

Saturday, September 22, 2007

Where did they go?

Mary Ellen Walters, 68, and Ada Wasson, 80, left April 19 to go shopping. The women haven't been seen since.

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The Cincinnati Enquirer

TURTLECREEK TWP. - People don't just vanish.

Of course not.

There's an explanation for what happened to Mary Ellen Walters, an answer to the question that's been haunting her family, a reason she never came home from that shopping trip all those months ago.

Part of it, they know.

The realization sunk in slowly, weeks after she went missing.

Mary Ellen's husband, Joe Walters, felt it before anyone said it aloud: His wife - the woman he met on a blind date, whom he married in 1960, who would have turned 69 last month - is probably dead.

No one has seen her since April 19. No one has heard from her 80-year-old travel companion, Ada Wasson, either.

No one has used their credit cards or taken money from their bank accounts or tried to sell Ada's car.

No one's even seen the car.

Mary Ellen and Ada are, quite simply, gone.

So this is the question.

Where are they?

Asking isn't enough.

After five months, Scott Walters, one of Mary Ellen's three children, still drives out every Sunday after church and at least one afternoon during the week to look for his mother. Up one road, down another.

He parks his green van and hops out to check the ditches that might conceal Ada's silver 2000 Chevy Impala.

"We still just haven't found anything at this point," Scott Walters says.

He's put more than 7,000 miles on the van. His siblings have ratcheted up their odometers, too. They've driven countless rural roads and trudged through poison ivy and brush and marsh, hoping to discover the silver car in a deep ravine or catch a glimpse of it submerged in a pond.

Theirs is a tedious, blind search, stretching from Columbus to Carrollton, Ky., and into southeastern Indiana.

Dozens of volunteers and law-enforcement officials have helped, both on the road and from the sky. With every search comes the same result.

No Ada.

No Mary Ellen.

Scott Walters recounts the past five months from the patio of his parents' home. He's a lumbering guy, an engineer, a Forest Park father of two. He holds a map and points out the area he'll be searching that weekend.

He says he's tried to find a way to describe what this all feels like, why he keeps looking.

Imagine someone you love dies, he says, and you have that sadness, that heavy grief, that loss. Then, you have a funeral and, while that doesn't ease the pain, at least it marks something. An ending. Some closure. A chance to move on.

Now, imagine not getting that ending. Imagine the grief just lingers. Imagine an unthinkable question hangs over your head.

"You're trapped," he says.

Where'd they go?

Before all of this happened, before the missing-persons reports, before their pictures were posted on the window at the Warren County Sheriff's Office, Mary Ellen was a boisterous 68-year-old, a retired schoolteacher and minister with a husband, three adult children, five grandchildren and a dog named Susie.

Ada was a childless widow who loved to travel and had retired from the accounting department at Columbus's Riverside Methodist Hospital.

The two women lived in the red-brick homes of Warren County's Otterbein Retirement Living Community. They sang in the community choir and were part of the same women's group. Life had worn them down a bit - Mary Ellen had diabetes and two bum knees and Ada suffered an illness that left her increasingly confused - but both remained active, open to adventure, ready for a road trip.

Which is how April 19 came about.

No one's too sure where the women went. Neither had a cell phone. Ada left behind a list of places she wanted to visit. Joe Walters was out of town. The best guess police and family have is that when Ada and Mary Ellen climbed into the Impala, a handicap tag hanging from its rearview mirror, they were headed to a J.C. Penney outlet store in either Columbus or Carrollton.

The two cities are more than 160 miles apart. Both are more than an hour's drive from the retirement community. Either could have posed a problem: Just days earlier, the pair had gotten lost trying to reach the outlet mall in Carrollton.

They ended up stopping for lunch at the Montgomery Inn Boat House, relatives say, laughing about their foiled shopping attempt.

Nothing comes close

Scott Walters tried to think like an engineer. He tried to think like his mother, but that hurt too much. In the end, he and his siblings and his father and all the volunteers have just picked apart the massive search area, one road at a time. They've found plenty of vehicles - one submerged beneath a boat ramp - but nothing even close to the car they're looking for.

"You can't fathom it," Joe Walters says.

In the beginning, this was a rescue operation. Find Ada and Mary Ellen. Get them help, get them home. But weeks passed. Then months. Spring gave way to summer. Trees grew green and leafy, and thermometers hit the 100-degree mark.

Too much time had passed.

Rescue gave way to recovery.

"It's hard to say that," Scott Walters says. "But the reality is kind of where we're at."

Across from Scott Walters, Joe Walters sits and fumbles with a pipe. He doesn't say much.

The son, who admits he's grown increasingly protective of his father, does most of the talking. He says they're doing "as good as you can expect" and calls this a "lost summer." Their expressions are hidden behind sunglasses.

The men chuckle at all the places they've been, joke that Mary Ellen is getting a kick out of making them run around, but grow quiet when asked whether they are afraid that one day they might just find that silver Impala.

Scott Walters pauses. He says no. He wants to find that car. He wants to find his mother.

He looks at his dad.

"I think," he says, "I want to find her for him."