

HUNTER: OPP solve 1975 Nation River Lady cold-case mystery

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Author of the article:

Brad Hunter

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FINALLY

IDENTIFIED: A Tennessee woman has been identified as the Nation River Lady who was discovered murdered in Eastern Ontario in 1975. PHOTO BY HANDOUT /OPP

Article content

Her name in death was the chilling sobriquet Nation River Lady.

On May 3, 1975, a farmer discovered her body floating face down in the Nation River, between Ottawa and Montreal. She had been strangled to death.

Now she has finally been identified and her alleged killer is in custody, ending an odyssey that encompassed Ontario, Quebec, Florida, and finally, the Nation River Lady's Tennessee home.

OPP detectives have identified the victim from nearly 50 years ago as **Jewell Parchman Langford**, who was 48 when she was murdered.



The victim's feet and hands were bound with neckties. OPP

Cops allege she was killed by Rodney Nichols, a man who was an acquaintance in Montreal back in the day. He is now 81 and living in Hollywood, Fla., the subject of an extradition request.

Despite Herculean efforts, the investigation seemed to go nowhere fast. The woman in the Nation River was white, likely between 20 and 45 years old, around 5-foot-4, weighing a slight 100 pounds. Her brown hair had recently been dyed strawberry blond.

She was a smoker who drank coffee and her fingernails and toenails were well-manicured.



The coat she was wearing at the time of the murder. OPP

According to Radio-Canada, Langford grew up in a large family on a farm in Madison County, Tenn. She and her husband opened a spa in Jackson in 1972.

How she ended up in Montreal isn't clear but cops there took a missing persons report in April 1975 when she disappeared. No one twigged to the Quebec missing person and the Ontario homicide.

The woman's decomposed body was wrapped in scraps of towels, rags and other cloth. Her hands and feet had been bound with neckties.



This tea towel was found on the body. OPP

And for the next 48 years, her identity and death were among Canada's greatest criminal mysteries.

As for the accused killer, Nichols was reportedly a well-known figure in rugby circles in Montreal's English west end.

Radio-Canada reported — citing court documents — that Nichols was charged with Langford's murder on Sept. 8, 2022. There was no public announcement and detectives didn't take a bow because of a publication ban, since lifted.

So far, the elderly suspect has not appeared in court and has not entered a plea. The OPP and their U.S. counterparts remain tight-lipped.

As the march of technology began giving cops more tools on clearing cold cases, detectives reopened the investigation in the mid-2000s. A three-dimensional clay bust was released in 2017 as investigators scoured the public for new leads.

Working with the DNA Doe Project for help on the case, a DNA profile was developed and uploaded to the genetic genealogy databases at GEDmatch Pro and FamilyTreeDNA in 2020. Within weeks, Langford was ID'd as the likely Nation River Lady.

“The heartbreaking part is that Jewell’s mother clearly searched for her for years and unfortunately died not knowing what happened to her daughter,” the Doe Project said in a release.

As DNA testing and genetic genealogy helped solve some of the most vexing murder probes, such as the Golden State Killer and the Toronto murder of Christine Jessop, investigators saw their chance.

Michael Arntfield, University of Western Ontario professor and noted cold case expert, told the Toronto Sun the development underscores what’s now possible in clearing cold cases.

“This is yet another case that reminds us that, whether a cold case crime or a set of unidentified human remains, or in this context both of those things, every case is now theoretically solvable using forensic investigative genetic genealogy, or FIGG for short,” Arntfield said.

“This is really excellent police work but like some other cold case sexual assaults in Ontario solved using FIGG behind the scenes, the lack of corresponding publicity means that the public is still somewhat in the dark about how this system works, something I’m trying to rectify.”

Arntfield added that he’d like to see a commitment from all incoming chiefs of police in Canada to do what was done by the Toronto Police Service.

“Specifically, obtaining available grant money in order to have private labs assist with using FIGG to resolve cold case homicides. In Toronto, they’ve already solved three 40-plus-year-old cases and counting using FIGG. I’m not sure why more agencies wouldn’t want to emulate their success.”

And once they had the real name of the Nation River Lady, the dominoes began falling.

But behind the curtain, there was a real victim, a real person who loved and was loved. Unbeknownst to the media and the public, her lonely remains that had been stored in Canada for so long were finally sent home.

Jackson, Tennessee lies off I-40, about halfway between Nashville and Memphis. Langford had never been forgotten there.

She wasn’t known as the Nation River Lady in Jackson. But she was desperately missed and a plaque was installed in a local cemetery noting that she was missing.

Today it reads: "Finally home and at peace."

bhunter@postmedia.com

@HunterTOSun