

Police begin intense search for 8-year-old

By Connie Remlinger
and Sacha DeVroomen
Kentucky Post staff reporters

A search party with police dogs began looking this morning for an 8-year-old Highland Heights girl who has been missing since Thursday evening after a game of hide-and-seek.

The girl, Jessica Buckler, was last seen playing in front of her apartment complex, Hampton Farms Apartment complex, on Grey Stable Lane in Highland Heights.

Her father, Larry James Buckler, said Jessica and other children were playing hide-and-seek about 6 p.m.

"Jessica was paired with a 16-year-old boy from the Knollwood subdivision. It was their turn to seek the others who were hiding," Buckler said.

"It wasn't long before the others realized nobody was looking for them. So then they started to look for Jessica and the boy. Then they called the police."

Buckler said the boy's grandparents, with

JAN. 8, 1993

Please see SEARCH, 2K

Search

From Page 1K

whom he lived, saw him walking alone along a road about 7 p.m.

"They picked him up and took him home," Buckler said. "He was very agitated. They tried to calm him down."

Police described the teen as slightly mentally retarded and said he is not a relative of the missing girl.

The boy also is missing. Buckler said the boy said he had gotten into a fight.

"He went down to the base-

ment to calm down. He went out the back door. No one has seen him since about 7:30 p.m.," Buckler said.

Jessica, a student at Cold Spring Elementary School, has brown eyes and long brown hair.

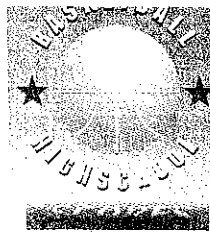
Anyone with information should call her parents at 781-9165.

Police with three dogs were searching a wooded area around Knollwood, a subdivision where the boy lived and near apartment complex where the Bucklers live.

Police declined to identify the missing boy.

2 section, 1 pages
 Classified 11K-22K
 Death notices 5A
 Perspective Page 4K
 Sports 6K, 8K-10K

A scary experience
 Classes help first-time home buyers
Page 4A



Covington Catholic 66, Green
 Bullitt East 84, Newport 66
 Newport Catholic 64, Casey
 Holy Cross 67, Owensboro
 St. Henry 53, Harlan 51
 North Bullitt 80, Boone Cou
 Simon Kenton 75, Madison
 Clay County 77, Dixie Heigh

Honoring a friend
 Pizza shop raising money for memorial
Page 4A

OUTSIDE
 Wintry day: Snow, sleet or rain
 can be expected today, with a
 high about 36. Low about 30
 tonight, with more snow or rain
 Sunday and a high about 35.



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Eight-year-old killed



Police charge teen with murdering girl

By John C.K. Fisher and Paul A. Long
 Kentucky Post staff reporters

By 2:40 p.m. Friday, the search was over.

A Highland Heights couple found the body of 8-year-old Jessica Buckler in the grassy area of a ballfield behind the apartment complex where she lived.

Jessica had been missing since Thursday night, when she disappeared while playing hide-and-seek with a group of children in front of the Hampton Farms apartment complex in Highland Heights.

She was last seen with playmate Garry Gampfer, a 17-year-old who police say is slightly retarded. On Friday, police charged him with murder and kidnapping.

Jessica's parents, Ann and Larry James Buckler, had feared the worst when Jessica didn't return home Thursday after playing with the other children. That wasn't like her, they thought, and police were called about 6 p.m.

When they got word Friday that a body had been found, they headed to the ballfield.

"Is she dead?" Mrs. Buckler asked as she trudged through the grass and mud where police were taking pictures and securing evidence.

"Yes," someone replied.

Mrs. Buckler raised her hands to her eyes and asked for more information. But police didn't allow her to come closer while they built their case.

"Please, I've waited for so long. Why are they treating me this way?" she asked as she wept in the arms of her husband.

Buckler hugged his wife and led her back to their car. They drove away without commenting.

A friend, Jeff Halloran of Union, summed up their feelings:

"It's a shame it had to end this way," said Halloran, who helped search for Jessica Thursday night and Friday morning.

Campbell County Coroner Fred Stine said an autopsy would be performed today at St. Luke Hospital East. Neither Stine nor his deputy, Al Garnick, knew how long Jessica had been dead or how she died.

Stine said Jessica had no obvious injuries, and she was fully clothed. Garnick said she was wearing a ski jacket, pants and white gym shoes. She was lying on her back, Stine said.

Garry, a sophomore at Campbell County High School, remained in police custody Friday night, said Highland Heights Capt. Harry Stiers.

Stiers would not say what evidence police have against Garry, but he acknowledged that the youth was the last person to see Jessica alive.



Larry James and Ann Buckler talk with Highland Heights police Capt. Harry Stiers (wearing hat) while the search continued for their daughter, Jessica. Friday afternoon, the body of the 8-year-old child was found in a field.

Hide-and-seek ends tragically



Highland Heights police officers cover the body of Jessica Buckler after she was found dead in a field near the Hampton Farms apartment complex where she lived.

By Sacha DeVroomen
 Kentucky Post staff reporter

Children of all ages around the Hampton Farms apartments usually got together after school to roller-skate and play hide-and-seek or survival games.

Garry Gampfer joined them this summer. The 17-year-old who is slightly retarded didn't live in the apartment complex, but he liked playing games with the other children. He always carried knives and once had a gun, the other children say, but they enjoyed playing with him.

Thursday afternoon, Garry was paired with 8-year-old Jessica Buckler in a game of hide-and-seek. But when it came time for them to find the other children's hiding places, Garry and Jessica disappeared.

Neighbors found Jessica's

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Jessica

From Page 1K

However, Campbell District Judge Dan Guidugli said he signed a search warrant related to the case Friday afternoon. The warrant said Garry had blood on his hands and clothes when he came home Thursday evening, Guidugli said.

Stiers said Garry has not given police a statement. The FBI was summoned but will not pursue federal charges, said Terry Hulse, the agent in charge of the Northern Kentucky office.

However, the FBI will assist Highland Heights police with any evidence they gather, if needed, Hulse said.

Earlier, Larry Buckler said Jessica had been paired with Garry, who lives with his grandparents in the Knollwood subdivision in Highland Heights, during a game of hide-and-seek. They disappeared when it was their turn to search for the others who were hiding.

"It wasn't long before the others realized nobody was looking for them," Buckler said. "So then they started to look for Jessica and the boy. Then they called the police."

Garry's grandparents found him walking along a road about 7 p.m., Buckler said. He was agitated, Buckler said, and they tried to calm him down. They took him home, but he left again around 7:30.

Highland Heights police quickly organized a search party with dogs and civilian volunteers and used a helicopter from the Hamilton County Sheriff's office to look for Jessica.

They searched through most of the night and early morning but didn't find her, Stiers said.

Ron Holcomb, a friend of the Bucklers' who helped search for Jessica, said police wouldn't allow neighbors and friends into the area where Jessica's body eventually was found.

Stiers said that was because he didn't want them to track over the scent that the police dogs were following. Police searched Thursday night the ballfield where Jessica's body was found but didn't see her in the darkness, Stiers said.

Laura and Chris Buben, who live in the same apartment complex as the Buckler family, joined the search early Thursday evening. Buben said he stopped

about 1 a.m. Friday, but his wife continued until 2 or 3 a.m.

Buben said he got off work at 1 p.m. Friday and returned home to help his wife continue the search. The couple went into the woods but split up to cover a wider area.

"The police came by and told us to get out of the woods," Buben said. "My wife knew the boy, and she knew the kid used to hang around by the baseball field."

The couple searched the ballfield, with Mrs. Buben looking in an old barrel and Buben searching the fence area.

"I went over by the fence line and that is where I saw purple sticking out of the brush," Buben said. "Her father had told us she was wearing purple."

Buben said he and his wife and dog had actually searched the same area the night before along with Jessica's father, but could not see her.

"We were within probably about 20 feet or so of where I ended up finding her," he said.

Mrs. Buben often had seen Garry walking around the baseball field late at night, Buben said. Mrs. Buben lost a cat a few months ago and spent many a night out searching for it. She often ran into Garry, walking alone, while searching for her cat.

Stacy Wilson, 10, who was among the children playing hide-and-seek with Jessica and Garry Thursday afternoon, said she and her friends weren't allowed to hide in the ballfield where Jessica's body was found.

As the search continued Friday, teachers at Jessica's school, Cold Spring Elementary, hoped for the best but prepared for the worst. Generally, only those children in Jessica's homeroom or those who rode the bus knew she was missing, said Vikki Clemons, associate superintendent of instructional services for Campbell County schools.

"We have had counselors go into certain classes to discuss the children's fears," Miss Clemons said.

It was unclear Friday night whether authorities would seek to prosecute Garry as an adult or a juvenile. Campbell County Commonwealth Attorney Louis A. Ball, who viewed the crime scene, declined to speak about the case.

Under Kentucky's juvenile code, a person under 18 must have a hearing before a district



RICHARD FRIDEMORE/The Kentucky Post

Police remove the body of 8-year-old Jessica Buckler Gampfer, 17, has been charged with murder and kidnapping in her death.

court judge to determine if he can be tried as an adult. The judge must determine several factors before transferring the case to circuit court.

Among those factors, spelled out in state law, are:

- The seriousness of the offense and whether it was against a person or property.
- The child's maturity and prior record.
- The best interests of the

child and the community.

■ The likelihood of rehabilitation.

One court official who asked not to be named said Gampfer does not have a police record.

Greg Miller, 16, a sophomore who attends school with Garry, said Garry plays a clarinet in the school band and isn't known for causing any trouble.

"He's always seemed fine to me," said Greg, who has known

Garry for two years.

Meanwhile, Stiers, who like more than a dozen others had spent a cold winter night searching for Jessica, said he had hoped for a different ending.

"You always hope that we could have found her alive," he said.

Kentucky Post staff reporter Lesley Cissell Abukhater contributed to this article.

Suspect

From Page 1K

body about 3 p.m. Friday evening in a fenced-in field, just a few hundred yards from her parents' apartment. Police have charged Garry with murder and kidnapping.

Stacy Wilson, a blond 10-year-old, recalled the game through teary eyes as she watched police recover her friend's body.

"We were roller-skating and Garry showed up," Stacy said. "Then we all played hide-and-seek."

Jessica and Garry sat on the steps in front of her parents' apartment while the other children, including Jessica's 10-year-old sister, Jamie, scattered throughout the complex to hide between the entryways of the three-story, gray buildings.

Someone heard Garry tell Jessica to count to 10 again before they started their search. But when they never came looking for the others, the rest of the children got worried. They walked over to a nearby ballfield, thinking that Garry and Jessica had decided to play a different game.

When they weren't there, the children went to tell their parents, and the search for Garry and Jessica began.

Garry's grandparents, with whom he lived, found him walking alone along a road about 7 p.m., said Jessica's father, Larry James Buckler.

He was agitated, so they took him home and named him

down. But he disappeared again about 7:30 p.m.

Police found Garry early Friday and questioned him all day. Highland Heights police Capt. Harry Stiers, who is investigating Jessica's death, declined to say where or how Garry was found.

Children who live in the apartment complex came home from school Friday to the news of what had happened. They recalled how Garry became part of their group — even though he didn't live in the apartments.

Stacy's mother, Kathy Wilson, said Garry, a sophomore at Campbell County High School, was always a loner.

"He acted like an 11-year-old," she said. "He acted younger than his age. He had a hard life."

Two other 10th-graders at Campbell County High also were part of the group this summer, but when school started they often were busy with other things.

"(Garry) kept coming even after school started and would play with the little kids," said Greg Miller, a sophomore who lives at Hampton Farms.

On the street where Garry lived with his grandparents, few people knew of him. He had moved to the two-story, brick-and-siding home on Arbor Drive on Thanksgiving. Before that, he had lived on Towanda Drive in a house that will be torn down for the widening of U.S. 27.

Even when he lived there, he would come to Hampton Farms to play, the children said. Several children said Garry always carried several survival knives.



DAVID KOHLER/The Kentucky Post

Concerned friends, including a man on horseback, awaiting word on the search for Jessica Buckler, who eventually was found dead in a nearby ballfield.

Stacy said he once showed her a gun.

Ms. Wilson said she confronted Garry after her daughter told her about the weapon. He didn't deny it, she said, but he told her it wasn't a big gun.

Ms. Wilson said she started to have doubts about Garry. Why would a 17-year-old want to play with the younger kids, she wondered. Since then, she said she kept a close watch on the children and told them to stay close

to her house.

But staying close to home didn't help Jessica, who disappeared after playing right in front of her own apartment.

"They were just playing, but you just don't know," Ms. Wil-

son said, tears streaming down her face.

She watched her own daughter closely.

"It could have been her," she said. "It's going to take a long time for people to get over this."

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