



JOHN ENGLER, GOVERNOR  
**DEPARTMENT OF STATE POLICE**  
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COL. MICHAEL D. ROBINSON, DIRECTOR

August 30, 1991

Compl #1906-91

D/Lieut. James Reeves  
St. Joseph Police Department  
620 Broad Street  
St. Joseph, Michigan 49085

Dear Jim:

The information that follows concerns the equivocal death of ERIC MCGINNIS. The analysis is based upon statistical data, training, our experience in other death investigations, and is the combined opinions of Dr. Gary Kaufman, Dr. Richard Smith, both Departmental Police Psychologists, and D/Sgt. David Minzey.

OVERVIEW

On May 22, 1991, the body of ERIC MCGINNIS, a 16 year old Black male, was recovered from the St. Joseph River. Eric had been reported missing on May 18, 1991 when he failed to return home.

On May 17, 1991 Eric's father drove him from the Benton Harbor area to a teen establishment called the Club in St. Joseph. Eric had received \$5.00 from his mother to cover the entrance fee at the Club. Eric's father dropped him off at the Club at approximately 8:30pm-9:00pm. This was the last time that he saw his son.

It would appear, based upon the investigation, that Eric never entered the Club. Instead, it appears that he wandered the general area around the Club, shooting off bottle rockets and talking with friends.

Sometime later, Eric was caught breaking into a car by the owner. Eric was able to escape, running through the downtown area, being observed by an off-duty Berrien County Detective. This is the last verifiable observation of Eric. The investigation later discovers shoe impressions on a porch south of the downtown area which appear similar to the shoes that Eric was wearing.



The autopsy findings indicate that Eric's death was due to drowning. The pathological examination of the body found nothing remarkable. Of note in regard to the clothing was the missing task force coat and the pants being unzipped with the leather belt being unbuckled.

### VICTIMOLOGY

Eric McGinnis was a 16 year old b/m, who regularly attended school and was not known to be involved in any significant criminal activity. Eric's parents were divorced and Eric spent time with both his mother and his father.

Deborah Parker, a relative, and Becky Dew, a friend, both describe a recent change of behavior in Eric. In examining the interviews contained in this investigation, it would appear that for all intents and purposes Eric was experiencing the normal problems associated with adolescence. It is likely that the divorce of his parents had an impact on Eric. It is also likely that Eric wanted to establish himself with his peers in St. Joseph.

Prior to this incident, Eric had missed a week of school, due to his contracting chicken pox. During this time, Eric stayed with his father. From the information gathered, it would appear that Eric's father was strict with Eric, not allowing for drugs, gangs, etc. Several persons reported that Eric had said that he was associated with a gang. This information could not be confirmed by investigators. It is more likely that Eric was a pseudo-gang member, telling people that he was in a gang, and wearing gang-like clothes, only to enhance his sociability.

### ANALYSIS

In examining the case information, there are but three possibilities which could account for the death of Eric McGinnis. These are suicide, homicide, and accidental death.

While certain persons have suggested a change of behavior in Eric, no information was developed which would show prior suicidal behavior or suicide attempts. There does not appear to be any evidence of a prolonged period of depression or an inclination toward high risk ventures.

The post mortem examination could not reveal any external or internal injuries. Eric was a young, athletic, healthy male. Had a physical confrontation taken place, it is highly probable that some injury would have been present. It is possible that Eric was pushed into the river, however this would have required that Eric be right next to river. The information offered about Eric would indicate that it would be unlikely that he would have stood that close to the river when approached by someone who potentially presented a danger to him. More importantly, when considering the homicide scenario, no evidence has been ascertained which would point in that direction. The investigating officers have followed up each and every tip to it's conclusion, yet no concrete evidence has emerged.

Unfortunately, rumors and innuendo have occupied much of the investigators time and efforts. These rumors circulated amongst Eric's classmates and seemed to grow as they were passed from person to person. This phenomenon is not unique to this case. When an adolescent dies, there is a feeling of victimization which spreads throughout the community. People struggle to assign a reason for the death of someone so young. Another dynamic of a case such as this involves the police investigators. When the police become involved, there is an implication that a crime has occurred, and persons occasionally will recall information that may help the police solve the crime.

The final scenario involves an accidental death. In looking at the facts of the case, Eric was in a fight or flight mode when he escaped from the car owner. He knows that he is being pursued and he likely knows that the police will be summoned. If the shoe impressions located did belong to Eric, this would be the first opportunity that Eric had to stop and collect his thoughts. All indicators are that Eric had been raised with strong moral principles and a sense of right and wrong. He is keenly aware that his coat is easily identifiable. If the coat was hidden, it is likely that it would be near this house in a place that Eric could later find it.

Given this flight mentality, Eric needs to get across the river to Benton Harbor. The vehicular draw bridge is manned, therefore making a crossing at that point riskier. The railroad bridge could be utilized, however this is more dangerous. It would be mere speculation as to what actually occurred next. If Eric was wearing the coat when he went into the water, the extra weight would be extremely burdensome and it is likely that he may have removed it. It is possible that an attempt was made to remove the pants as well. Eric was described as a good swimmer. The distance across the river is somewhat deceptive. The temperature of the water at the time of

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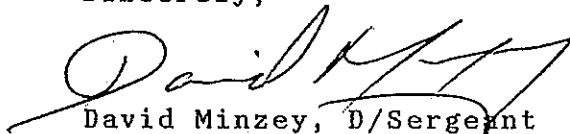
this incident would preclude all but a very short exposure. Even though Eric was feeling healthy, it is likely that he still had not fully recovered from the chicken pox.

Whether Eric fell in the river, or attempted to swim across it, the best scenario involving the death of Eric would have to be an accidental death. No evidence has been collected or information verified which would point toward a suicide or a homicide. The investigators have searched tirelessly for physical evidence, and interviewed numerous persons. The media has given this investigation a great deal of attention. Yet, nothing other than rumor has surfaced which would point to a murder or a suicide.

In conclusion, the death of Eric McGinnis was a tragic event. The community feels a loss that it can't explain. Although investigators aggressively pursued every lead, no evidence was developed that would suggest a murder or a suicide. Information about Eric would paint him as a normal adolescent who experienced the same ups and downs as other adolescents and made the same mistakes. Given the events of the evening, it is likely that Eric knew he had made a mistake and was in a state of mind where he was desperately trying to get back to his safe haven, his home.

If additional information is developed, we would welcome the opportunity to further discuss the case with you.

Sincerely,

  
David Minzey, D/Sergeant  
Investigative Resources Unit,  
Violent Crimes

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