

# Retiree's Life of Travel Becomes a Mystery of Disappearance

■ **Crime:** Glendale man bought a motor home, hit the road and vanished. Two people are accused of driving his vehicle and embezzling his money, but no one has found a body.

By MARTHA L. WILLMAN  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

When Gordy Johnson hit retirement age, he sold his Glendale home of 27 years, unloaded his old, beat-up green Volkswagen and invested in a \$219,000 luxury motor home with a brand new Suzuki four-wheel drive in tow.

After a career marked by punctuality, the former Glendale banking accountant and bachelor looked forward to a nomadic life without a timetable.

He hit the road last summer at age 62—accompanied by Rocky, a black-and-brown Labrador-shepherd puppy his co-workers at a Glendale Federal Bank subsidiary gave him for companionship in his travels.

Several months and short treks later, Johnson telephoned relatives on Oct. 14 from Bend, Ore., saying he was headed south to visit a friend in Los Angeles.

"That was the last anyone ever saw of him or heard from him again," said Sgt. Robert Cosner of the Deschutes County Sheriff's Department in Oregon. "He has disappeared from the face of the Earth."

A month after relatives notified authorities, Gordon Theodore Johnson—born April 15, 1927, 5 feet 9, 170 pounds, fair complexion, balding black hair, blue eyes—officially became a missing person.

He is one of 21,996 other missing adults on the computerized nationwide list maintained by the National Crime Information Center of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in Washington. Since the list was established in 1975, a total of 9,244 adults—fewer than 30%—have been found dead or alive.

But Johnson's is not a typical missing-person case. A couple have been arrested in Las Vegas, accused of having possession of Johnson's vehicles and most of the missing man's savings—allegedly partly spent on a trip to Tahiti, lavish clothes and gambling in Las Vegas, according to court papers filed in Las Vegas by the FBI.

The couple, who are being held without bail in a Clark County, Nev., jail, have



Gordy Johnson holds puppy, Rocky, which was given to him by former colleagues to keep him company on his travels after he retired. Both have disappeared.

been identified as Stanley Alan Hershey, 46, and Jan Vicki Fine, 37, who had used a Santa Monica address, investigators said.

Hershey and Fine have denied knowing Johnson and have refused to talk to authorities. They have been charged in the federal District Court of Nevada with relatively minor crimes—illegal use of a banking card and transportation of a stolen vehicle across state lines.

Because no body has been found, authorities are not calling it murder. But they also do not speak optimistically of locating Johnson.

"I have grave concerns about whether we will ever find Mr. Johnson," said Dick Whitaker, supervising special FBI agent in Las Vegas, where the couple were arrested March 1.

The 40-foot motor home was found Jan. 29 parked in a trailer vacation resort in Surprise, Ariz., five miles outside of Phoenix, in a space Hershey had rented. FBI documents state that Johnson's

Glendale bank account is virtually depleted, with \$100,000 of the money transferred to a money market account registered to the couple. The Suzuki was found at a Las Vegas hotel where FBI agents arrested the couple. Authorities have no clue to the whereabouts of Johnson and Rocky.

Assistant U.S. Atty. Gregory Damm argued in court that the couple pose a danger to society and may flee prosecution if released. A preliminary hearing is scheduled for Friday.

Cosner, the Oregon sheriff who took the missing-person report, is still pursuing the case. "A man doesn't save all his money to retire, then just give away a \$220,000 coach, his motor vehicle and his bank account. Everybody who has ever looked at this case knows what we're talking about."

However, because there is no body, Cosner says his department must treat it as a missing-person investigation.

Johnson's relatives—including his sister, brother and sister-in-law in Minneapolis and a close-knit network of nieces, nephews and their children—are trying to stay optimistic.

"We can't help but be apprehensive, but we have to keep our hopes up," said Del Johnson, 51, the brother. "Until we learn differently, we believe he is somewhere and not able to contact us."

In the meantime, investigations into Johnson's disappearance are complicated by jurisdictional problems. Federal and local authorities in half a dozen states are involved in the Johnson case—states where checks were issued on Johnson's bank funds or cash was withdrawn from his account on automatic teller machines.

The FBI's Whitaker in Las Vegas said: "We are not conducting a murder investigation. One of the main problems is, who would have jurisdiction? Bend, Ore., is still conducting a missing-persons investigation."

But Cosner in Oregon said his own investigation is limited by a tight county budget in the economically depressed region. "We can't just fly here and there to chase a case," he said.

Johnson's relatives said they were concerned but not alarmed when the retired accountant failed to call them from Los Angeles. Thanksgiving came and went and they still hadn't heard from him. "He just wanted go hither, there and yon," Del Johnson said. "That was his thing. Gordy said he wanted to be just like a turtle, with my home on my back."

By early December, Johnson's relatives said, they could no longer suppress their anxieties. They opened Johnson's November banking statement that had been sent to his sister and discovered, among other things, a canceled check for \$6,100 to a Louisiana travel agency, dated Oct. 15, one day after Johnson was last heard from.

They found that the check had been issued to pay for tickets to Tahiti for a man identified as Stanley Hershey. Relatives contacted the sheriff in Bend and an investigation began.

Cosner said he learned that the tickets, sent to an address in Surprise, Ariz., were used by Hershey and Fine. Further investigation indicated that other checks had been issued to pay bills not owed by Johnson and that sums of cash were being withdrawn from Johnson's bank account from automatic teller machines,

Cosner said.

In all, up to \$160,000—Johnson's total cash nest egg—is believed to have been embezzled from Johnson's account, officials said.

According to accounts from family and friends, Johnson is a kind and considerate man who kept in touch with his Midwestern family and went out of his way to brighten the office for co-workers.

"He was a very careful and meticulous worker," said Rochelle Gnatz, Johnson's last supervisor at Glenfed Development in Encino, where he worked for a time as an accounts payable assistant.

Johnson frequently marked holidays by bestowing gifts on co-workers. He distributed Christmas towels and pot-holders and remembered birthdays.

"He was the only one who did it," said Mary Anne Paul, a former Glenfed employee. "He was just a saint, a very warm and loving and friendly and outgoing and generous man."

He was generous at home, too.

Johnson had allowed an acquaintance, a Vietnam veteran, to stay at his home, even though the man was prone to nightmares that prompted him to punch holes in some of the interior doors of the house, friends and neighbors said. He had also provided shelter recently for a woman he said had fallen on hard times, they said.

Neighbors described Johnson as "a loner," a man who lived in a secluded, country club area of Chevy Chase Canyon.

He had done little to maintain his 1,800-square-foot, three-bedroom, two-bath house since he purchased it new in 1962. The elaborate fireplace was never used, the drab brown paint had faded and the wooden roof shingles were deteriorated when Gay Paylor purchased the property last August at a "fixer-up" price of \$385,000.

Friends and co-workers said Johnson was an avid backgammon player and often traveled to Las Vegas, Reno and Lake Tahoe to participate in tournaments, frequently winning large sums of money.

Johnson kept all of his personal and financial papers neatly packed in one place—in a camera-type satchel that he always carried with him, friends said.

"He was a sweet, kind, loving guy," one business associate said. "He trusted people."