



STATE LINE Observer



UPDATE—With Morenci Chief of Police Larry Weeks at his side, Detroit FBI chief Andy Arena faces a wall of television cameras and a barrage of reporters. The disappearance of three Morenci youngsters Friday soon became a national and international news story. Chief Weeks gave his

sixth news conference Tuesday morning as the investigation and search reached its fourth day. New information led the FBI to direct Monday's search efforts into Williams County, Ohio, but no trace of the children was found.

DAVID GREEN/Observer photo

Search continues for missing brothers

We do not anticipate a positive outcome

— Police chief Larry Weeks

By DAVID GREEN

May God and Tanya forgive me...

Wednesday, Nov. 24, Facebook

That was John Skelton's Facebook message to the world two days before he unsuccessfully tried to hang himself. It was also two days before the disappearance of his three children—Andrew, 9; Alexander, 7; and Tanner, 5.

After Skelton's wife, Tanya, reported to police Friday that her three boys failed to return home following a scheduled visit to John Skelton's home on East Congress Street in Morenci—the couple is separated and seeking divorce—an investigation began

with Morenci police officers searching the neighborhood and speaking with neighbors.

Personnel from the Michigan State Police and the Federal Bureau of Investigation soon arrived in town and by Sunday, the disappearance of Morenci's Skelton children became the most-read story on CNN.

Family troubles

Skelton, 39-year-old truck driver, had been unemployed for several weeks when

he unexpectedly drove to Florida with two of his children.

The Skeltons' marital situation had been troubled before that time, said Kathye Herrera, who is serving as a spokesperson for the Tanya, but the Florida trip was the turning point in their relationship.

After Skelton was convinced to return home with the children, Tanya moved out of the Congress Street home and obtained custody of the boys.

A neighbor who wishes to remain unidentified recalls seeing walk the boys to church on Sunday mornings and said his demeanor had changed.

"He looked sheepish and defeated," he said. "It wasn't his usual appearance."

On Halloween night, Skelton watched his children go trick-or-treating, telling the neighbor that he wasn't allowed to go with them.

"He talked for quite a while and was really despondent," the neighbor said. "He really wanted to be with his kids. He said he loved Tanya and wanted to get back together."

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The disappearance of the three Skelton children quickly evolved into a major investigation backed up by state and federal resources.

THURSDAY AFTERNOON—As far as police know, a neighbor of the Skeltons was the last person to see the children when they were playing outside on Thanksgiving afternoon.

FRIDAY—John Skelton alleges that he delivered the children to a woman who lives in either Hillsdale or Jackson counties. After that he had an unsuccessful suicide attempt by hanging. He called a friend who transported him to the Fulton County Health Center.

Skelton's estranged wife, Tanya, notified the police about the failure of her children

A timeline of events...



Andrew, age 9



Alexander, age 7



Tanner, age 5

to return home from a scheduled visit.

SATURDAY MORNING—Morenci police officers began a property search at the Skelton residence at 112 E. Congress St. before daybreak Saturday morning. Officers were knocking on doors in the neighborhood and looking for clues in yards Saturday morning.

SATURDAY AFTERNOON—An FBI agent began visiting neighbors of John Skelton Saturday afternoon. Additional agents arrived later in the day, along with investigators from the Michigan State Police.

Tanya Skelton spent most of the day at the Morenci Police Station assisting FBI agents and Michigan State Police officers.

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Missing boys

Continued from page 1

In a few days, Skelton said, he would find out if he was going for counseling or to divorce court.

Tanya stayed with her plans to seek a divorce and the couple eventually agreed upon informal visitation rights. That agreement included Skelton's time with the children on Thanksgiving Day and Friday.

A neighbor saw the children playing in the yard about 2:30 p.m. Thursday, but that was the last sighting of which police are aware.

Mystery woman

On Friday afternoon, Skelton was unsuccessful in a suicide attempt. He injured an ankle while trying to hang himself and called a friend for transportation to the Fulton County Health Center in Wauseon. Skelton was treated and transferred to a mental health facility in Toledo for psychiatric observation.

He told law enforcement officers that he delivered his children to a woman named Joann Taylor earlier that day. He said he met her during an auto break-down and maintained contact with the woman.

Taylor was to deliver the boys back to Tanya Friday afternoon so they wouldn't be present when he killed himself. The boys never came home and police questioned whether there was any truth to the Taylor story.

We've eliminated the relationship between Joann Taylor and Mr. Skelton.

— Police chief Larry Weeks

Morenci Chief of Police Larry Weeks stated in a press conference Saturday evening that officers were unable to locate a Joann Taylor or to confirm that she exists. Eventually Skelton's story fell apart and Monday morning Weeks told reporters Taylor was no longer part of the investigation.

"At this point we have been able to eliminate the reported established relationship between Joann Taylor and Mr. Skelton."

Search begins

Search parties combed Wakefield Park and walked along Bean Creek into Riverside Nature Area Saturday afternoon looking for signs of the boys. Sunday the search widened to include an area northwest of Morenci and at Harrison Lake State Park. On Monday, the FBI sent search teams to areas near Kunkle and Holiday City, Ohio, and again into Michigan Tuesday morning.

Weeks stated Tuesday morning that Skelton has been forthcoming with some information, although police were not able to verify the credibility.

"We have searched a number of locations from all sorts of resources, including sources from him," Weeks said.

The search continued Tuesday, based on tips, and locations Skelton had frequented.

Weeks cast a pallor on the conference when he stated, "We continue to talk to all parties involved in this investigation, including Mr. Skelton. Statements he's made to investigators indicate it's not going to be a positive outcome."

At the Morenci Methodist Church service Sunday, Herrera said she could visualize the boys' faces at the front of the church during the children's sermon.

"They always wanted to answer questions," she said. "That's the thing that keeps us going—remembering their faces and some of the silly things they did."

Alexander, 7, claimed to have a girlfriend at school and she made a card for her friend. She delivered it to his house and asked that it be given to him.

It read, "Welcome home. I miss you."

"I think that helped Tanya," Herrera said. "She knows her boys are missed by a lot of people beyond the family."

Breaking News:

John Skelton was released from a mental health facility in Toledo Tuesday afternoon and promptly arrested on three counts of parental kidnapping.

He will be lodged in the Lucas County Jail.

This information was released at a 3 p.m. news conference at the Morenci Fire Hall.

Additional news will be posted at statelineobserver.com as it's reported.

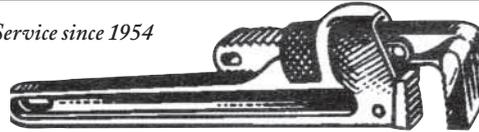
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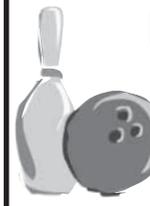
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Timeline

Continued from page 1

SATURDAY EVENING—Officers from several agencies converged at the Skelton residence Saturday evening and a State Police helicopter with thermal imaging equipment made several passes over the neighborhood Saturday night.

Skelton's minivan was confiscated and towed away.

An announcement was made via fire department radio that a rescue effort would get underway at 7:30 a.m. Sunday.

SUNDAY MORNING—About 230 volunteers from area fire departments and the community registered at the fire station to join search teams.

In addition to ATVs, teams of five searchers combed ditches and woods looking for evidence of the children.

The search was focused on two areas that John Skelton was known to visit: Harrison Lake State Park southeast of Fayette and an area in the vicinity of White Pine Highway and Lime Creek Road.

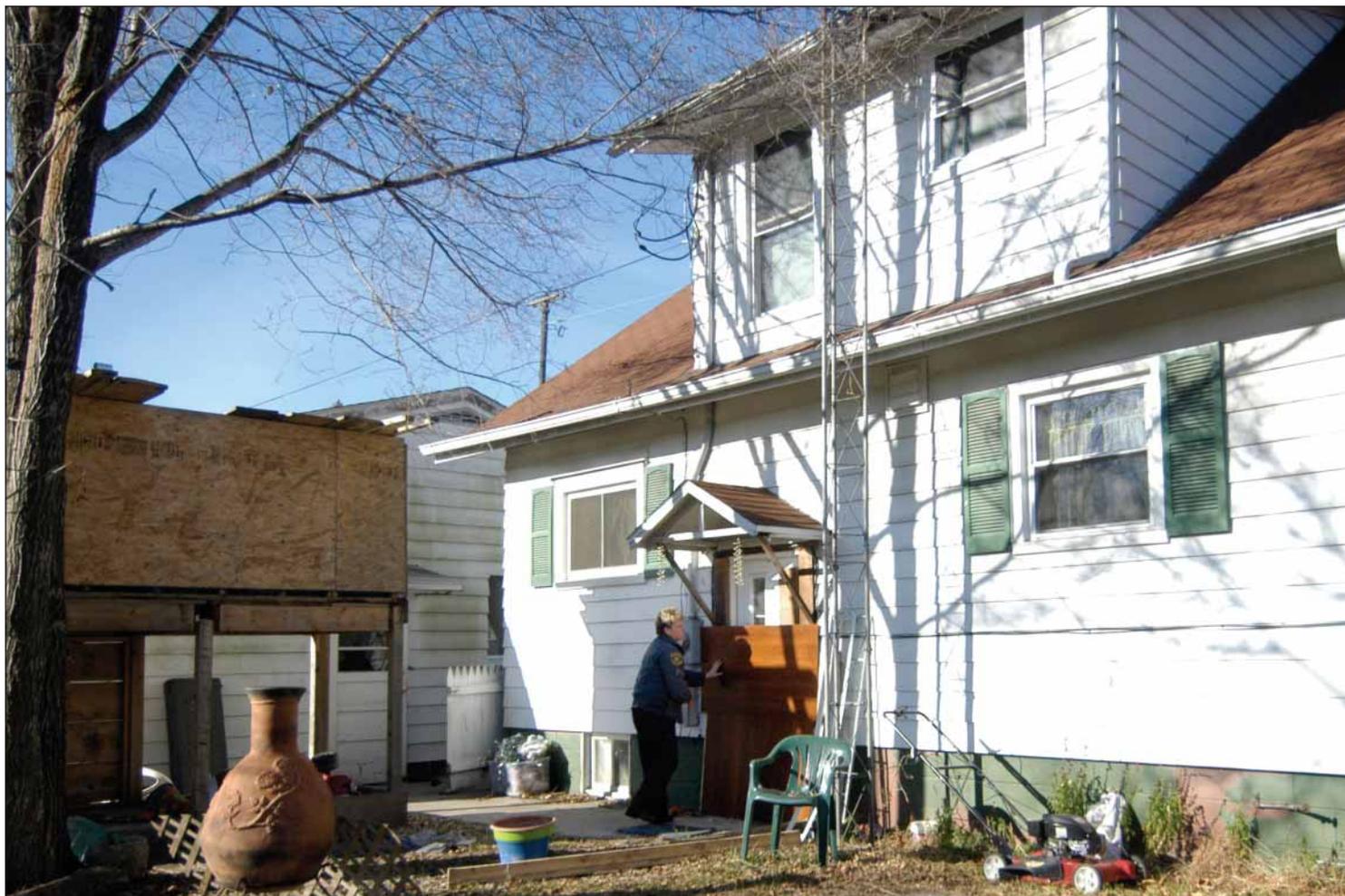
"We want to go slow and check every step of the way," Morenci fire chief Chad Schisler told the volunteers. "We need to be thorough in our search."

Additional teams of FBI agents interviewed neighbors and examined property.

SUNDAY AFTERNOON—The Michigan State Police mobile crime lab arrived at the Skelton house and officers worked inside and out before boarding up the back door and leaving the scene.

SUNDAY EVENING—Morenci Chief of Police Larry Weeks gave his fourth press conference at the fire hall as searchers returned to the station before dark.

The chief announced that city hall would be closed until further notice since the FBI and Michigan State Police were using the



WRAPPING UP—A Michigan State Police officer boards up the back door of the Skelton home on E. Congress Street in Morenci after investigators completed their work Sunday afternoon. John Skelton built the large wooden playhouse on the left for his three boys this past summer.

DAVID GREEN/Observer photos

building as a command center.

The Salvation Army canteen truck and the Fulton County Red Cross, along with donations from area residents, helped feed the volunteers.

A prayer vigil at the United Methodist Church drew about 200 people.

MONDAY MORNING—Nearly 300 volunteers gathered at the fire station for a second day of searching, and waited about

90 minutes for an assignment.

After evaluating new information, the FBI directed searchers at mid-morning to travel to Williams County, Ohio, to search a campground and along roadsides.

At the morning press conference, Chief Weeks announced that John Skelton lied about his connection to Joann Taylor—the woman he earlier claimed had possession of his sons.

TUESDAY MORNING—Searches were sent to areas along Mulberry Road north of Morenci, continuing to explore areas that Skelton was known to frequent.

At the 11 a.m. news conference, Chief Weeks delivered grim news, stating that "It's not going to be a positive outcome."

The search for the boys through the countryside continued.

Volunteer effort fills the ranks of search team members

Bill Foster said he was among several people who got together when the Amber Alert notice warned the public about the disappearance of the three Skelton children.

"Friday night we started posting the Amber Alert and Saturday everybody wanted to gather at the Tourist Camp and start looking," Foster said.

That was the small beginning of an outpouring of help that followed the next three days.

Foster estimates there were about 250 civilian volunteers Sunday—in addition to members of 12 area fire departments—and an ever larger number on Monday. He's heard that number might swell again Tuesday.

"They just kept showing up," Foster said.

Not everyone signed in at the fire hall, so the exact number of searchers is impossible to know.

"It's been remarkable," he said. "Just tremendous. We've had people from as far away as Indiana."

Foster said he was put in charge of the civilian volunteers Sunday because the group needed some organization.

"The FBI is calling the shots and we have to do what they tell us," Foster said. That's not easy for some searchers.

The federal agents have some strict rules about evidence and they're the ones choosing which areas to investigate.

Morenci Fire Chief Chad Schisler concurs.

"Sometimes it's hard for the community to understand because they just really want to help," he said.

"People have to be patient," Foster said. "I'm here to help find the boys and I can put up with anything."

After Sunday's search in the Lime Creek Road/White Pine Highway area and Har-

It's been remarkable. Just tremendous.

— Bill Foster

rison Lake State Park, efforts Monday turned to Williams County, Ohio, looking in ditch banks and searching a campground. The departure orders weren't given until mid-morning and by then volunteers were more than ready to move out.

Schisler said he was asked to direct two-thirds of a collection of volunteers to the new staging area in Pioneer, Ohio, but when he told them that, they responded that they were all going.

Fire officer Bronson DiCenso was left in charge at the Morenci station. Small crews were dispatched to the roadside park on U.S. 20 south of Lyons, to the Green Valley Campground west of Morenci, and to the gravel pit north of Morenci along Mulberry Road.

"They're all wanting to get out and look," DiCenso said. "Everybody's doing a good job of coming together."

That statement applies not only to those scouring the countryside; it also includes those providing food for the volunteers. In addition, Foster said, those unable to walk helped serve food, register volunteers, and perform other tasks.

Donations from local businesses helped feed the crew, plus food from individuals. Chips, soups, cookies, pies, bottled water.

"It's just been outstanding," Foster said. "Some people dropped off sandwiches on their way to work."

The outpouring of food was really overwhelming, Schisler said.

"The Salvation Army canteen said it was the most food they ever served," he said.

Schisler said Monday night he expects to hear the FBI's next directive the next morning and the process will begin again.

"We're going to be ready to go out," he said.



THE SEARCH—Although John Skelton first said he left his three children with an acquaintance, the FBI began search operations Sunday morning to look for any evidence of the boys. A few community volunteers looked around area parks Saturday afternoon.



VOLUNTEERS—Firefighters and community volunteers gathered at the Morenci Fire Department for the third time Tuesday morning to receive directions for searching. Nearly 300 volunteers took part in the operation Monday.