

Foul play suspected in county man's disappearance

Click image to enlarge

Teams of searchers combed the Bovina countryside Sunday looking for Benjamin "Ben" Berrick, who was last seen on Jan. 25.

Man had helped homicide victim

By Pamela Hitchins

Published:

Monday, February 16, 2009 12:09 PM CST

Teams of searchers combed the Bovina countryside Sunday looking for a local man who disappeared days after providing help to another man who later died of stab wounds.

To help

Report any information related to the disappearance of Ben Berrick, 5123 Warriors Trail, to the Warren County Sheriff's Department at 601-636-1761 or the Central Mississippi Crime Stoppers at 601-355-8477 or 866-481-8477.

Benjamin "Ben" Berrick, 55, 5123 Warriors Trail, was last seen Jan. 25, Warren County Sheriff Martin Pace said. Two days earlier, Berrick had taken Shawn Sponholz, 50, to River Region Medical Center, where Sponholz died of stab wounds. The case was termed a homicide and remains under investigation.

"We looked in several different areas, all in the Bovina community," Pace said late Sunday afternoon. About 62 searchers, including 15 Warren County deputies, were involved in Sunday's effort, which lasted about eight hours.

Five search and rescue organizations from Mississippi and Louisiana participated with trained dogs. Some teams involved searchers on horseback working with dog units, and each team included a local deputy.

"We have specific information we are acting on," Pace said. "We have reason to believe foul play was involved (in Berrick's disappearance) and we are acting on specific leads."

Last week Pace requested help from Mississippi Gulf Coast Search and Rescue Team, coordinated by Pat Sullivan, Gulfport's fire chief. Sullivan notified other groups, who arrived in Bovina early Sunday morning.

Pace would not identify the specific areas in Bovina that were searched, or comment on suspects or a motive in Sponholz's death or Berrick's disappearance.

Sponholz, who rented a cabin from Berrick, was bleeding heavily from stab wounds to his neck when Berrick took him to the hospital around 7 p.m. Jan. 23. Sponholz died in the emergency room, and an autopsy the next day confirmed his death was a homicide.

Berrick was questioned by deputies and released. Pace said that when investigators went to speak with him again on Monday, Jan. 26, he was not home and has not been seen since.

Sullivan briefed the assembled teams gathered at the Bovina Fire Station, which was opened as a command post. "We're all here to search for Ben," Sullivan said, "and we hope he is maybe somewhere in the Caribbean with one of those little drinks with the umbrella in it."

Besides the Gulf Coast group, searchers included the search and rescue team from the Gulfport Fire Department, Lamar County Search and Rescue from the greater Hattiesburg area, Delta K-9 Search and Rescue from Bolivar County and LASAR, Louisiana Search and Rescue, from Slidell.

"These people are here as volunteers to assist us, trying to get a job done," Pace said. "They do this as a service to the state, and they are good." The county pays only for their lunch.

To the rescue teams, though Berrick was not found, the search involved a measure of success. "Clearing an area is a positive, because we know then that we don't have to put resources there," said Dee Wild of LASAR.

Wild, of St. Tammany Parish just north of New Orleans, searched with her dog, Sky, a 9-year-old yellow Labrador retriever. She said dogs and handlers undergo continual training, working every Saturday as well as seven or eight hours during the week to stay sharp. All expenses are borne by the volunteers.

"This is a calling," Wild said.

Pace said there are no immediate plans for another search for Berrick.

Little was known about Berrick, except that he has a daughter, is not married, is unemployed, and is a longtime resident of Vicksburg.

Sponholz, who had lived in Vicksburg for only a year or two, had been employed by Energy Services International on U.S. 61 South, said a stepson who lives in Vicksburg.

---

Death, disappearance of two from Warriors Trail still a mystery

Published:

Monday, June 29, 2009 6:57 AM CDT

phitchins@vicksburgpost.com

Five months after the stabbing death of Shawn Paul Sponholz and the disappearance three days later of his neighbor and landlord, Benjamin Berrick, authorities remain tight-lipped about suspects, evidence and the details about what they think happened to the two men.

Sponholz, who was 50 and lived at 5123 Warriors Trail, died Jan. 23 in the emergency room at River Region Medical Center from multiple stab wounds in his neck, Warren County Coroner Doug Huskey said. An autopsy the next day confirmed the death was a homicide.

Berrick, 56, 5125 Warriors Trail, had taken Sponholz to the hospital that night, Sheriff Martin Pace said. After Sponholz died, deputies took Berrick to the Warren County Jail for questioning, and the jail docket that night listed him as being in custody as a "material witness."

Berrick was questioned by investigators, then released, Pace said at the time. When investigators returned Jan. 26 to the Warriors Trail property to ask more questions, Berrick had disappeared.

Pace said Wednesday that investigators have identified a suspect in the Sponholz killing, but will say nothing about what happened to Berrick other than it involved "foul play."

"We feel that in the Sponholz case we are on the right track but at this time we are not going to name a suspect," Pace said. "We do have a suspect in the case who has not been formally charged."

Regarding Berrick, Pace said, "I will not comment specifically about any items of evidence, but we do have reason to believe Mr. Berrick met with foul play."

Berrick was the target of a manhunt in the Bovina area Feb. 15. The search turned up nothing.

Family members of both men also wonder what happened to them.

"We're getting on with our lives, but it still bothers everybody because they haven't found a killer," John Barrett, Sponholz's stepson, said Thursday. "We have no idea what happened and the police haven't told us anything."

Sponholz lived in a cabin on the Berrick property since late October or November, Barrett said. As far as what might have happened to Berrick, "that's the million-dollar question," he said.

A chain has been strung across the driveway leading to Berrick's and Sponholz's homes, with yellow "Sheriff line — do not cross" tape dangling from the chain.

Beth Brewster, Berrick's daughter, said Thursday marked five months to the day since she last talked to him. Berrick called her Jan. 25 to set up a date to go fishing. Two days later, sheriff's deputies told her he was missing.

"It's been five months, and my father still has not been found," said Brewster. "I have no idea why any of this has happened. They haven't told me anything."

Brewster said Berrick owned the property and that she has taken over paying his bills and looking after his affairs, including adopting his dog. "I know for a fact he didn't just leave," she said. "He had a sm"

Neighbors said Berrick could often be seen walking his dog, but otherwise he kept to himself. They said there was not a lot of traffic on the road and no evidence of disturbances or unusual activity around the time that Sponholz was killed and Berrick disappeared.

Pace said Wednesday that some items of evidence are still being analyzed at the state crime lab, and all information will be turned over to District Attorney Ricky Smith for a grand jury to review and decide if there is enough evidence for formal charges and a criminal trial.

The next Warren County Grand Jury will convene Aug. 3. Pace said he did not know if the case would be ready to present at that time.

Sponholz was a native of New York, said his mother, Carol Sponholz, a New York resident living in Florida at the time of his death. In addition to his mother and father, he left four brothers, as well as two stepsons in Vicksburg and a stepdaughter in Alabama. Berrick, a veteran of the U.S. Army who was born in Texas, worked for one of the casinos about eight years ago, his daughter said. He also has a son, who is "on the road right now," Brewster said, and family members in Texas, but had not spoken to them for more than 20 years.

<http://www.vicksburgpost>

---