when Santa Fe railroad planned this area as a community, bringing in members of their company to live here," Sawelson said.

"They planted all those trees and hoped to use the wood for railroad ties, but it didn't work out at all."

The Rancho Santa Fe Association pays for its own security force, officers who patrol the area and can make citizens arrests or call in the Sheriff's Department.

Anyone who closes escrow on a covenant property agrees to abide by the association art jury's decision on any improvements. Disputes have erupted over everything from flower beds to sculptures.

"It took years to get people to even put numbers of their addresses out in front of their homes," said Jo-San Arnold, a public information officer for the Rancho Santa Fe Fire Protection District. "That's how the privacy has been kept all these years. With the distance and topography, it's not so uncommon for a neighbor not to see his neighbor for a month or so."

The lifestyle is Californian to the T — literally, with half a dozen country clubs within a few miles of one another. Crooner Bing Crosby's early tournaments, before WWII, were held at the Rancho Santa Fe course. Other country clubs are located nearby at Fairbanks Ranch and Del Mar.

Many people here don't commute to offices, but simply work from their homes as investors, entrepreneurs, consultants, or writers, residents say. "The lifestyle of Rancho Santa Fe is unique, said Bebo Mallory, a longtime Realtor in the community. It's sort of like going back in time, to what life was like before there were a lot of problems."

Staff writer Greg Moran contributed to this report.

HORROR IN RANCHO SANTA FE



JOHN R. McCUTCHEN / Union-Tribune

Proceeding with caution: Sheriff's investigators waited outside the Rancho Santa Fe home for hours yesterday until a search warrant was issued and until members of the county's Hazardous Materials Team could check the house for toxic chemicals.

Multiple deaths in the region

■ **Feb. 2, 1995:** Joshua Jenkins killed five members of his family with a hammer, a knife and an ax. He then set fire to the family condominium in Vista before fleeing. He was captured a few miles from the scene and later confessed the killings to the police.

■ **Oct. 31, 1993:** Gordon Neumann opened fire from a window of a second-story apartment in El Cajon, killing two people and injuring five, mostly children. He was found dead after his apartment burst into flames.

■ **Oct. 15, 1993:** James Buquet, a 19-year old college student, shot and killed four people and then himself at the El Cajon Family Fitness Center.

■ **April 10, 1993:** Two gunmen killed six people, including four members of one family and wounded two others in a Tijuana home. A 10-year-old boy escaped by hiding in a bedroom closet. The gunmen escaped capture.

■ **Nov. 5, 1992:** The bodies of Ian Stuart Spiro's wife, Gail, and their three children were found in their rented Rancho Santa Fe home. Each had been shot once in the head. Spiro was found dead of cyanide poisoning Nov. 8 in the Anza-Borrego Desert State Park. Authorities believe Spiro killed the family members and himself.

■ **Aug. 10, 1989:** Postal worker John Merlin Taylor shot and killed his wife, then killed two co-workers and wounded a third at the Orange Glen post office in Escondido. Taylor died the next day of a self-inflicted wound.

■ **Dec. 28, 1986:** Three men and a woman were found shot to death in a house in the 3400 block of Hasty Street in College Grove. Carlos Villa Fonseca received a life sentence for the killings.

■ **June 1, 1985:** Toufic "Tom" Naddi, 44, killed his wife and four family members in their El Cajon home. He is serving 135 years to life in prison.

■ **July 18, 1984:** James Huberty, 41, killed 20 people when he opened fire in a crowded McDonald's in San Ysidro. Huberty was killed by police.

■ **Feb. 17, 1982:** Alys Edmund McNair, 57, went on a four-hour afternoon shooting rampage from his Chula Vista mobile home, killing three neighbors and wounding a sheriff's deputy. He is serving 45 years to life.

■ **Jan. 29, 1979:** Brenda Spencer, 16, killed the principal and a janitor and eight children while firing on a San Carlos elementary school with the .22 caliber rifle she got for Christmas. She is serving 25 years to life in prison.

■ **Sept. 25, 1978:** At 9:02 a.m., PSA flight 182 was headed toward Lindbergh Field when it was struck by a Cessna 172. Both planes crashed, killing all 144 passengers and seven people on the ground.

Research by DWIGHT DONATTO / Union-Tribune

Spiro case rocked community in '92

By Darlene Himmelspath
STAFF WRITER

RANCHO SANTA FE — Four-and-a-half years ago, this exclusive community was rocked by the grisly discovery of a mother and her three children shot to death in their luxury home — killed by the man who had loved them.

Ian Stuart Spiro, millions of dollars in debt and a failure at business, took his own life four days after wiping out his family. Spiro died of cyanide poisoning. His body was found in the Anza-Borrego Desert Nov. 8, 1992.

Detectives concluded that Spiro, 46, shot his wife, Gail, 41, daughter Sara, 16, and son Adam, 12, as they slept. His youngest child, Dina, 10, was awakened by the noise and was standing and resisting when her father shot her.

Audio tapes discovered after his death contained the ramblings of a loser as Spiro talked of his vain efforts to use a Ouija board to win the lottery and solve his overwhelming financial problems.

Ian and Gail Spiro lived in a \$1 million estate, which they rented for \$5,000 a month, near the Rancho Santa Fe Golf Course. When they died, they owed at least \$5 million to creditors. In-

vestigators found "handfuls" of credit cards, all charged to their limit. Water and electricity had been shut off for nonpayment.

Spiro's 900-number business was failing and he was operating a money-juggling scheme in which money from new investors was being used to pay off old ones.

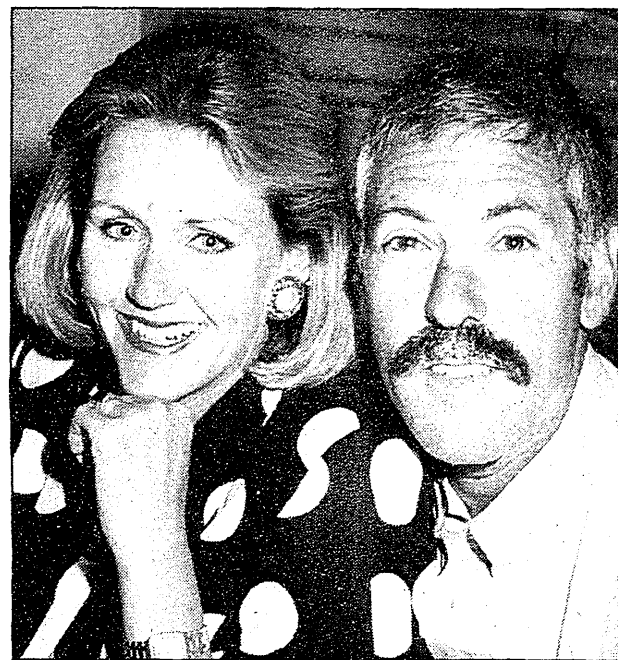
The Spiros had lived in many parts of the world and were accustomed to a grand lifestyle. Their many relocations added to the complexity of the case, a sheriff's captain said at the time.

"It's not like this guy was a plumber and lived in San Diego and went to Hoover High School," Capt. Jim Marmack said.

"For his entire life, he threw nine balls in the air," a source told *The San Diego Union-Tribune*. "Then the balls started falling and he couldn't do anything about it. He was desperate."

The case made international headlines and prompted wild conspiracy theories until the Sheriff's Department determined three years later that the deaths were a murder-suicide.

The most persistent theory was that the CIA, seeking to prevent release of a videotape depicting the torture and murder of



FILE PHOTO

High-profile couple: Detectives believe Ian Spiro killed his wife, Gail, shown with him in this undated photo, and three children before committing suicide.

the agency's Beirut, Lebanon, chief, William Buckley, by Shiite Muslim extremists in 1984, murdered the family and took the tape.

No such tape was ever found. British journalists identified Spiro as a former British and American spy with ties to the Iran-Contra affair.

Other theories included Spiro

double-crossing the Israeli secret service, which then sent a hit squad to kill him, or that Spiro made off with drug money and was the target of drug kingpins.

Sheriff's detectives ruled out the theories, determining instead that Spiro murdered his wife and children and committed suicide to escape mounting debts.

Autopsies set for this morning

Results could take days or even weeks

By Rex Dalton
STAFF WRITER

Autopsies on bodies found yesterday in a Rancho Santa Fe home will begin this morning at the county Medical Examiner's Office, where officials spent the night preparing for the onerous job of determining causes of death.

The bodies will be stored in a 40-foot trailer at about 38 degrees until county pathologists can perform autopsies, officials said. At least 39 bodies were discovered in the house.

Officials from the Los Angeles County Coroner's Office, who called yesterday to assist San Diego authorities, sent two rescue vans last night to help transport the bodies to the Kearny Mesa office of the medical examiner. The refrigerated vans can carry up to 20 bodies, officials said.

Depending on what evidence is available at the house where the bodies were found, the medical examiner will begin running toxicology screens and performing other tests to determine what caused the deaths, said Calvin L. Vine, a supervising investigator.

It could be days or weeks before the exact cause of death is known, if an unusual toxin was involved, he added.

Dr. Brian D. Blackburne, the county medical examiner, and another pathologist were some of the first authorities at the house, examining the bodies and checking for evidence. Blackburne was unavailable for comment last night.

Pathologists are not expected to work around the clock performing autopsies, officials said, because there is only so much evidence that can be obtained from a decomposing body.

But because it will take several days to lower the temperature of the bodies to halt decomposition, the staff at the Medical Examiner's Office can be expected to work with dispatch to complete the autopsies.

The initial autopsies will be the most important, because they will provide basic information about the cause of death, Vine said.

In past cases of mass deaths, the Medical Examiner's Office has learned that it is best to designate a couple of pathologists to handle routine deaths in the county, while several of the agency's remaining seven pathologists concentrate on bodies from the major incident.

One or two officials also will be designated to talk with families as identifications of the bodies are made.

As of about 8 p.m. yesterday, no families had called the medical examiner about any missing relatives, officials said.



JOHN R. McCUTCHEN / Union-Tribune

Investigation begins: A county sheriff's investigator shines a light at a window of the Rancho Santa Fe house where the bodies of at least 39 people were found yesterday. Authorities went to the house in response to an anonymous caller's tip.

HORROR IN RANCHO SANTA FE

Doomsday cults have a grisly history

By Gregory Gross
STAFF WRITER

The men and women whose bodies filled the rooms of a Rancho Santa Fe mansion are but the latest in a series of mass suicides and slayings that have horrified the world since the late 1970s.

Many of those grisly events have been perpetrated by so-called doomsday cults, whose devotees turn apocalyptic visions of the future into orgies of self-sacrifice — or in some cases, homicide.

The largest mass suicide associated with the United States involved the Rev. Jim Jones and the California-based People's Temple in 1978.

More than 900 Temple members drank a grape-flavored, poisoned punch, with the fatal concoction even being given to children at the urging of Jones.

Earlier, Congressman Leo Ryan, a *San Francisco Examiner* photographer and a San Francisco television news cameraman were all

shot to death after flying together to Guyana to investigate the cult.

More recently, 83 members of the Branch Davidians, a heavily-armed cult led by David Koresh, killed four federal agents in a fierce gunbattle at their compound in Waco, Texas, in 1993, then burned to death inside the facility when the FBI tried to force an end to their 51-day standoff.

Not all such cults devote themselves to suicide, however. Some turn to murder, authorities claim.

Police SWAT teams swooped down on Hulan Mitchell Jr., a politically influential black Florida preacher who called himself Yahweh Ben Yahweh, after he was accused in 1990 of conducting a reign of terror that included the murder of 14 opponents and the firebombing of a block of homes.

In recent years, other doomsday cults have risen in Europe and Asia, with terrifying results.

A French-speaking cult calling itself the Order of the Solar Temple stunned the world with a series of mass suicides in Europe and Canada.

Members of the Solar Temple believe that the group's founder had taken part in the Crusades in a previous life and that through death they would be able to join him on the star Sirius.

In October 1994, 53 members of the group committed suicide in two villages in Switzerland and at a ski resort in Quebec, Canada. Their bodies were found inside burning buildings.

Again in December 1995, the burned remains of 16 Solar Temple members were found lying in a forest clearing near the French city of Grenoble in the Alps. Their bodies had been arranged in a star formation in the snow.

As recently as last Sunday, police in Canada's Quebec province were investigating the deaths of five people found in a burned-out house owned by a member of the Solar Tem-

ple.

In Japan, a doomsday cult called Aum Shinri Kyo attempted not mass suicide, but mass murder, releasing Sarin nerve gas in five Tokyo subway stations on March 20, 1995.

Eleven people were killed and 5,500 sickened. The same group is suspected by Japanese authorities in a similar poison gas attack on a small Japanese town outside of Tokyo that killed seven people and injured 144.

Its blind leader, Shoko Asahara, has been arrested and charged with murder.

Closer to home, six occupants of a house in Tijuana, including four members of one family, were found shot to death in 1993. A 10-year-old boy, who hid in a closet as the killings took place, later told police how the gunmen had shouted, "You're going to hell!"

Three years later, a family of six was found stabbed to death in their home outside Mexico City. The suspects in that case reportedly believed their victims were witches.



SAN FRANCISCO EXAMINER

Cult leader: More than 900 followers in Jonestown, Guyana, joined the Rev. Jim Jones in a mass suicide in 1978.

Horror

Veteran officers call it the worst they've seen

Continued from A-1

and there was no sign of a struggle inside the house, he said.

"This is the worst (crime scene) in terms of the numbers of people in one place at one time that I've ever seen," Fulmer said.

"I've never seen anything like this in my life," said veteran homicide Detective Lt. Jerry Lipscomb.

There were many computers inside the house. One computer monitor was on with a note indicating that it should not be turned off.

"I'll bet that's their suicide note," a law enforcement source said.

An attorney for the businessman who owns the home said it had been rented in October to a religious group he knew by the name of WW Higher Source. Others said the men designed pages for the World Wide Web.

Realtors said the home's owner, Sam Koutchesfahani, rented it for \$10,000 a month after unsuccessfully trying to sell it for \$1.595 million.

The renters "referred to themselves as angels," said Milton Silverman, Koutchesfahani's attorney. "They didn't drink, they didn't smoke, (they) were celibate. . . .

"They believed they were sent to Earth as angels," he added. "They met in Middle America, U.S.A." Silverman said there are affiliates or chapters of their group in New Mexico and Arizona.

The house remained on the market, Silverman said, though the group asked not to be bothered by prospective buyers this week.

"They requested that the house not be shown this week because it was their holy week," Silverman said. "They appeared to be peaceful, religious people."

Holy Week, the last week of Jesus' life, started Sunday with Palm Sunday. Purple — the color of the scarves found on the corpses — is one of the traditional colors associated with the Lenten season.

Sheriff Bill Kolender, Undersheriff Jack Drown and Gov. Pete Wilson were said to be on their way to the mansion from out of town last night, while as many as 20 sheriff's detectives waited outside the home for hours until a search warrant was issued.

Investigators also waited until members of the county's Hazardous Materials Team made sure no toxic chemicals were inside the house. Fulmer said the team detected no gas fumes inside the residence.

The first two deputies to enter the house — wearing surgical masks — smelled a noxious, pungent odor inside. The house was completely shut up, with all the windows and doors closed, although the deputies found an unlocked side door through which they entered.

The two deputies were examined at a hospital as a precaution and were discharged.

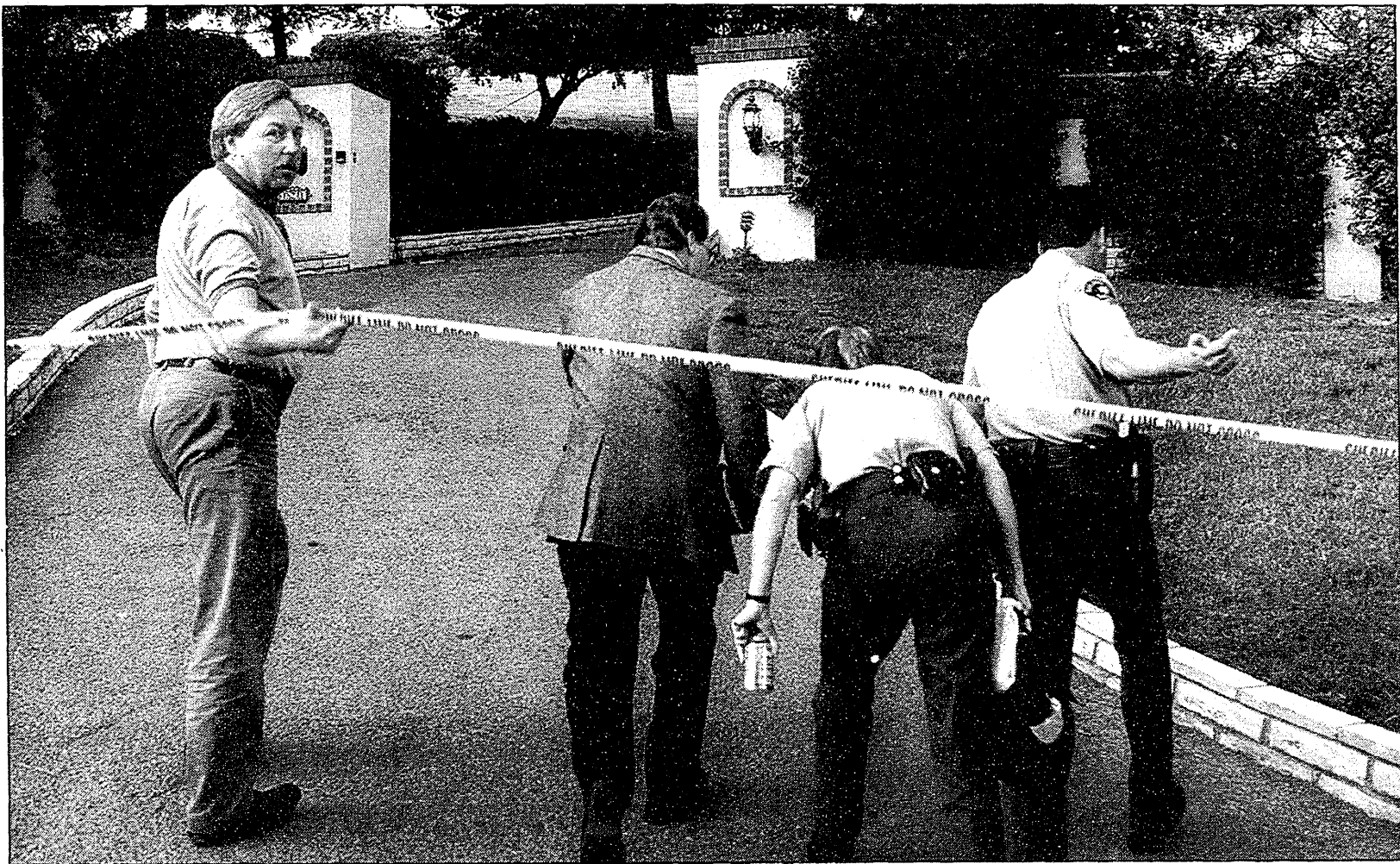
Last night, a sheriff's evidence technician in the rear of the home was seen taking numerous photographs of apparent writing on a sidewalk.

As sheriff's officials began their investigation, seven helicopters and one small plane, all possibly hired by the media, flew low over the house. El Camino del Norte, the nearby main thoroughfare, was congested with interested passers-by.

Bill Strong, a Realtor who lives next door to the home where the bodies were found, said the last time he saw anyone go in or out of the house was on Saturday.

Strong said he occasionally saw people coming and going from the home in four large vans with New Mexico license plates. He said he exchanged waves with them, but never words.

"It almost seemed like they were

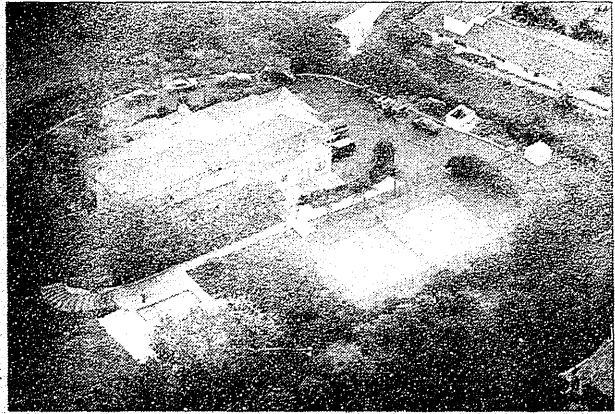


TONY DOUBEK / Union-Tribune

Mansion of death: San Diego County sheriff's deputies duck under police tape as they enter the million-dollar Rancho Santa Fe estate where the bodies of at least 39 men and women in matching dark pants and tennis shoes were found.

The house at a glance

The home on Colina Norte where the deaths occurred was for sale, listed at \$1,595,000.



From a current real estate listing: This two-story home built in 1983 has 7 bedrooms, 7.5 bathrooms and is approximately 9,200 sq. ft. Rooms include an indoor laundry room, guest house. Other features include fireplaces, living room, hardwood floors. This home has a four or more car garage, and patio. Recreation amenities include swimming pool, spa, tennis court. The 3.11-acre lot is located on a cul-de-sac.

Dimensions:	Additional features:
Master Bedroom 37x22	Forced air heat
2nd bedroom 17x12	Electric heating
3rd bedroom 17x12	Baseboard heat
4th bedroom 17x12	Propane heating
5th bedroom 16x12	TV cable available
Living room 30x28	Security features
Dining room 18x14	Attached parking
Family room 26x15	Landscape irrigation
Kitchen 26x14	Lot size between 2 1/2 and 5 acres
Extra room 26x14	Frame and stucco exterior

SOURCE: SignOn San Diego

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a nonspeaking order," Strong said. "I never heard a noise from there."

Strong said he once saw a chalkboard inside the house and used binoculars to try to read what was written on it. He said he saw a list with five columns with three letters written under each column, but he could not decipher the meaning.

Four or five members of the group apparently did computer work for Web Sites Now, which is owned by Interact Entertainment Group in Beverly Hills, according to Lili Ungar, a Santa Monica publicist whose clients include Interact.

One of those members left the group about three months ago and is now employed by the company,

she said last night.

Ungar spoke with Nick Matzorkis, Interact's owner, after learning of the deaths. "He didn't believe they were part of a cult or anything like that — they were just people," Ungar said.

One cult expert said that yesterday's grim discovery was reminiscent of the ritual deaths of followers of the Order of the Solar Temple, a Swiss-based cult, who apparently believed that by killing themselves they would be transported to a new life in a world called Sirius.

"The M.O. is similar," said the Rev. Peter Barnes, who became a student of cults and a Baptist minister after leaving a cult.

The fact that the bodies were positioned somewhat alike — many lying on their backs — was among the similarities. The bodies found in two 1994 mass suicides, which claimed a total of 53 lives, were found in circles. In a mass suicide ritual within the same cult the next year, the 16 bodies were arranged in a star formation.

The Solar Temple deaths may also have been linked to the position of the sun.

But another expert played down the possible links.

"There's nothing at this point that appears linked to the Solar Temple," Mike Kropveld, executive director of Info-Cult, a Montreal organization, told *The New York Times*. Kropveld said all known Solar Temple members have been accounted for and authorities did not know of any large group of them that was missing.

The 9,200-square-foot house with seven bedrooms and 7 1/2 baths is one of five or six expensive homes on the cul-de-sac. The home sits on a 3-acre lot with a swimming pool, spa and tennis courts.

Koutchesfahani, the owner, recently pleaded guilty to tax evasion and fraud. He admitted that he took as much as \$350,000 from Middle Eastern students between 1989 and 1995 and used the money to bribe instructors at San Diego City College, Mesa College and Palomar College to illegally enroll the students and certify them as California residents.

Neighbors Arnie and Claudia Kapan, who moved into their house on Colina Norte in October, said Koutchesfahani joked about renting his home to monks.

Koutchesfahani "was a real nice guy," said Arnie Kapan, 72. "He said, 'You are one of the nicest neighbors around.' He said to me jokingly, 'I am going to rent my house to some monks.'"

"We think we are in paradise," said Claudia Kapan, 65. "We left L.A. because it was getting gnarly up there. . . . We thought we were moving to a safe utopia. The only exciting thing around here is the ditch they are digging out front to put in a pipe."

Most homes in the area are behind security gates. Several resi-

dents declined to speak to reporters last night, while others expressed alarm.

"I am very shocked something like this would happen on our quiet street," said Jody Honnen, 63, who lives next to the home where the bodies were found. "Everyone is very respectable. Everyone stays

to themselves. And everyone is very nice."

Staff writers L. Erik Bratt, Clark Brooks, Sandi Dolbee, J. Harry Jones, Anthony Millican, Jim Okerblom and Kelly Thornton contributed to this report.

Cults

Millennium may inspire more apocalyptic fervor

Continued from A-1

■ And they are led by leaders with the kind of charisma that, as with Jim Jones in 1978, is capable of persuading more than 900 people to give up their lives.

Well-known San Diego cult deprogrammer Ted Patrick, who by his own count has deprogrammed over 2,600 former cult members, said that people should view these members as if they had been hypnotized.

"When we're talking about mind control, we're talking about hypnosis," Patrick said last night.

"When I deprogram a person, I'm restoring that person's free will and ability to think and make decisions," he said.

Cult-tracking groups do not agree on how many destructive cults there are in the world. The estimates range from a few dozen to a few thousand.

But they do agree that the number is growing. Part of the impetus, they say, is the coming of the new millennium — and the apocalyptic fervor that is fed by it.

David Koresh, the head of the Branch Davidians who died with dozens of his followers outside Waco, Texas, in 1993, repeatedly quoted Revelation, the complicated last book of the New Testament that predicts Armageddon. The Order of the Solar Temple also follows a doomsday teaching.

"I think everybody expects more of this in the next five years just because of the millennium," Bill Pitts, a Baylor University religion professor and student of the Branch

Davidians, predicted in 1995.

There is something about the calendar's move toward a new millennium, Pitts said, "that cause people to do these self-fulfilling sorts of things."

The same thing happened as 999 rolled toward 1000.

"Things are going to reach fever pitch for what we refer to as apocalyptic (cults)," said Barnes, from Clairemont Emmanuel Baptist Church. "They are all very convinced that the end of the age has to come by the year 2000."

And they will follow their charismatic leader even to their death.

These leaders, explained Barnes, "are able to persuade their followers that they represent God. . . and that their followers can trust everything they say to them."

Contributors

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