

Mother, son arrested in elderly woman's death

By Dick Weber
Staff Writer

A lengthy investigation into the disappearance of an elderly woman in Indiana has ended here with the arrest of her daughter-in-law and grandson who, authorities said yesterday, are accused of killing her with a crossbow.

Helma Marie Witte, 36, and her son, John David Witte, 15, are charged with murder in the death last January of 74-year-old Elaine Witte in her home in Trail Creek, a suburb of Michigan City, Ind., authorities said.

They were taken into custody Wednesday, along with another son, Eric, 19, in a Chula Vista bank where the mother was attempting to cash a government Social Security check issued to the dead woman, U.S. Secret Service agents said.

Marie Witte was arraigned yesterday before a federal magistrate on charges of forgery of U.S. obligations and conspiracy while Eric Witte, a sailor stationed at the Naval Hospital, was charged with conspiracy. They are being held in the Metropolitan Correctional Center pending re-

lease to Indiana authorities on a murder charge. The younger son was being held at Juvenile Hall.

Local authorities would not discuss details of the slaying, but police in Trail Creek said statements made here to two Indiana detectives Tuesday night form the basis for murder warrants that were issued yesterday by a Laporte County, Ind., judge.

According to Trail Creek Police Chief Marshal Michael Chastain, Marie Witte ordered her younger son to kill his grandmother, with whom they were living in a large two-story home. Chastain testified in court the boy then went to his grandmother's room and shot her in the chest with a crossbow as she slept.

After they were sure she was dead, the body was dismembered and stored in a freezer, Chastain said. The body parts were disposed of during the year by Marie Witte, her sons and by Douglas A. Menkel, 22, a family friend who was arrested here this week as a Navy deserter, Chastain said.

The grisly slaying occurred during the first week in January. Detectives described Elaine Witte as "a neigh-

borly type" usually seen out working in her yard. It wasn't long before neighbors became curious and started asking about her welfare, they said.

"First they were told Elaine was sick and couldn't answer the phone. Then they were told she was on an extended vacation. Finally, they were told she moved out to San Diego to be with her grandson," said Trail Creek officer Dean Bunton.

Neighbors were dissatisfied with the explanations, and in April, after Marie Witte left, they went to authorities who began an investigation. Indiana investigators contacted San Diego police last Thursday for assistance in finding the four suspects, who were located that day at a recreational vehicle park on West San Ysidro boulevard in South San Diego. The Secret Service was called in and alerted area banks to watch for government checks issued in the name of the missing woman. Officials at Pacific Commercial Bank in rural Chula Vista contacted authorities Wednesday.