

The confession and polygraph testing

**Will the arson confession withstand scrutiny?
Has the confessor taken a polygraph test? Should others?**

by Dave FEATHERLY

My recollection of what I'd been told by Mary Coonts during an earlier interview and what had been reported by other media after the confession for the arson of the property along 16th Street, did not square.

I had asked detailed and specific questions about the two entrance doors into her bake shop. What I remembered being told earlier was considerably different from what the Channel 5 and WT-E reporters had made up for their stories.

When I again interviewed Mary Coonts and Paul Hanson this past Saturday (February 25, 2006), the most self-serving answers they could have given would have been lies.

To square with what has been released thus far by the police department about the confession of a young man who said he started the fire on December 27, 2004, that destroyed much of that downtown block, Mary could have told me that she "may have" left the front door unlocked and that there were several combustible materials left in the basement which could have been used to start the fire.

She did not make those representations.

As a business owner, you tend to develop a pattern, or habits, about your entry and exit from your store or office. You do it the same way everyday. Sometimes because you have no alternative and sometimes just because you do. And when you own the business, the one thing you do without exception is make sure the door is locked. Not maybe. Not could be. Is!

Mary entered her store and left it every day by the front entrance. The rear, alley exit was used just to take out the trash or load delivery orders.

Mary had not taken the precaution to rekey the locks when she first leased the space from Cheyenne Outfitters (WRO). She should have, but didn't. Any keys ever made, issued, borrowed, etc., could still be floating around.

There could have been keys to 206 remaining in next door - also owned by Cheyenne Outfitters and later sold to the Millers of Wyoming Home - and other keys were issued by Mary during her nine years in the building at 206 W. Lincolnway.

She also had an spare key to the front door on a hook behind the first wall which separated the sales area from the kitchen (back room) area of the store.

It would be interesting to know if the investigators asked Sue Miller if such keys remained in a visible location when she and Jack bought her building(s). Could Wyatt Johnson, a former employee of Wyoming Home, have had access to such a key from inside those premises?

Mary described for me once again the lock on the front door as being keyed from both sides. She also went into depth about the alley door and the door down to the basement - their type, placement, locks, etc.

In spite of what has been reported elsewhere - that a door was "a self-closing" door that would lock itself when it closed - there was no such door in her building.

And, she was adamant that she had locked the front door when she left that Monday morning - after a quick visit on a day the shop was closed to check telephone messages.

She did not go past the telephone in the front that morning. Not to the back area where the ovens, sinks, mixers, etc., were or into the basement. In fact, she had not visited the basement of her own building for the first eight years after she had leased it, then bought it.

Had she been willing to change her story and tell me that she "may have," "might have," "probably did," or "did," leave the front door unlocked that morning, her corroboration would have been the confirmation investigators would appreciate. But she would not bite. She is certain. She is positive. She is absolutely positive that she locked the front door when she went back out it that morning. She had done the same thing thousands of times before.

Cheyenne's version of Geraldo Rivera (Channel 5's Justin Joseph) while telling a story about interviewing the young man who confessed to the arson but who had told our Geraldo (in his exclusive access interview) that he had been "coerced" into giving a false confession, showed a door with a certain type lock on it to illustrate his suggestion that the story isn't over.

But, without disclosing it, he used a prop door. Not a door to, or in, Mary's Bake Shoppe. His theatrics to arouse suspicion that the confession was untrue included a fake door. Nice touch. The WT-E finally has some competition for manufacturing news, not reporting it.

It is almost certain that the confession includes many details that have not been made public. So no one knows what the investigators (including the ATF, CFD, CPD and Laramie County Sheriff's Department) have in full the confession.

If they only have what has been provided to the public (and they better have more - a lot more), a question has to surface as to what the confessed arsonist used to start and fuel the fire.

Again, Mary's interest would have been served to lie to me. I asked her what materials remained in the cleaned out basement that could have been used for the purpose of starting a fire. There was virtually nothing flammable in the basement. Some 2x4's along the wall did not seem to be dry enough to burn well. Beyond that, there was little or nothing. A remaining broken mannequin was "moldy" and probably too moist to burn. There was no gasoline, kerosene, jet fuel, paint thinner, turpentine, or other fuel down there.

When Mary saw Wyatt Johnson at the arraignment, she recognized him as both

a customer and one who worked next door - at Wyoming Home - as a "handy man." She and others remembered him as being attired in western wear, including a cowboy hat. Mary later recalled that he had been in the shop in "full dress military uniform" and he said he was in the "Wyoming Guard." Access to jet fuel?

The investigation included asking Mary to submit to a polygraph exam. Was the same request made of other property owners on the block who might benefit from a fire? Now that it's known that a former employee of Wyoming Home has confessed, does that change anything? If Mary told the investigators that she had taken a polygraph arranged by her own attorney and it had shown that she had nothing to do with the fire, would those results be accepted? Below are some comments about polygraphy. Would you take one under these circumstances?

Late last year the NAS published its findings. It determined that the polygraph was not a worthless tool—indeed, that it was much worse than worthless. The report said that "available evidence indicates that polygraph testing as currently used has extremely serious limitations . . . if the intent is both to identify security risks and protect valued employees." The NAS panel, made up of internationally respected psychologists and statisticians, further determined that the test was so nonspecific that even if the polygraphers managed to finally uncover their first spy, at least 100 innocent laboratory employees would have their clearances yanked because of the "false positives" inherent in the test. The NAS concluded: "Polygraph testing yields an unacceptable choice . . . between too many loyal employees falsely judged deceptive and too many major security threats left undetected. Its accuracy . . . is insufficient to justify reliance on its use in employee security screening in federal agencies." It doesn't get much clearer than that.

Even simple over the counter medications can cause adverse reactions; take cough syrup for example. Have you ever read the alcohol content on a bottle of cough syrup? Drink a bottle of cough syrup of some brands and you'll get a better buzz than a couple of beers! Over the counter medications for cold, sinus and allergy just to name a few can and do effect peoples responses both mentally and physically.

Indeed, as an American Medical Association expert testified during public hearings before Congress, "the [lie detector] cannot detect lies much better than a coin toss."

It is interesting to note that so far, not one scientific study has been published that proves the validity of the polygraph test. Polygraph tests have also been criticized for failing to trap known spies such as Aldrich Ames, who passed two polygraph tests while spying for the Russian government.

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