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Pa. man accused of killing in-law's newborn

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The Associated Press

PITTSBURGH - A man killed his sister-in-law's newborn more than eight years ago because he thought the child might be his and he didn't want his wife to find out, according to police who arrested him Wednesday after a prison interview with the baby's mother.

Warren Ernest Bircher, of Adah, had been sleeping with his wife's younger sister, Sarah Hawk, then 16 years old, in 2000, according to state police in Uniontown.

Hawk got pregnant and told Bircher that another man was the father. But Bircher, now 33, got upset because he thought he might be the father and told Hawk he would take care of it, police said Hawk told them in a prison interview Monday. She was charged in November.

Bircher said his wife would hate him if the baby turned out to be his and that, if it turned out to be fathered by the black man Hawk believed was the father, Hawk's father would not accept it, authorities said.

Tests confirmed that the child was not Bircher's, but it wasn't clear if he realized that, Fayette County District Attorney Nancy Vernon said Wednesday.

"Even if he did know, it didn't make any difference to him because he planned to kill it," she said.

A witness interviewed in June recalled hearing Bircher say at a party a couple months before the baby was killed that "someone was pregnant and he was going to get rid of the kid," according to police.

"Bircher said he was going to put the child in a bag and drown it just like he does his animals because she doesn't have the nerve to do it and he cannot afford another child," the witness told police, according to a police affidavit. The child was found in Cove Run Creek near Uniontown on June 4, 2000.

Bircher and Hawk's sister already had two children, according to Trooper James Pierce. He said Vernon decided to charge Bircher after he told her what Hawk said in the prison interview Monday.

According to police, Hawk gave birth one night after her sister had gone to bed. Hawk asked for her sister, but Bircher told her he'd take care of it and he got some plastic bags, a flannel shirt and a backpack to put the baby girl inside, authorities said.

Bircher later told her he had put the baby in the creek, according to the affidavit.

Bircher was charged with homicide, conspiracy to commit homicide and concealing the death of a child. He was being held at the Fayette County Prison without bail. His attorney, Simon John, said Bircher pleaded not guilty, but otherwise declined comment.

Vernon said Hawk was cooperating, but that her charges would not be dropped or modified. She is charged with homicide and concealing the death of a child.

Hawk was charged in November after advanced DNA testing techniques determined she was the mother, Vernon said. Hawk also confessed when presented with the evidence, Vernon said.

The case had been dormant until 2007 when Pierce decided to re-examine young women who lived in the area, about 45 miles south of Pittsburgh.

He had had a hunch that someone from the area was responsible, because the creek in which the baby was found is isolated and would be hard for an outsider to find.

Pierce went to Hawk's childhood home near the creek and took a DNA sample from her sister, who still lived there. The test concluded the sister could have been a relative of the baby. With that, Pierce sought DNA samples from Hawk and her other sisters.

Tests later proved that Sarah Hawk was the mother, Pierce said.

The baby weighed about 3 1/2 pounds when it was found, yet it was nearly full term, according to an autopsy at the time by former Allegheny County Coroner Cyril Wecht.

Fayette County Coroner Phillip Reilly has said he could not determine an exact cause of death because of decomposition. He believed the baby was born alive but died because of abandonment and lack of care.

After the baby was found, members of the community held a funeral for the girl at a local church. Everything was donated, including a casket and flowers, and the baby, dubbed Baby Mary by the coroner, was buried at a nearby cemetery.

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