

THE BODY AT THE FOOT OF

The mysterious death of a missile expert's wife uncovers a

By RUTH REYNOLDS

THE SURPRISING interview which William Porth, 27, gave publicly after the conviction of his scientist father, Robert Edward Porth, 58, for wife-murder, has added new fuel to the gossip in Winston-Salem, N.C., as to what really happened to the Porths.

Bill Porth thinks his father was wrongly convicted in the death of Hilda (Jerry) Porth, 54, Bill's mother. Some Winston-Salem acquaintances of the family agree with Bill. Others can be sure only that Mrs. Porth and the Porths' adopted daughter, Kathy, are dead and that the future of well-to-do Robert Porth is highly uncertain.

It was about 10:30 P.M. Monday, Aug. 16, 1965, when Sgt. S. J. Abbot of the Virginia State Police received a call from Robert Porth in Winston-Salem.

Porth, an anti-missile missile expert, told Abbot he feared something had happened to Jerry, his wife of 30 years. Porth said Jerry had started off alone in the family Chrysler at 9:30 P.M. the previous Friday to visit friends in Illinois on Saturday and later attend a wedding in Milwaukee. No word had been heard from her since.

Abbot asked Porth if he had called Winston-Salem police.

"They appear to be closed," Porth answered. Abbot said nothing to the scientist about a teletyped message that had come in the previous Saturday about the finding of a woman's body.

Shortly after this call from Porth to Virginia police, E. F. Shearwood, an investigator for the Virginia State Police, tried to reach Porth at his Winston-Salem home on Briarcliffe Road. Porth was out. Shearwood left a message. Porth called back in the early hours of Tuesday morning.

Shearwood told Porth that the body

of a middle-aged woman, who answered the description of Mrs. Porth, had been found on a roadside embankment near Pulaski, Va., at 7:30 the previous Saturday night. The body was first seen by a Pulaski-bound autoist who pulled off the road to rest high on Draper's Mountain. Peering through the dusk down the road-edge cliff, he thought he saw a mannequin. Then he realized it was the body of a woman who appeared to have been trying to scramble upward.

City, state and county officials retrieved the body. An autopsy revealed the woman had died on Friday—about 24 hours before she was found—probably from shock. A blow at the base of the skull showed up in the autopsy. This did not appear to have been a hard blow, yet it might have caused the shock which caused death.

Shearwood told Porth the state police were convinced that the well-dressed woman—who was missing one slipper and socklet—was the victim of a hitchhiker who had taken her purse and her car. The state police had queried sheriffs for miles around. Could Porth come up to look at the body?

Accompanied by his Winston-Salem pastor, the Rev. L.C. Baumgarner, Porth identified the body.

Husband Expresses Shock

"Terrible! She looks terrible!" he sobbed to his minister. "I hate for her friends to see her."

"Then why don't you have the body shipped directly to Milwaukee to have it buried beside Kathy?" the pastor suggested. As an old friend, he knew the Porths were originally from Milwaukee and that Kathy had been buried there after a mysterious illness caused her death in 1963 at the age of 17.

SO JERRY PORTH was buried in Milwaukee with her husband and son at the cemetery. Bill flew up from El Paso,

Tex., where he lived with his wife, Margaret. And (in the light of what he was to say later) one may wonder at Bill's thoughts as he looked upon the graves of his mother and his sister and saw his father's grief-aged face.

He knew that his father had always treated his mother with kindness; that his mother had had some disturbing moments over the knowledge that there was a younger, prettier "other woman" in Porth's life; that his mother had a quick temper and had often turned it on Kathy.

Neighbors and friends in Winston-Salem—where the Porths had moved in 1954—knew only a part of this background. They said that Jerry Porth had been "snipet," although she sometimes flew off the handle. They said Bob Porth had been very good to Jerry, although he sometimes "ran around with some woman."

Everyone knew of Jerry's popularity with fellow members of the women's clubs to which she belonged. Many wondered how she had managed to do as much as she did, considering the arsenic poisoning—she blamed insecticides—from which she suffered in 1963 after Kathy's death.

Friends knew that, at the time of her death, Jerry had some sort of foot trouble—she clopped along unsteadily. For that matter, so did Porth. His friends wondered what he would do now, with Jerry dead.

The police asked themselves the same question, especially after they learned about the other woman who was still very much in Porth's life. When informed that this woman, Mrs. Nancy Cockermam Johnson, 33, had come up to Winston-Salem from Florida to see Porth, they picked her up at a motel.

What Mrs. Johnson had to say bolstered the suspicions of police that Jerry Porth had died in Winston-Salem, not in Virginia.

On Sept. 6, 1965, Porth's lawyer, James I. Booker, called Winston-Salem Capt. W. C. Burton. Soon Burton was at the Porth home on Briarcliffe Road with Forsyth County Sheriff Ernie G. Shore, Chief Deputy Walter Speas and Deputy E. G. Baker. Porth, who was drinking, made a long statement which began:

"Something is tearing me up inside . . . I've got to get it off my chest . . . I need help . . . will you help me?"

Booker: "You don't have to say anything in front of the officers."

Porth: "I know that."

Booker: "Is that what you want to do?"

Porth: "It is. My friends have turned against me. I have been receiving telephone calls, calling me a murderer. I can take it no longer. I want to talk about August 13th—"

"You have done a good job in your investigations. You have uncovered a lot of skeletons in my closet. I deserve to be punished. You can do whatever you want to do. You can hang me if you want to. I've made a mess of my life. I've become a professional bum . . . the arsenic deal is a separate deal. I will straighten that out later. I want to tell you what happened to my wife—the poor girl."

PORTH said that on Thursday afternoon, Aug. 13, he and Jerry worked on a new house they were building in Winston-Salem on Phillips Bridge Road. At dusk, Porth said, Jerry went out to the car to change her paint-stained clothes in order to grocery shop. When she returned to him in changed garments, he told her, "You look fine." Then he went downstairs. He heard a thud.

"I found her on the first floor with her feet on the little stairs," Porth said. "I dragged her outdoors onto the straw. Then I look her back into the room and she lay on insulation material. We talked and we talked and we talked but she didn't say anything."

He apparently meant here that his wife didn't say anything about her accident.

"Then she died. I realized I was on a hot spot. Nobody would believe me because of those arsenic cases."

"I put her body in the car trunk. I had the car gassed up. I called Nancy Johnson. I drove up Highway 52. I



wondered what I could do to make it look like a hitchhiker did it. I pulled off the road. I took her body to the edge and she rolled down into the ravine. One shoe was in the car. I threw it out—God only knows where. I drove to Charlotte, W. Va., and parked the car at a motel. I flew back to Greensboro, got a taxi home and talked to a service man to establish an alibi."

As a feeble excuse for being involved with another woman, Porth said there had been "no sex life at home since Jerry had a hysterectomy eight years before and a lot of things after that. She had a severe intestinal operation in May, 1962."

Porth then showed the investigators the half-finished house on Phillips Bridge Road, where Jerry fell, where she died. They found blood on the stairs; a socklet under the stairs. There were only four steps in the stairway, measuring 39 inches overall.

His Note to Nancy

Bill Porth, believing his father's story that Jerry Porth's death was accidental, arranged with his firm, Western Electric (the same firm for which his father worked) to transfer him to its Winston-Salem branch. Bill and his wife moved into the Briarcliffe Road home. The elder Porth remained in the county jail; the Forsyth County grand jurors—unlike his son—did not believe his story of his wife's accidental death. They indicted him for first degree murder. From jail, the elder Porth wrote to Nancy Johnson, who was living in Fort Lauderdale, Fla.:

"They want to prove I killed Jerry because of you. You know me well enough to know I couldn't kill anyone. I'm in a real tight spot. You stick with me through it and we'll have a future together. Please burn or destroy this. The state will try to prove a torrid romance. If they do, I'm stuck."

Nancy did not "burn or destroy."

FEELING that he had a good case going, Forsyth County Solicitor Thomas W. Moore Jr. sought exhumation in Milwaukee of the bodies of Jerry and Kathy Porth. Bill Porth fought vainly against this.

Porth's trial for the murder of his wife began last Feb. 14—St. Valentine's day—before an all-male jury and Superior Court Judge George M. Fountain.

The first prosecution witnesses, neighbors and friends, made as many points as they could for the defendant; if Jerry's body was badly bruised when it was found, it must be remembered that Jerry bruised easily; she had very sensitive skin. If she tripped on 39 inches of stairway (four steps), it should be explained that she had foot trouble. Also, she was bothered by hot weather and the day of her death was very hot. Porth was very good to his wife; they worked a lot together in the yard; he would blow kisses to her whenever he drove away. State witnesses managed to squeeze all these details favorable to Porth into the prosecution's testimony. But there was unfavorable testimony, too.

Mrs. James Messick, a neighbor, said Mrs. Porth told her Thursday morning (Aug. 13) that she (Mrs. Porth) wasn't going to Milwaukee. Then, on Saturday, Porth told Mrs. Messick that his wife had changed her mind "very quickly."

Mrs. E. R. Eisenhour testified that Jerry's brother, Arthur W. Borchardt, called her Saturday from Milwaukee to find out where Jerry was; that she telephoned Porth off and on up to 3 P.M.



Robert Porth, being escorted by deputies, told police that, "Something is tearing me up inside . . . I've got to get it off my chest."