

Kopechne Inquest Today

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Boston

The participants in a convivial cookout party that ended in tragedy on Chappaquiddick Island last July 18 will gather at the Dukes county courthouse at Edgartown, Mass., today for the opening of an inquest in the death of Mary Jo Kopechne.

Senator Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts, in whose car Miss Kopechne died that night, is expected to be one of possibly a score of witnesses.

No public disclosure about the witnesses has been made, and the inquest will be closed to public and press.

CAUSE

Six men and six secretaries, all Kennedy associates, were in the party. Kennedy's testimony and theirs will be the basis for determining the legal cause of Miss Kopechne's death. The Senator has agreed to cooperate.

Kennedy and Miss Kopechne left the party some time before midnight, ostensibly to catch the last ferry from Chappaquiddick to nearby Martha's Vineyard island.

But the Kennedy car made a wrong turn onto a dirt road. Moments later, it ran off a narrow bridge, known as Dyke bridge, and plunged into Poucha pond, a tidal inlet. Kennedy escaped but the accident went unreported for nearly nine hours. Miss Kopechne's body was recovered the next morning.

The medical cause has been officially recorded as death by accidental drowning by a finding at the site of Dr. Donald R. Mills, associate medical examiner for Dukes county.

MEDICAL

After hearing testimony under oath, the inquest judge is required to make a report, setting forth culpability or the absence of any. If warranted, the district attorney may call a grand jury, which is empowered to hand down criminal indictments or find no cause for prosecution.

The inquest will be held in the 111-year-old courthouse on Martha's Vineyard and will probably have an arcane quality because of the decision by the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court to bar both the public and the news media.

GRIM

The setting will be grim as well. Instead of thousands of Labor Day weekend tourists in holiday garb under warm skies, as gathered there in early September when the inquest originally was scheduled, only year-round residents and a still fairly substantial press corps in heavy jackets and mufflers will be on the serene and brownish island.

The court's decision was

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the result of a petition by lawyers representing Kennedy to change the ground rules set down by Judge James A. Boyle.

The lawyers asserted that because of Kennedy's prominence, attracting international news coverage, his constitutional rights would be seriously compromised by the presence of the press.

LAWYERS

Lawyers for the witnesses will be permitted in the courtroom while their clients are present, but only to advise them, not to cross-examine other witnesses.

A statement of agreed facts, filed with the Commonwealth's highest court, confirmed that Miss Kopechne had died when the Kennedy car went off the bridge and into the pond.

It was also noted that Kennedy subsequently pleaded guilty and was given a three-month suspended sentence by Boyle on a complaint of having left the scene of an accident after causing personal injury.