

# Farmington Observer

Volume 83 Number 42

Monday, March 8, 1982

Farmington, Michigan

28 Pages

Twenty-five cents

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## Confrontation shuts down school bus system

By M.B. Dillon Ward  
staff writer

It may have been cold and snowy outside, but it was hot and fiery inside the Farmington School Administration Building during last Thursday's snowstorm.

Farmington bus drivers staged a "stay-in" after reporting before 7 a.m. to the transportation office and deciding that weather conditions prohibited safe transport for students.

Most schools and buses operated in the metro-Detroit area but closed during the day Thursday when snow turned to freezing rain and sleet.

School administrators consider the action a strike and a violation of the bus drivers' contract which warrants disciplinary action, said Farmington School Superintendent Lewis Schulman.

"Closing school is a district decision, not an individual bus driver's decision," said Schulman. "The bus drivers made a unilateral decision refusing to take their buses and, according to them, it had to do with the road conditions."

"We checked the roads, and saw that all other districts around us were open, without exception. I personally traveled the roads and could get through with no problem."

The bus drivers contend their decision was neither a strike nor a union action, according to Judith Watts, acting president of the Farmington School Bus Drivers Association.

"Administrators are viewing it as a wildcat strike, but the action was taken based on a consensus of individual decisions," Watts said.

"Each student we transport is worth \$1 million. It's mighty precious cargo we're hauling. Unfortunately, the administrators were not up early enough to survey the situation and make a decision themselves."

"I feel the drivers cannot be directed to drive under unsafe conditions, and I'm sure the contract would back me up. Many drivers had a hard time getting in or were late. Based on those surveys we deemed it unsafe to go out," she said.

**HALF AN HOUR AFTER** the drivers notified the administration of their decision, they received a directive to go to work with William Frisk, assistant superintendent of business and finance for Farmington Schools, Watts said.

When drivers maintained their position, Frisk told them their action would be viewed as an act of insubordination. Watts was then called into Schulman's office. She informed Schulman drivers would go out as soon as the salt trucks went out, or conditions changed. Watts said she was given half an

hour by Schulman to mobilize the drivers or give up a day's pay and suffer disciplinary action.

"When I informed Mr. Schulman for the third time that this was not a strike, just an action based on weather conditions, he would not let me state that on record," she said. "He said he was viewing it as a strike, and only that would go on record."

**ACCORDING TO A FARMINGTON** bus driver who wished to remain unidentified, all drivers were threatened with their jobs.

"They make us out to be peasants and dirty people. They're really being stinkers about this," she said.

"We only took a stand for the safety of the children and I feel our voice should be heard. Mr. Frisk was telling us it was our job to go out there because we were professional drivers. We said that's why we weren't going out."

Schulman refused to say whether drivers' jobs are in jeopardy, saying only that administrators will meet with the board to discuss disciplinary action Tuesday.

Attendance in Farmington schools averaged 75 percent Thursday. School closed about an hour early due to hazardous weather conditions and the bus drivers' abstention from work, Schulman said.

Although the working relationship between bus drivers and the administration has been largely harmonious, safety is one of several concerns of drivers.

"We're never consulted when decisions are being made about closing school due to weather conditions," Watts said. "Several neighboring school districts have committees comprised of both union members and administrators who make decisions on snowdays."

"Here, they discount the input drivers could have," she added. "When you work with a situation day in and day out, you can make a pretty good decision."

Legally, Farmington bus drivers are unable to rely on the school board for support — another sore spot with many drivers.

"If a driver faces criminal charges, she faces them by herself," Watts said. "If someone sues the district in conjunction with the bus driver, they can collect through the district and the driver sits in jail."

"The school board gives us no legal backing. If a driver misses time from work appearing in court for something that's job-related but not her fault, she foots the bill."

Drivers start at \$5 hourly and reach top of the scale at \$7.25 after five years.



RANDY BORST/staff photographer

Judith Watts and her colleagues on the Farmington School District bus drivers' team thought last Thursday's weather was less than safe

for students and drivers alike. Now the group is in direct conflict with the school's administration.

## Money lenders pleased

# Bill would deregulate banking

By M.B. Dillon Ward  
staff writer

Antiquated legislation that prohibits statewide branch banking may be as much a part of the past as 5-percent interest rates if state Sen. John Kelly, D-Detroit, has his way.

Kelly's Senate Bill 575, scheduled for a Senate vote March 18, would lift restrictions placed on banks during the Great Depression.

Locally, the bill would mean a boon to competition in the banking industry, according to Metro National Bank Executive Vice President Leon Serdynski.

"If the law is enacted, additional banks would be able to locate in the area, and banking facilities would be able to branch statewide, offering more services for customers," he said.

Current legislation prevents a bank from expanding outside a 25-mile radius of its main office. It also prohibits a bank from establishing branches within 25 miles of a competing bank's main office.

The laws resulted from widespread fears in the 1930s that bank failures could become commonplace.

"People were afraid to let that happen, so they intentionally set up a sys-

tem where banks were insured a certain level of profitability giving them no competition and protected territory," said Richard Johnson, director of corporate communications for National Bank of Detroit.

"At the time, there was a rationale for it politically and economically. But it's an inconvenience in light of the way people live nowadays. A couple may live in one city and work in two other cities, meaning they must maintain three separate accounts. The monopoly position has outlived its usefulness."

**DEREGULATION OF the banking**

industry is viewed by proponents as both a stimulant to competition and an inevitable development.

Currently, 20 states and the District of Columbia have statewide branch banking.

Said Kelly, "proposed legislation to permit statewide branch banking is vital to the success of any plan to stimulate economic development and diversification in Michigan. By making it attractive for banks to use their lending power to help develop new economic and job opportunities we will be pass-

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RANDY BORST/staff photographer

in happier days Cha Long Pan (left) posed for this picture with his wife, Chan, and their newborn baby.

## Cause is probed

# Mystery shrouds Cambodian's death

By Craig Plechura  
staff writer

National researchers are looking into the unexplained death late last month of a young, apparently healthy Cambodian refugee who came to this country under the sponsorship of a Farmington church.

Cha Long Pan, whose age is officially listed as 29 but friends say was closer to 22, died at 6:30 a.m. Feb. 24, in his sleep, four hours after his work shift ended.

His wife, Chan La Pan, 22, told friends she was awakened by her husband's violent convulsions. He was dead within minutes, according to authorities.

The symptoms of Pan's death fit the pattern of an epidemic affecting southeast Asian males classified as Sudden Unexplained Nocturnal Death Syndrome by the national Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta.

The case was referred to CDC by Dr. John Smialek, deputy chief director of the Wayne County Medical Examiner's office because he said the autopsy revealed "nothing acute that would explain a death occurring."

Dr. Smialek said that last month he attended a national science conference in Orlando, Fla., where a CDC spokesman alerted medical examiners to the rash of unexplained deaths primarily affecting men from southeast Asia — particularly Hmong tribesmen from the highlands of Laos.

**PAN'S PREGNANT WIDOW,** Chan La Pan, said her husband grew up near the Laotian border of Cambodia — now called Kampuchea — but was Cambodian. When he couldn't determine the

cause of Pan's sudden death, Smialek contacted the CDC in Atlanta. The CDC is keeping close tabs on the apparent epidemic which has claimed the lives of 46 Asian refugees living in America since July 1977, according to Robert Alden, a spokesman for the CDC.

A breakthrough was done last year when the toll reached 38, Alden said, to determine the nationality of the victims. Of the 38 victims, 33 were Laotian refugees and 25 of those 33 Laotians were Hmong tribesmen, an ethnic group in Laos. Four of the 38 victims were Vietnamese and one was Cambodian like Pan.

No one knows what causes the high rate of deaths during sleep but there are a few prominent theories. One is that victims suffered from a reaction to "yellow rain," a form of chemical warfare powder the U.S. State Department claims was used in Laos by the Soviets.

Another theory known as the Nightmare Syndrome has been postulated. This deadly emotional malady affects mostly Japanese and Filipino men during their sleep.

Alden discounts both theories as explanations in Pan's death. While friends say Pan groaned during convulsions before he died, as if he were having a nightmare, Alden said groans often accompany cardiac arrest.

All of the Asians whose unexplained deaths are listed as fitting the Sudden Unexplained Nocturnal Death Syndrome died during their sleep but not necessarily while having a nightmare, say CDC investigators.

**WAYNE COUNTY** medical examiners are in the process of conducting pharmacology (drugs), toxicology (poisons) and tissue tests which should be

completed in another month in an attempt to find out what caused death.

So far, medical examiners know only that something caused Pan's heart to stop beating while he slept, much like some infants' hearts stop with Sudden Infant Death Syndrome.

"Everyone who dies has a cardiac arrest," Smialek said. "What causes the heart to stop beating is the problem. Whether it's a principal disease of the heart or the problem is the brain or the center (that controls the heart is something we're always going to look for."

"But there's been nothing of that type. So we're starting from scratch." Pan's employer, Adolph Dubiel of Omni-Fiber plastics, said newspaper stories that hypothesize about an unexplained disorder killing Asian men does

a disservice to the public.

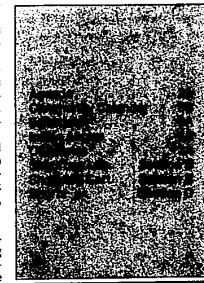
"It's scary," Dubiel said. "I'd hate to be a Cambodian male and go through this. How would you feel every time you went to bed knowing you might die in your sleep?"

**DUBIEL SAID** Pan was one of his finest workers and had seemed uncharacteristically chipper at work the night he died.

"That particular night he was very happy, laughing, throwing names back at the other workers (who kidded him)," Dubiel said. Other Asian men who work at the plant, Dubiel said, took Pan's death pragmatically because they'd seen sim-

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## what's inside



**EXCELLENT RESULTS**

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