

Oregon State Medical Examiner's Office Teams with Othram to Identify 1981 Clackamas County Jane Doe

A woman who went missing from a Clackamas County, OR home for the aging in 1976 has been identified as Illya "Ella" Wilkins, born July 30, 1887.

Solved

Summary



In August 1981, the remains of a partial human skull were discovered by private property owners counting trees outside of Sandy, Oregon in Clackamas County. An examination of the remains could only determine that the individual was most probably female and of advanced age. It was immediately noted that an elderly woman named Illya Wilkins had disappeared from "Baunach's Home for the Aged" off Langensand Road in Sandy, Oregon in August 1976. Ms. Wilkins was known to have memory problems at the time of her disappearance in 1976. Searches were performed to locate Ms. Wilkins, but she was never found.

These remains were long thought to be Illya Wilkins based on circumstantial evidence, but limited resources did not allow additional analysis at the time, and forensic DNA examination did not yet exist. In 2010, Oregon State Forensic Anthropologist Dr. Nici Vance re-analyzed the remains and submitted a sample from the skull to the University of North Texas Center for Human Identification and entered the unidentified profile into the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System - NamUs. The sample was processed and yielded a forensic DNA profile for comparison and upload into CODIS. Unfortunately, no genetic associations to missing persons or family reference standards in the CODIS database were established. In 2011, the case was entered into the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs) as UP9499.

In July 2022, the Oregon State Medical Examiner's Office ("SMEO") submitted skeletal remains to Othram's laboratory in The Woodlands, Texas. Othram scientists developed a suitable DNA extract and used Forensic-Grade Genome Sequencing® to build a comprehensive DNA profile for the victim. Othram's in-house genealogy team used the DNA profile in forensic genetic genealogy research which indicated the distinct possibility that remains were, in fact, Ms. Illya "Ella" Wilkins. Clackamas County Sheriff's Office missing person detectives then reached out to Illya Wilkins' grandchild, who still lives in Oregon, and collected a DNA sample for confirmation testing. This reference DNA testing revealed with 100% probability that the remains of the unidentified female were genetically associated with the grandchild of Illya "Ella" Wilkins, born July 30, 1887.

Ms. Ella Wilkins was positively identified by Oregon Chief Medical Examiner Dr. Sean Hurst on April 4, 2023. Her remains have subsequently been released to her remaining family members. This case is a great example of the power of DNA confirmation testing, and the legitimacy these methods have in resolving unidentified human remains cases. This case had been on the Clackamas County Sheriff's Office "pending resolution" list for over 4 decades. The Oregon State Medical Examiner's Office had targeted the case for testing and analysis since 2010. With the power of Forensic-Grade Genome Sequencing® and forensic genetic genealogy, the case was resolved less than one year after DNA testing began.

"It is our distinct honor to provide the family of Illya "Ella" Wilkins some resolution by returning her to her next of kin. Dignity is recovered when remains are no longer anonymous, and Ella Wilkins is now accounted for. The Oregon State Medical Examiner's Office will continue our commitment to solve these mystery cases and assist families, no matter how unsolvable they may seem." -Dr. Nici Vance, Oregon State Medical Examiners Office Forensic Anthropologist.