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Prayers lifted up for abducted boys / Tots whisked off in S.C. carjacking Tuesday

BYLINE: Robert Davis

SECTION: NEWS; Pg. 10A

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Staring down the barrel of a gun, Susan Smith pleaded with the carjacker to let her children out of the car.

But the thug sped away Tuesday, taking with him Smith's young sons.

Now, the FBI and police across the nation are searching for the boys, snatched from the tiny textile village of Monarch Mills, S.C.

And a family prays.

"If people would just lift up the names of Michael Daniel Smith and Alexander Tyler Smith to the Lord," says Beverly Russell, 47, the boys' maternal grandfather. "That's what we need the country to do."

Smith spent Wednesday helping an artist craft a drawing of the man who kidnapped her boys. She flipped through pictures of criminals.

But as time passed - and as a dangerous frost swept in with the fall of night - officials grew more fearful of the children's fate. Typically, police say, carjackers leave children within the first few hours.

The fact the boys didn't surface safely soon after the car was taken is "bizarre," says Hugh Munn of the South Carolina police. "It's scary."

Smith was waiting in her burgundy, four-door, 1990 Mazda Protege at a traffic light Tuesday night when a man jumped into the front passenger seat and said, "Drive."

About 6 miles out of town, on a two-lane highway, he told her to stop and forced her out, promising not to hurt the kids.

But as hours passed with the boys still gone, pressure grew.

"It's particularly acute now," says the FBI's Charles Sheppard. He worries that if the boys were abandoned, a fall frost could be too much for the blue-and-red striped coat 14-month-old Alex wore, or the light blue jacket with a teddy bear that Michael, 3, had on.

Under the new federal crime law, the carjacker could face the death penalty if either boy dies. But the FBI is most eager to find the victims first; their abductor later.

"Our primary objective at this point is finding the boys," Sheppard says. Helicopters and planes searched the back roads and woods of northern South Carolina.

The suspect, described as a black man in his late 20s to early 30s, may have driven 40 miles to North Carolina after the carjacking, said Munn, spokesman for the state Law Enforcement Division.

He said investigators had a report that a car like Smith's stopped for gas in Sharon, about halfway between Union and

Charlotte, N.C.

Police nationwide have been asked to look for the car with South Carolina tag GBK 167.

Sheriff's Capt. Roger Gregory said there were more than 60 officers searching the roads and towns in Union and adjacent counties. He said it was the first carjacking in his 18 years on the force and the largest manhunt he had seen.

People from all over northern South Carolina have offered to help. A hostage rescue team is standing by.

Authorities said they could do little but wait for the boys' best hope, a watchful public, to break the case.

Meanwhile, the family waits.

"All we can do is pray," says Russell. "This is a nightmare."

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GRAPHIC: GRAPHIC, b/w, USA TODAY (Map); PHOTO, b/w, Sight and Sound Studio; PHOTO, b/w, State Law

Enforcement Division via AP

THE NATION

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The Philadelphia Inquirer

October 29, 1994 Saturday FINAL EDITION

CARJACKED BOYS STILL ARE MISSING

BYLINE: Christopher Sullivan, ASSOCIATED PRESS, This article contains information from The (Columbia, S.C.) State,

SECTION: NATIONAL; Pg. A04

LENGTH: 481 words

DATELINE: UNION, S.C.

About 80 law officers and volunteers trudged through woods dense with kudzu yesterday, searching for any trace of two little boys said by their mother to have been snatched by a carjacker.

The search yielded nothing. And the odd case continued to baffle authorities and residents of this rural town.

"The breaks have not been coming like we thought they would," said Sheriff Howard Wells of the investigation into the disappearance of 3-year-old Michael Smith and 14-month-old Alex Smith.

Wells said nobody, including the parents - David Smith, 24, and Susan Vaughan Smith, 23 - had been ruled out as possible suspects. But Wells also said he had no suspects.

"This is bizarre," James Oppy, the FBI agent in charge in South Carolina, said of the circumstances surrounding the alleged kidnapping.

Wells said investigators have talked several times with the boys' mother. He said Susan Smith has changed some details of the events, but he would not elaborate.

"We had some questions about her story and talked with her several times," he said.

Federal and state law enforcement sources told The State newspaper of Columbia, S.C., that Susan Smith did not pass a lie-detector test when questioned Thursday.

Both parents took lie-detector tests during questioning Thursday, sources said. The father passed the test, but the mother did not. Her test was inconclusive, the sources added.

Sources said that investigators hope to retest her.

On Tuesday, Susan Smith, 23, said a man with a gun forced his way into her car at a traffic light and then, after a few miles, forced her out in an isolated area, driving away with her sons still in their safety seats.

Through a family spokeswoman, she and the boys' father, David Smith, appealed again yesterday for the return of the children and thanked the searchers.

Addressing the missing boys, the spokeswoman, Margaret Gregory, added: "We miss you, we love you, and we want you home."

Susan Smith last month filed for divorce, though the sheriff said he did not consider that a factor in the case.

Kidnappings by strangers are unusual. Between 200 and 300 take place annually in the United States, according to the

federal Bureau of Justice Statistics. Carjackings in rural areas are also rare, the bureau said - about 3 per 100,000 residents compared with about 30 per 100,000 in urban areas.

Early yesterday, four teams of searchers were assembled at the thickly wooded spot where Smith said she last saw her sons, a road about 10 miles outside Union.

The teams fanned out near a lake that had already been searched by divers for Smith's car, a burgundy 1990 Mazda Protege.

Hiking up a slope with his breath frosting the air, after overnight temperatures in the 30s, volunteer John Phillips voiced everyone's hope that the boys were somewhere else and safe. "I hope we don't find anything," he said.

LOAD-DATE: October 21, 2002

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

GRAPHIC: PHOTO:

PHOTO (2)

1. Deputies examine a shoe in Davidson County, N.C. The search Thursday and yesterday was among several for two boys reported abducted in a carjacking in South Carolina. (Associated Press, DAVID HOLSTON)

2. Police and rescue workers near Jackson Hill, N.C., where they were searching for two boys. The boys' mother said they were snatched by a carjacker. (A02)

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The Washington Post

November 6, 1994, Sunday, Final Edition

Before Boys Died, Woman Saw Her Life 'Falling Apart'; Hundreds Mourn Drowned Children in S. Carolina Town

Barbara Vobejda, Gary Lee, Washington Post Staff Writers

SECTION: FIRST SECTION; PAGE A3

LENGTH: 1373 words

DATELINE: UNION, S.C., Nov. 5

In the hours before her children died, Susan Smith drove along the deserted country roads near this small southern town, her two boys strapped in their car seats in the back.

Police have said she was desperate, contemplating suicide and distraught over what she felt was a life collapsing around her. Her marriage was dissolving; a boyfriend had ended their relationship, in part because of her children; and she was worried about money, police said.

Ultimately, she could not take her own life. But she has admitted that she found her way to an isolated lake and sent her burgundy sedan into the water with her sons Michael, 3, and 14-month-old Alexander still in the back seat.

Her confession came after a nine-day hunt for the kidnapper she had claimed drove off with the boys.

"Every part of her world was falling apart, and one thing led to another," said a police source. "There doesn't seem to have been great plans aforethought in her actions. They just happened."

Today, confined to a prison cell on murder charges, Smith is once more suicidal, state officials said. Her every move is monitored by a camera, and a prison guard checks on her every 15 minutes.

"She's been very quiet, very stoic, and cool, not talkative at all," said Robyn Zimmerman, a spokeswoman for the state Department of Corrections.

The path that led Smith to her high-security cell appears uncomplicated: a small-town life revolving around children, work and friends. She loved to shop and to attend Friday night football games at the high school, and she proudly showed off photos of her children.

She worked as a secretary at a plant that makes decorative trims for textiles, where her boyfriend, Tom Findlay, 27, also worked. Before that, she worked at the Winn-Dixie grocery, where her husband, David, 24, is assistant manager.

"Everybody shopped there and everybody saw her as a real attractive, friendly, outgoing woman," said Fred Delk, a local resident. "We all used to see her with those children and thought of them as a beautiful, warm family."

But others say that life was not always so easy for Susan Smith.

Union County Sheriff Howard Wells, a friend of the family, said she had a "troubled background." Her father had committed suicide when she was very young, and her marriage had been difficult.

In the weeks leading up to Oct. 25, the night the boys disappeared, her troubles piled up. In late September, she filed for divorce.

On Oct. 18, she received a letter from Findlay breaking off their relationship and saying, among other things, that he was not ready for the pressures of fatherhood.

Also in mid-October, David Smith, who had often dropped by her house to spend time with the kids, stopped visiting altogether, according to neighbor Catherine "Dot" Frost.

Susan Smith told police she also was worried about money. She made just under \$ 17,000 annually but was to receive \$ 115 a week from the boys' father for child support.

"She came from a pretty well-off family and was used to getting everything she wanted and was kind of spoiled and snobbish," said Kim Gardler, a Union resident. "So all that must have been kind of hard."

Still, for most of those who knew her, the news that Smith had killed her own children was unthinkable.

"I couldn't believe it. I still can't believe it. That's not the person I know," said Tracy Lovelace, who has been close to Smith since high school. "Something happened in her mind."

The more familiar picture of Smith was that of a loving mother, even as she appealed to a fictitious kidnapper to return her children.

Wednesday, the day before she confessed, Smith talked on national television about one of final moments with her older son.

"The night this happened, before I left the house, Michael did something he's never done before," she said. "... He put his arms around me and he told me, 'I love you so much Mama.'... I'm holding on to that so much."

The young woman delivering the deceptive appeal had grown up here with her mother, brothers and, after her father's death, a stepfather, Beverly Russell Jr., who is active in local politics.

At Union High School, she had belonged to several clubs, earned A's and B's and had plenty of friends.

"She was vivacious and outgoing," said Grace Lybrand, who taught the American literature class Smith took as a junior.

"There was never a hint of any problem."

Susan and David Smith married in 1991, when they were barely out of their teens. Susan gave birth to Michael seven months after the wedding. Shortly before Michael turned 2, Alexander was born.

"She was like a real involved mother," said Frost. "She spent a lot of time with the kids in the yard. She pulled them in the wagon, hosed them with water in the summer and laughed with them a lot."

"She always seemed to be running behind those kids," said Linda Busbee, another neighbor.

Among work colleagues and acquaintances, rumors began emerging in the summer about problems between David and Susan.

The two separated in August. David moved some bedroom furniture out two weeks later, Frost said. Susan cited adultery by her husband as grounds when she filed for divorce.

Soon after David left, Findlay began visiting Susan Smith at lunchtime and in the evening, said Frost. One rainy day, he ran into the house to get an umbrella, then returned to escort Smith from the car into the house.

"They looked like just the picture of sweethearts," Frost said.

Some of those Smith worked with at Conso Products told reporters they knew she was seeing Findlay, son of the company's wealthy chief executive.

But Lovelace said Smith had never told her of the romance.

Smith did tell police that she felt desperate because of her difficulties.

"Her life was crumbling and she knew it," the police source said. "Her marriage was ending. There were problems with her boyfriend and worries about money."

Experts interviewed today said such pressures can lead parents to abuse their children but may not totally explain Smith's actions.

"This is a very strange situation," said Michael Lamb, a research psychologist at the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development in Bethesda. "I keep waiting to hear or read about the missing piece, what else was going on."

"From what we know, this is a young woman having a difficult period in her life," with "lots of things going wrong with her life at one time. That sort of stress is what's often associated" with child abuse, "lashing out at a child, snapping" from pressure.

"In this case," he said, "it seems to be a much more premeditated situation. That type of premeditated assault on young children is much less common," Lamb said. "It makes you think it was a woman with prior psychiatric problems in addition to stress."

In trying to explain the actions of parents who kill their children, experts have pointed to studies that indicate that abusive parents were themselves abused as children.

But "the research is being questioned on that," said Maura O'Keefe, assistant professor of social work at the University of Southern California. "The vast majority [of abused children] grow up to be adequate parents."

Tonight, hundreds of mourners came to a funeral home here to pay their respects to the family of the boys, whose bodies were in a single white casket. The line of visitors stretched outside the building, and six rooms inside were filled with flowers, including some from President Clinton, stuffed toys and balloons sent from across the country.

Smith will not be allowed to attend her sons' funeral Sunday, restricted by a regulation that prohibits accused killers from attending services for their victims, Zimmerman said.

Smith, who requested a Bible for her cell, was visited today by her attorney, David Bruck, and a private psychologist.

She has not been allowed to have other visitors.

Smith, neighbors said, was something of a creature of habit. She always turned her porch light on when she left the house.

But the night of Oct. 25, Frost said she noticed that Smith pulled away from the house with the boys in the back of the car.

For the first time, the porch light was off.

Staff writer Al Kamen in Washington contributed to this report.

LOAD-DATE: November 7, 1994

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GRAPHIC: PHOTO, DAVID **SMITH**, FATHER OF MICHAEL, 3, AND ALEX, 14 MONTHS, WHO DROWNED IN THEIR MOTHER'S CAR, IS CONSOLED BY A FRIEND UPON ARRIVAL AT BOYS' WAKE. REUTER

TYPE: NATIONAL NEWS

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The New York Times

July 18, 1995, Tuesday, Late Edition - Final

Sheriff Says Prayer and a Lie Led Susan Smith to Confess

BYLINE: By RICK BRAGG

SECTION: Section A; Page 1; Column 4; National Desk

LENGTH: 1093 words

DATELINE: UNION, S.C., July 17

Nine days after the big lie, the one that had people across the nation praying for the lives of her children, Susan Smith bowed her head in a church gymnasium, took the hands of the county sheriff and confessed to God and man.

The Union County Sheriff, Howard Wells, who held her and prayed with her that afternoon of Nov. 3, told a hushed courtroom today how he had tricked Mrs. Smith into a confession with a small lie of his own.

His testimony, before the judge ruled that Mrs. Smith's written confession in the drowning deaths of Michael, 3, and Alex, 14 months was admissible, detailed how Mrs. Smith's story that the boys were taken by a carjacker came apart slowly and painfully.

That afternoon, as hope was running thin in the search for her sons and suspicion against her continued to build, Mr. Wells told her that he knew her claim that the children had been taken at an intersection outside the small town of Union was a lie because his deputies had been working a surveillance at that crossroads.

"This could not have happened as you said," he told her, sitting face to face with her in a small room in the gymnasium, where they had gone to get away from reporters. There had been, in truth, no such deputies at the intersection.

"I told her I would release it to the media" because her lie about a black carjacker was causing deep pain among blacks, and he said he owed to the town to end the racial divisiveness it had caused.

"Susan broke at that time," he said, and she burst into tears, just short of hysteria. She asked him to pray with her, he said, and face to face, holding hands, they did.

"I'm so ashamed," she said to Mr. Wells, he testified. "She asked for my gun so that she could kill herself."

Mr. Wells said he asked her why she wanted to do that.

"You don't understand," she said, the Sheriff testified. "My children are not all right."

"I said, 'Susan, don't say anything else,' " Mr. Wells said, before going to the hallway for a Miranda form to read her her rights.

The 23-year-old mother gave both a spoken and written confession before she left the room, telling how she released the parking brake and allowed her Mazda to roll down a boat ramp and into a lake with her sons strapped inside.

Over objections from her lawyers, who said Mrs. Smith was tricked into the confession and coerced with prayer when she was out of her mind with grief, Judge William Howard of the state's Circuit Court ruled that the jury could hear the written confession and other statements.

The testimony by Mr. Wells and other investigators gave a preview of the capital murder trial, which is expected to begin with opening statements on Tuesday.

Judge Howard also removed a juror from the panel and put her in jail. Gayle Beam, the only black woman on the jury, was held in contempt and jailed because she did not disclose that she had recently pleaded guilty to credit card fraud.

She told the judge that she had not even looked at the questionnaire the court required all potential jurors to complete and that her daughter had completed it for her.

She could be fined \$10,000 and sentenced to six months in jail. Judge Howard must now proceed with just one alternate juror. Only two were picked.

But it was the tale of Mrs. Smith's doomed deception that held many people in the courtroom spellbound.

As it unwound, Mrs. Smith, whom the state psychiatrist calls suicidal and who relies on the anti-depressant Prozac to make her more alert, sat quietly in the courtroom, not crying. She looked lost, out of touch with what was going on. Her body seemed to tremble, but it was because she was jiggling her leg absently, for minutes at a time.

Investigators testified that from the beginning they were suspicious of Mrs. Smith, who held to her lie for nine days, even pleading for the safe return of her sons from the fictional carjacker. They described a woman who cried without shedding any tears, who seemed more interested in how she looked on television than in getting her sons back and who spoke about going to the beach to get away from hounding reporters.

An agent with the State Law Enforcement Division said he had noticed inconsistencies in her story from the start and passed that information on to other agents.

"She started out extremely vague," said Roy Paschal, who helped Mrs. Smith with the composite drawing of the phantom suspect. She gave conflicting descriptions, saying once that the man had worn a baseball cap, then a knit cap.

David Espie, an agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, said she would make sobbing noises, "but when I would look at her eyes, no water, no tears."

James E. Harris, another state investigator, said Mrs. Smith had seemed strangely unconcerned about the children.

"She asked if I had seen her on CBS," he said. "She asked me how she looked. She said she wanted to get away from the media and go to the beach." He said she had asked him if he knew how to do a dance called the shag and said he could perhaps teach it to her.

Even though suspicion grew, Mrs. Smith was not arrested. Mr. Wells said that until the confession, he had not been certain of what had happened to the children.

Pete Logan, a former F.B.I. agent who now works for the state, was with Sheriff Wells on the day of the confession. When he walked into the room, after Mrs. Smith confessed, she was on her knees with her head in the chair, as if in prayer.

She was sobbing, said Mr. Logan, a white-haired, man whose coaxing of Mrs. Smith over the previous two or three days seemed to help bring on the confession. "No question, it was total remorse," he said. "I've been doing this 35 years, and I've never seen someone quite like that. Several times she said she wanted to kill herself."

She told Mr. Wells that she had gone to the lake to kill herself and her children, but found herself running away from the lake with her hands over her ears so she could not hear the car slide into the water.

Mrs. Smith has a long history of mental instability. Psychologists wanted to admit her to a psychiatric hospital when she was 13, but her mother and stepfather refused to cooperate. Her stepfather later molested her when she was 15.

Her lawyer, David Bruck, is expected to argue that she is either innocent by reason of insanity or guilty but mentally ill.

Mr. Wells seemed, from the beginning of the case, to be almost protective of her. She knew and trusted him, he said.

As they bowed their heads in prayer, he told her: "All things will be revealed to us in time."

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Full Text:

SHOULD Americans care about Susan Smith? Plainly many do, and not surprisingly. The story has something for everyone: double <u>infanticide</u>, suicide, molestation, incest and a web of marital infidelity that makes Peyton Place look like Sesame Street. These lurid, compelling details--and a central plot-line so impossibly tragic that, if it appeared in a novel, no one would believe it-- make the Smith case compelling. But do they add up to something larger? To something more profound than the insight that ordinary people can commit acts of irredeemable evil?

These questions might seem hopelessly ponderous. Yet, ever since the day last November when Susan Smith admitted she had let her Mazda roll into a placid little lake outside Union, South Carolina, with her two young sons still strapped inside, pundits and politicians have been trying to invest the drama with deeper meaning. At first, critics (including some vocal black leaders in Union) focused on southern racism: on the ease with which Mrs Smith had conned officials with a deeply implausible tale of a black man who had hijacked her car and her two sons with it. But officials were neither conned nor even credulous. From the start the police suspected Mrs Smith was lying, and although they did conduct a nine-day manhunt for the black carjacker, it was mainly for show. Contrast that with the police in "liberal" Boston, who five years ago were so taken in by a similar hoax that they arrested an innocent black fellow and did not discover the truth until the real murderer killed himself months later.

Next to weigh in was Newt Gingrich. A few days before the mid-term elections, the not-yet-speaker of the House argued that Mrs Smith's<u>crime</u> "vividly reminds every American of how sick the society is getting" and that the remedy was "to vote Republican". As sociology, this was at once banal and dubious. As political anthropology, it would prove embarrassing. For after Mrs Smith's arrest it came to light that she was molested as a teenager by her stepfather, Beverly Russell, a leading light in the local Republican Party and the Christian Coalition. One of the incidents of abuse took place after Mr Russell had come home from putting up Pat Robertson-for-president posters.

Indeed, the past seven months have brought forth many such facts: inconvenient, uncomfortable, prone to exploding easy certainties and cheap cliches. That Mrs Smith's father killed himself when she was six> That she tried to do the same--twice--as a teenager. That her marriage had been a disaster, full of unfaithfulness on both sides. That the sex with her stepfather may have continued until six months before she

Nowhere have these revelations been more unsettling than in Union, a town of about 10,000 whose Main Street looks (or looked, before the press descended with their cranes and scaffolding) like the set of a 1950s film. When Mrs Smith confessed, the place was enraged. Susan Smith may have fooled the country, but she had made fools of her neighbours. They wanted her to die for her crime. The state obliged. Its 32-year-old prosecutor, Tom-my Pope, now seeking to send Mrs Smith to the electric chair.

Mr Pope is all self-righteous fervour; the townsfolk, though, have lost their lust for <u>blood</u>. "They all think she must be punished," says the Rev A.L. Brackett, one of Union's leading black Baptist ministers. "They think she should get hell." Yet Mr Brackett adds that many of the good people of Union (himself

included) have come to believe that, like heaven, h wait; that Mr Pope should accept Mrs Smith's offer to plead guilty and spend 30 years in prison. For some, what lies behind this change of heart is sheer expedience, for a plea bargain would spare the town a national airing of its foul laundry. Others are riddled with doubt: about her motives, about her character and, at bottom, about her sanity.

It is just these doubts that the jury will be forced to wrestle with--and from which America could indeed learn something from the Smith case. For the truth is that the particulars of Susan Smith's crime are so unusual that they convey no large message about the South, or race, or class, or gender, or (surely) America. But they drive home a powerful point about <u>capital punishment</u>: whatever you think of it in theory, in practice it is a deep and muddy quagmire.

To see why requires making no judgment about whether Mrs Smith was crazy that night at the lake, a judgment which, to many, seems obvious from the act itself. Instead, consider this simple question. If, rather than concocting a black menace, she had said from the start what she claimed in her confession-that she intended to kill herself and her children, but they alone ended up in the water--is there any chance she would now be facing the death penalty? Certainly not. A lifetime in a mental hospital or in prison: yes. But the electric chair: never. If the claim in her confession is true, Mrs Smith is facing death not because she drowned her sons, but because she lied about it.

Of course, her confession could be a lie too. Yet what like so many death-penalty cases, so disturbing, is that being sure about this depends on knowing the unknowable: what was going on in Susan Smith's head when the awful deed was done. Not that people have not tried to puzzle it out. Late at night at the John D. Long lake, they turn up in their cars, to sit and stare for a while (getting out would be too spooky, so they stick to drive-through grieving). Like them, Mrs Smith's lawyer made the trip, "to see what Susan saw." But the lake is terribly dark at night, all blurry shapes and battling shades of black and grey. Unfortunately for the jurors, even in the broadest daylight, the view inside the courtroom is not likely to be much clearer.

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