

Deaths of Hewitt children to be probed at fire inquest

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An inquest will be held in Waco Oct. 3 to rule on whether a fire that killed two Hewitt boys was caused by arson.

Such a hearing must be held before criminal charges can be filed.

Justice of the Peace John Cabaniss will preside over the inquest, which was requested by the state fire marshal's office in Austin.

Scheduled to present evidence to Cabaniss are Detective Frank Lathem, Hewitt Police Department; Joseph Porter, state fire marshal's office; and J. Patrick Murphy, assistant district attor-

ney, McLennan County.

John Ben Sutter, administrative assistant to McLennan County District Attorney Vic Feazell, said Wednesday if Cabaniss rules arson caused the Aug. 26 fire that killed Joby Graf, 9, and Jason Graf, 8, the case will be referred to the grand jury.

"We'll let them decide if they want action to be taken," Sutter said.

Porter last week labeled the fire that engulfed the wooden storage shed at 505 Angel Fire Drive and killed the two boys as "suspicious."

In a synopsis to his official report, Porter wrote that burn pat-

terns on the shed's wood indicated the "presence of accelerants."

Also, Porter wrote, the bodies of the boys were found in an "unusual" position.

It is still uncertain if the district attorney's office will receive the final autopsy on the bodies of the Graf boys from the Southwestern Institute of Forensic Sciences in Dallas before the inquest.

A preliminary autopsy showed Joby and Jason had soot in their lungs, indicating they were alive when the fire started.

Fire investigators have com-

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plied most of their evidence through photographs of the fire scene taken by the Hewitt Police Department and the Hewitt Volunteer Fire Department and through interviews.

What was left of the shed after the fire was dumped in Donaldson Sand and Gravel in South Waco. Although investigators have rummaged through the dump, evidence they found may not be admissible since the so-called "chain of evidence" was broken, officials close to the investigation say. Remains of the shed were dumped in the gravel pit and mixed with materials already there.

The inquest will offer the public its first detailed look at how investigators believe the fire started and, perhaps, who they think started it. Cabaniss said Wednesday he will open the inquest to the public.

"I'm an elected official," he said. "The business of this office is the business of the public."