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Mystery of Bethany Bones still unresolved

BY STEVE MCCONNELL (STAFF WRITER) Nov 19, 2011 Updated Jun 9, 2020 [FOLLOW](#) 0 Followers



Bob Jennings / special to the Sunday times This grave in a cemetery along Dyberry Creek is the final resting place of a woman whose remains have been a mystery to Wayne County officials since 1977.

HONESDALE - She was laid to rest in late summer in an old cemetery along the banks of Dyberry Creek.

There was no family to say final farewells, no friends holding hands in prayer, not even a real name to carve into her headstone or stamp on the cover of the cold case file that contains everything that is known about 'Jane Doe 1977.'

That sad biographical tidbit etched on her new granite tombstone is the lone identity investigators have been able to attach to the fragmented remains that were kept for nearly three decades in a filing cabinet at a Honesdale photography shop owned by a former county coroner. A state trooper, Wayne County commissioner and coroner tossed dirt onto the unidentified woman's casket at a special interment ceremony on Sept. 3 meant to give her the dignity of a proper burial - 34 years after her bones were found several miles north of the cemetery.



Bob Jennings / special to the Sunday times The skull of Jane Doe 1977, one of Wayne County's most enduring mysteries.

"I just thought it was the respectful thing to do," Commissioner Wendell R. Kay said. "Nobody knew who she was."

Jimmy Hoffa's remains?

The skeletal remains hunters stumbled upon in thick brush off a road near Bethany, Wayne County on Oct. 24, 1977, are an incomplete puzzle that has confounded scores of investigators. What came to be known as 'the Bethany Bones' were even mistaken for the never-recovered remains of Jimmy Hoffa, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters president who was last seen in a parking lot outside a suburban Detroit restaurant in 1975.

"The teeth were so close to Hoffa's that the FBI jumped on it right away," then-Wayne County Coroner Robert F. Jennings said in a recent interview. "There was so many gold fillings. It had to be somebody that was very wealthy."

Mr. Jennings, who lost his bid for a fourth term in the 1979 coroner's election, said he did not come up with the Hoffa theory, contrary to the opinion of some in the tightknit community of Honesdale.

Because Wayne County lacked the facilities to conduct a proper inquiry into the suspicious death that was considered a possible homicide, Mr. Jennings said he had the remains sent to the New York City medical examiner's office. He believed it was a "gangland" murder, deserving of deeper inquiry.

Mr. Jennings said he had his suspicions about possible suspects and referred his findings to law enforcement. All these years later, he has concluded that if Jane Doe 1977 was murdered, the person responsible is more than likely dead.

"I still feel deep down that one person should have really been looked at," he said, but declined to elaborate.

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Dr. Dominick DiMaio, M.D., the New York City chief medical examiner, compared Jane Doe 1977's dental work with Mr. Hoffa's medical records and determined that the remains were not Mr. Hoffa's. It was later determined that the bones belonged to a woman, according to a 1980 examination of the remains by Clyde C. Snow, Ph.D., a forensic anthropology consultant with an Oklahoma City, Oklahoma laboratory.

Despite these findings, the idea of the Bethany Bones belonging to the vanished Teamsters boss was embraced across the region and is still part of local lore.

Wayne County Coroner Carol Lienert said, who was first elected to the post in 2003 and who was part of Jane Doe's interment ceremony, remembers being a teenager and hearing the Jimmy Hoffa story around town.

When hunters stumbled upon Jane Doe's remains, there were no clues for state police to suggest how she got there, Mrs. Lienert said. Animals, time, and weather took their toll on the remains, leaving just bones and specks of tissue.

"They can be cleaned up pretty quickly with scavengers," she said.

Aside from a few ribs and fingers, the skeleton was largely intact.

Mystery lingers

Investigators were able to estimate that she was approximately 5 feet, 7 inches tall, about 175 pounds, white and 65 years old. Markings on her bones suggested she may have been bedridden, according to Dr. Snow and Dr. DiMaio's reports obtained by The Sunday Times.

Investigators swept the area with a metal detector, but found no clues. Frank Golden, now a retired state trooper who was on the case when the bones were found, said there was no evidence at the scene to suggest what happened, how long the body had been there or to develop any suspects.

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"Nothing that you could tie to anything," he said of the lack of evidence. "Just bones, no flesh, as I recall."

Two plastic bags were found near the remains. The bags were apparently torn away from the body by animals, according to Mr. Jennings' 1977 notes.

State police earlier that year she saw a red pickup truck with New York tags parked near the discovery site. Mrs. Lienert said.

Investigators were also told by neighbors that a few months before the discovery they smelled a strong stench in the area, but thought it was a dead animal. These tips produced no arrests nor shed any light on who Jane Doe 1977 was or how her body ended up off a rural road in Northeastern Pennsylvania.

Wayne County District Attorney Michael Lehtsky took up the cold case in early 2008 in what ultimately became a futile attempt to try to piece together her life and death.

"There was no obvious sign of foul play, like a bullet hole in the skull or the like," he said. "There was no identification or other items that would point to identity, no local missing person reports (and) reports of a number of missing persons from other areas were looked into without success."

Autopsy records list her cause of death as undetermined, Mr. Lehtsky said.

As Mr. Lehtsky and state police moved to solve the mystery of her murder, they were presented with another: Where were the remains?

'Bethany Bones' missing

The district attorney wanted to try to match a DNA sample from the bones to a person listed in the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System, a U.S. Department of Justice clearinghouse of data on missing people and unidentified decedent records. There are roughly 40,000 unidentified human remains in the custody of medical examiners and coroners across the country, according to U.S. Justice Department figures. Some are buried or cremated before they are identified.

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But, Jane Doe 1977's bones had not been buried, and they were not in the county's possession nor stowed away in the coroner's office. Mr. Lehtsky had a hunch and called Mr. Jennings in February 2008.

"He advised that he would call me back and let me know what he was able to find," Mr. Lehtsky said.

Bones stored in filing cabinet

Later that month, Mr. Jennings called Mr. Lehtsky to say he had Jane Doe 1977's remains. He was willing to turn them over to state police, which he did.

Mr. Jennings said he kept Jane Doe's skull and some bones tucked away in a filing cabinet in a room above his Honesdale photography shop because, "nobody else wanted it."

State police picked up one unmarked box.

Mr. Jennings said the New York City chief medical examiner sent the remains back to him through the mail. The former coroner said he stowed the skeleton away because he feared it would get into the "wrong hands." Someone might try to pry out its gold fillings, he said, or it could simply be lost, ruining any chance of identification or finding a suspect.

"My purpose was the amount of gold... I felt a responsibility," he said. "And the principle if there was any leads on it... I felt I preserved it the best I could."

Mr. Lehtsky said while he debated the potential, legal ramifications of Mr. Jennings retaining Jane Doe 1977's remains all these years, he concluded that the greater goal was to have the bones returned.

"The objective was to try to get the body," Mr. Lehtsky said, rather than "fight 30-year-old wars over the Wayne County coroner's office."

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"I can't tell you that I recall him offering any explanation of why he was in possession of it."

Mr. Jennings said he believes he did no wrong by keeping the Bethany Bones.

"In fact, I think Lehtsky was the first one to call for it. Whatever I had was distributed to the proper authorities," Mr. Jennings said, adding that he has no other remains from his tenure as coroner.

Proper burial

With the remains now in the custody of state police, Jane Doe 1977's remains was shipped to the Center for Human Identification at the University of North Texas. An anthropological examination at the university in May 2008 confirmed Jane Doe 1977 was an "older" woman, Mr. Lehtsky said. The lab also performed DNA analysis, but produced no match to anyone in the national missing persons database, Mr. Lehtsky said.

The last-ditch effort to identify the Bethany Bones had failed.

Despite her burial, Mr. Lehtsky says the case remains open "but without a lead as to the possible identity of the remains there is not much we can do at present."

"Despite our renewed efforts we are once again at a standstill," he said. "Anyone who has any info that might help us identify this woman should contact us."

The Wayne County district attorney's office can be contacted at 253-4912.

Contact the writer: smcconnell@timeshamrock.com

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