

Koepchnes Say They Don't Have 'The Whole Story' on Accident

7-18-79
NYT

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Special to The New York Times

SWIFTWATER, PA. — The front door of the Koepchne home does not open easily; the hinges move reluctantly after years of little use.

"We're simple, back-porch people," Gwen Koepchne explained with an apologetic smile as she struggled with the door of the house in the Poconos. "We don't have many front-door visitors."

For the past decade these "back-porch people" have lived, in the words of Joseph A. Koepchne, "with a private tragedy that has thrown us into the intense pressure of the national spotlight."

Last Interview on Tragedy

And last week, for what they said was the final time and with their lawyer present, they agreed to speak about this tragedy with a "front-door visitor."

In a rambling, two-hour conversation held just five days before the 10th anniversary of the death of their daughter, Mary Jo, who drowned July 18, 1969, when a car driven by Senator Edward M. Kennedy plunged off Dyke Bridge on Chappaquiddick Island in Massachusetts, Mr. and Mrs. Koepchne made the following comments:

¶While they believe that Senator Kennedy, in two private interviews within a year of their daughter's death, "more or less" told them what happened, they still feel that "we don't know the whole story."

¶They believe that two of the men who attended the cookout that evening — Joseph F. Gargan, a cousin of the Senator, and Paul F. Markham, a former United States Attorney — are "morally guilty" of "not doing all they could to rescue our daughter."

¶They are highly critical of the inquest held by the state of Massachusetts into the death of their daughter, terming the judge's performance "poor" and the District Attorney "stupid," and saying of the entire process, "Every time anyone was on the verge of a good question, he backed off."

¶Since their daughter's funeral they have not spoken with the five other Kennedy campaign secretaries who attended the cookout, and would like to do so, particularly to ask the question, "Just how did Mary Jo feel that night?"

¶The alcohol content of their daughter's

blood — doctors found the equivalent of five to six drinks — remains "the puzzler," Mrs. Koepchne said, because "Mary Jo didn't smoke or drink."

¶They are critical of the authorities in Martha's Vineyard, the island Chappaquiddick adjoins, for not performing an autopsy on their daughter. They say they were led to believe, by a phone call from a Massachusetts state trooper the day after their daughter's death, that an autopsy had been performed. However, they oppose an exhumation of the body: "Nobody's going to dig up the grave of my little girl," Mrs. Koepchne said.

¶They have received a total of \$140,904 from the Senator and an insurance company as compensation in their daughter's death — about a third of which went to lawyers — but "never considered suing the Senator for a million dollars just because he had it." They have also turned down lucrative book and magazine offers because, Mr. Koepchne said, "money is not the most important thing."

¶They believe that Senator Kennedy has "grown up in the last few years," but they would have to "see who the other candidates were and what were their stands on the issues" before they would vote for him for President.

Some Memories Too Painful

The Koepchnes were never bitter in the course of the interview, held in their living room, the walls of which bear a portrait of Mary Jo and a gold cross. Rather, their tone was one of pragmatic and spiritual acceptance of events.

Mrs. Koepchne, 61 years old, sat in a leatherette swivel chair, and when the memories proved too painful she would absently swivel away from the conversation as if turning her back on the past.

Mr. Koepchne, 66, has changed more visibly than his wife since the accident. Now retired from the insurance business, he has allowed his gray hair to sweep over his collar, and he was dressed in faded flared denim pants and a work shirt embroidered with guitars on each shoulder, giving him the air of a country-western singer.

The Koepchnes talked easily and proudly about their only child, about how she was educated in Roman Catholic schools, was "excited" by John F. Kenne-



The New York Times/Carl T. Cossett

Joseph A. Kopechne with his wife, Gwen, at their home in Swiftwater, Pa.

dy, and "worshipped Bobby Kennedy because their ideals were so alike." And they talked of how "she accomplished so much all on her own."

They also recalled, quickly exchanging warm smiles and private laughs after 41 years of marriage, how they first met: It was on a Saturday night on a bridge in Wilkes-Barre, the Pennsylvania town where they lived as teen-agers.

As for what happened three decades

later on another bridge in Massachusetts, Mr. Kopechne said "there are still some mysteries."

"But," he added, "I'm not a bitter person. I'm not a revengeful person."

And Mrs. Kopechne interjected, "All we want is to get away from all this pressure, to be able to live out our lives with our memories of Mary Jo in serene happiness and peace."