

Human remains found in 1997 in Rockdale ID'd as Aurora woman

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Human remains found in 1997 in [Rockdale](#) in debris that came from a [Joliet](#) building has been identified as an Aurora woman.

Marie R. O'Brien, of [Aurora](#), was determined to be the woman whose remains were found in the debris that came from a building in Joliet known as the Rust Craft building, according to a statement on Friday from [Will County Coroner Laurie Summers' Office](#).

The cause of O'Brien's death has not been determined. Cold case investigators with the coroner's office and [Will County Sheriff's Office](#) are conducting additional investigations.

On May 13, 1997, an archeologist from the University of Illinois who was working in a construction landfill in [Rockdale](#) had found a human bone, according to the coroner's office.

More human skeletal remains, most of which had been broken, were at various layers of the landfill but all within the construction debris, according to the coroner's office. The debris was mainly brick, stone and wood.

That debris came from the Rust Craft building in [Joliet](#), which housed various companies since it opened in 1907, according to the coroner's office.

From 1986 to 1992, the building was abandoned.

In 1992, a fire had destroyed a bulk of the building and excess debris was removed while the rest was used to fill the basement, the coroner's office said.

In 1995, the basement area was excavated and removed to Rockdale. It was on that debris that the bones were found, the coroner's office said.

Former Will County Coroner Patrick O'Neil formed a cold case unit in 2009 to identify this case and several others.

Over the years, forensic anthropology studies were completed, DNA was developed and entered into the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System and Combined DNA Index System, according to the coroner's office. Facial cranial reconstruction was also completed by a specialized FBI unit.

As a result, numerous leads were developed but ultimately eliminated, the coroner's office said.

On June 8, 2021, the coroner's office worked with the company Othram on the case. Othram's lab developed a DNA profile sufficient to submit to a family tree, leading to their genealogists to narrow down family leads to a few people, according to the coroner's office.

"Cold case investigators interviewed several people in Illinois, Texas, and California. Othram narrowed the search through additional DNA profiling and genealogy studies to one person in California. Their investigation indicated this person could be a brother of the unidentified woman," the coroner's office said.

Cold case investigators from the coroner's office interviewed that man and determined he had a sister whom he last had contact with in 1984 and who was never seen again, the coroner's office said.

Further testing indicated this man and the unidentified woman are 100% related as a half brother and half sister, the coroner's office said.

Summers has continued to support the work of the cold case case unit, encouraging genomic research and agreeing to fund that aspect of these investigations.

Since 2020, when Summers was elected, the cold case unit — comprised of retired law enforcement detectives Gene Sullivan and Joseph Piper — have solved five cold cases dating back to 1974, according to the coroner's office.