



**STATE CORONER'S COURT
OF NEW SOUTH WALES**

Inquest:	Inquest into the death of Natalie Jean WOOD
Hearing dates:	6 February 2014
Date of findings:	6 February 2014
Place of findings:	State Coroner's Court, Glebe
Findings of:	Magistrate Michael Barnes, State Coroner
Catchwords:	CORONIAL LAW – Undiscovered human remains
File number:	2011/389932
Representation:	Sgt. D Williamson (Advocate) assisting the coroner P Jeffries (Barrister) instructed by Tsolakis Solicitors

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The Coroners Act in s81 (1) requires that following an inquest the coroner's findings as to various aspects of the death must be recorded in writing. These are the findings of an inquest into the death of Natalie Wood.

Introduction

In July 2011, the skeleton of a person was found in a derelict house in Surry Hills. It was suspected the remains were of the female homeowner who had been born in the house in 1924 and who had lived there alone since 1997.

There were no signs of a forced entry and the premises did not appear to have been ransacked. However, the decomposition and decay made establishing a date, manner and cause of the death difficult.

That the death of a life long resident of a high density housing area should remain undiscovered until after all the flesh had rotted from her frail bones caused public disquiet.

This inquest has sought to explain and address these issues.

The evidence

Background

Natalie Davis was born 11 August 1924. From birth she lived with her parents and her brother Vane in a two story, two-bedroom terrace house at 139 Kippax Street Surry Hills.

Natalie left school when she was 14 and worked as a machinist in a factory in Goodlet Street, Surry Hills. When she was 20, she married Douglas Wood, a naval seaman home on leave during the Second World War. When her husband returned from the war, he and Natalie moved to Melbourne to live.

They divorced after about 5 years and Natalie returned to her parent's residence in Kippax Street, Surry Hills. She kept her husband's surname returned to work as a machinist at the same business she had worked in prior to her marriage.

After her father died in 1955, Natalie and her mother, Phyllis, continued to live in the Kippax Street house. She stopped work around 1970. The reasons for this are not clear.

In 1979 Natalie's mother became very ill and she and Natalie moved in with Vane, and his wife Enid Davis at their Chifley home because it was near to where Phyllis was being treated at the Prince Henry Hospital at Little Bay.

Natalie's mother died in December 1992.

For the first 8 or 9 years that Ms Wood and her mother lived with Vane and Enid, Natalie used to travel weekly to Kippax Street to collect the mail. In December 1988 she had the mail redirected to her brother's address at Chifley. According to Enid,

every 12 months she would fill out a form so that the mail would continue to be redirected.

Thereafter mail addressed to Natalie continued to be delivered to that address until 30 June 2004.

After her mother died, Natalie continued to live with her brother and sister-in-law until 1997 when she moved back to 139 Kippax Street. The house had been vacant for many years and squatters had occupied it. Her brother and sister-in-law attempted to put it in some order before she moved back in, although Enid acknowledges the living circumstances remained rudimentary. The toilet, bathroom and laundry were out the back across the courtyard in a building abutting a laneway. The kitchen used to be attached to the side of the house but apparently it fell down when Natalie and her mother were living with her brother and sister-in-law. The furniture and fittings from it that could be utilised were moved into the dining room. She had a sink and a stove but no fridge or television or radio. There were two bedrooms upstairs. Natalie utilised the one at the front, which opened onto a balcony.

Ms Davis says that after Ms Wood moved back to Kippax Street, she would continue to regularly visit them and often stay for dinner. She says that sometimes Natalie would visit daily and other times she would only call in once a month.

Natalie did not drive, and did not have the telephone connected at home.

Natalie's electricity, water and land rates bills continued to be sent to the Chifley address for some time after he had ceased to live there. Enid says she would pay them with money given to her by Natalie.

Last contact

Ms Davis gave evidence that she last saw Ms Wood in early 2003. She says that for the first time in December 2002 they did not spend Christmas together because Mr. and Ms Davis had been invited to spend it with friends. She says that on 3 January 2003 Ms Wood came to see them and told them she had a brain tumor.

Ms Davis says Ms Wood never visited after that and from that time on Ms Davis was too busy to go and look for her as she was caring for her terminally ill husband who was wheelchair bound, and had numerous ailments including dementia which made it impossible to leave him alone.

Ms Davis says she believes she saw Ms Wood from a bus on 30 January 2004 but admits she only deduced the woman she saw was her sister-in-law from her clothing, build and manner of walking – she didn't see her face. I consider that fleeting glimpse was insufficient to form reliable identification.

She says that in 2007 and 2008 she made attempts via the police and Centrelink to make contact with Ms Wood but was unable to do so.

Vane Davis died in December 2009. In 2011, Ms Davis was in the process of selling their home and wanted to return some property of Natalie's that had been left at that

house. She arranged for her solicitor to go to the house with a key. On 5 July 2011, he persuaded police to go with him.

The death is discovered

When the key would not open the front door, police forced their way through a door across a narrow passageway beside house and found an open side entrance to the house.

On entering the ground floor they found the house in decay: thick dust and cobwebs covered the sparse furnishing; weeds and tree branches were protruding into the building.

Upstairs, the rear bedroom was all but empty.

In the front bedroom they found a complete human skeleton on the floor next to a bed frame with no mattress. A walking stick, some jewelry and a pair of earrings were on the mesh spring base of the bed. The clothes the person had presumably been wearing were disintegrated around the bones. A bunched up blanket was under the skull. Some other bedclothes were under the legs of the skeleton. The drawers of a low sideboard were opened, partially covering the mid portion of the skeleton. Pink dentures were intermingled with skull and jawbones. There appeared to be a piece of clothing draped over one forearm.

A packet of prescription medication that had been filled by a local chemist on 30 December 2003 was on the bed.

The investigation

A Scenes of Crime Officer attended the house and took photographs.

The skeleton was examined by a forensic pathologist who was unable to offer any opinion as to the cause of death, but found no evidence of trauma having been done to the deceased.

A forensic anthropologist examined the bones and concluded they were of a female Caucasian between 5 feet and 5 feet 5 inches tall and over 60 years of age. The anthropologist indicated "*She has probably been dead for at least a few years*".

Police and obtained the medical records for Ms Wood.

They revealed that she had been admitted to the Sydney Hospital in November 2003 after being found disorientated and semi-conscious on the street.

She reported that she had "*taken quite a turn*".

A CT scan detected a mass at the base of her skull but it was thought to be benign.

Ms Wood remained in hospital until 1 December 2003 when she was discharged home.

The chart indicates that during her stay, on two occasions, a social worker called her brother's house to see if she could be discharged there but this was declined.

After discharge, an MRI of her head was undertaken on 10 December. On 18 December she attended an appointment with her GP who renewed her hypertension tablets.

On 2 February 2004 Ms. Wood failed to attend a scheduled appointment with a neurologist and made no further contact with health care providers.

The last withdrawal from her savings account with the Commonwealth Bank was affected on 20 September 2003 when someone, presumably Ms. Wood, withdrew \$400. That left a balance of \$6900.

Her water bill was last paid on 15 July 2004 at Maroubra. The water was un metered and so she was only billed a connection fee. On 1 March 2008 an overdue water notice was sent, but not paid.

The electricity account was last read on 8 April 2004 and last paid on 17 January 2008 at this date, other bills remained outstanding.

Electricity reminder notices were sent to Ms. Wood throughout 2008, 2009 and 2010 but no response or payment was made. The power was disconnected in May 2010. The debt had been detailed to a collection agency at the time Ms. Wood's remains were found.

Electricity usage was minimal. Throughout 2003 it has been calculated that the amount used would be equivalent of a single 100 watt light globe being operated for 4.5 hours a day.

As a pensioner, Ms. Wood was entitled to a full pension rebate and accordingly no bills were rendered.

Centrelink ceased making payments into Ms. Wood's account after the Commonwealth Bank advised them the account into which the funds had been paid was moribund the account had a balance of \$16,367 when it was closed by the bank.

Australia Post advised that their mail redirection service from 139 Kippax Street to the Davis's address at Chifley expired in 2005 but no paperwork was available to verify who had made these arrangements.

Conclusions

I am of the view Ms Davis is mistaken in her belief that she last saw Ms Wood in January 2003. Ms Wood was not been diagnosed with the brain tumour she told her sister- in-law of until November 2003.

In my view it is likely that Ms Wood was aggrieved that her brother and sister-in-law had not agreed to her being discharged to their place when the hospital inquired

about this possibility. She was also disappointed that for the first time they did not share Christmas with her that year.

Although Ms Davis denies it, I expect Ms Wood expressed her disappointment to them when she saw them soon after Christmas 2003. I suspect she did it in such a manner that when she then ceased all further contact they were not surprised and did not assume anything untoward had become of her. They continued to pay her small bills when they arrived but were not surprised when she did not renew the mail redirection when next it fell due.

In early December 2003, Ms Wood attended to have the MRI scan that been ordered before she left hospital. Later that month she had the prescription for her hypertension medication filled. It seems clear she took those tablets over the next three weeks but did not keep her specialist's appointment on 2 February 2004.

In my view the most likely explanation for that failure is that she was unable to because she had fallen in her home and had died after a relatively short period when she could not get up or summon assistance.

I conclude that a witness who believes that in 2007 he saw a middle-aged woman in the room where Ms Wood was found is mistaken. He was unable to accurately describe the house. The upstairs veranda was not enclosed as he reported and its overhanging roof would make seeing someone through the French doors from across the street most unlikely.

Findings required by s81(1)

As a result of considering all of the documentary evidence and the oral evidence given at the inquest, I am able to confirm that the death occurred and make the following findings in relation to it.

The identity of the deceased

The remains found in the house at 139 Kippax Street on 5 July 2011 were of Natalie Jean WOOD.

Date of death

Ms Wood died on an unknown date in February 2004.

Place of death

She died in Surry Hills, NSW

Cause of death

The cause of her death is unascertained.

Manner of death

The manner of death is unascertained.

Recommendations

Pursuant to s 82 of the *Coroners Act 2009*, Coroners may make recommendations connected with a death.

The sad circumstances of this case naturally prompt consideration of what could be done to lessen the likelihood of a person dying and lying undiscovered for many years as occurred to Ms Wood. Human sensibilities are naturally offended by the thought of an old woman decomposing in her house without anyone inquiring to ascertain what had become of her.

However, platitudinous comments about a need for a more caring society would achieve nothing. Nor am I persuaded that public authorities or private providers should be required to go looking. Banks, local authorities, Centrelink, utility suppliers could not in my view draft guidelines that would not impose very significant bureaucratic burdens. Cases like this one are exceedingly rare; the burden of addressing them via some protocols requiring such organisations to investigate are unwarranted in my view.

Accordingly, while I am deeply saddened by the circumstances under which Ms Wood was left to decompose in her home, I am not persuaded an effective and proportionate regulatory response is available.

I close this inquiry.

M A Barnes
NSW State Coroner
Glebe
6 February 2014