

Confirmation of Hubbard's death sought

By IRA RIFKIN
Daily News Religion Writer

The San Luis Obispo County coroner attempted to independently confirm Tuesday that Church of Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard has indeed died, while church critics voiced skepticism over the circumstances surrounding the death.

Sheriff-Coroner George S. Whiting said his office was trying to verify Hubbard's death by checking fingerprints taken from what church officials said was Hubbard's body shortly before it was cremated Saturday.

Whiting said he would take several days to match the prints with a copy known to be Hubbard's obtained from a non-church source. One possible source would be the U.S. Navy, in which Hubbard served during World War II.

Church officials announced Monday night that Hubbard had died in his sleep Friday at his San Luis Obispo ranch.

But a leading Scientology critic said the church founder may have committed suicide to escape mounting legal problems.

Michael Flynn, a Boston attorney who represents several former Scientologists who have sued the church, said in a telephone interview he believes Hubbard may have committed suicide to avoid federal criminal indictments said to be pending.

"It's just an incredible coincidence that the week indictments are expected Hubbard dies and there's no body," Flynn said in a telephone interview. "This guy was sought after by everyone."

"There are serious issues of millions of dollars that are miss-

ing. From where I sit, there are a lot of questions that need to be answered."

Flynn said he will launch a full-scale investigation into Hubbard's reported death on behalf of his client, Ronald DeWolf, Hubbard's estranged eldest son, who is contesting the will that church attorneys say is Hubbard's.

Scientology attorneys have said Hubbard's will leaves the bulk of his estate, valued at tens of millions of dollars, to the church.

In 1983, DeWolf claimed Hubbard was either dead or incapacitated. A Riverside County judge ruled otherwise, saying Hubbard was alive and well enough at the time to handle his own affairs.

Hubbard — who has not been seen in public since 1980 — had been under investigation by the Internal Revenue Service, as well as other federal and Canadian agencies, seeking to determine if millions of dollars in church funds were diverted to his personal use, according to sources outside the church.

One source said the indictments still may be handed down later this week because they involve other Scientologists as well as Hubbard.

A church attorney, John Peterson, denied any investigations or indictments were in the works. He dismissed Flynn's allegations as ridiculous.

An IRS spokesman in Los Angeles declined comment.

The sheriff-coroner said his deputy reported the body contained no bruises or other indications of unusual circumstances. Blood tests have also turned up nothing unusual so far.