

The Alberta RCMP and OCME Partner with Othram to Identify Septic Tank Sam

The unknown homicide victim, now known to be Gordon Edwin Sanderson of Edmonton, was unidentified for over 40 years

Published June 30, 2021



Summary

In April of 1977, a couple discovered the remains of an unknown man while retrieving a septic tank pump at their farm near Lindbrook, Alberta. Investigators determined that the man, nicknamed Septic Tank Sam due to the circumstances of discovery, had been brutally tortured before his murder. A lengthy investigation was launched to pursue all leads that might help shed light on the man's identity, a crucial step to efforts to seek answers and justice.

Persistent collaborative efforts by the Alberta RCMP Missing Person Unit, the Historical Homicide Unit, and the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) to identify the victim and the circumstances of his death have spanned over 40 years. During this time, various RCMP investigators interviewed potential witnesses and tracked down leads, tenaciously employing novel technologies and methods as they emerged. OCME medical examiners worked with forensic anthropologists to develop biological profiles and with forensic dentists to compare dental records to reported missing persons. Forensic facial reconstructions were utilized as well to try and generate leads from those that might recognize the victim.

In October 2017, the Alberta RCMP Missing Person Unit announced the launch of a National DNA program focusing on the identification of unidentified remains. The program allows investigators to obtain DNA from people who have a missing family

member for potential match against unidentified human remains on the DNA index. It was hoped that this new program would provide some answers in this case. In 2019, the RCMP sent a partial DNA profile from the victim's remains that had been developed in 2012 to be compared to this new DNA database, without success.

With all leads exhausted, in 2020 the Alberta RCMP Missing Person Unit and the OCME teamed up with Othram to attempt to generate investigative leads with advanced DNA testing. Othram applied Forensic-Grade Genome Sequencing® to develop a comprehensive genealogical profile for the victim. Although the DNA was degraded and previously yielded a partial profile, the Othram team was able to develop a complete profile that was suitable for genealogical research. The Othram genealogy team developed investigative leads that RCMP investigators used to identify the potential immediate family members of the victim.

The investigation continued with the Alberta RCMP Missing Person Unit obtaining familial DNA samples that were then sent for confirmatory DNA testing. This secondary testing confirmed the familial relationships, and the investigators are now able to identify the homicide victim as Gordon Edwin Sanderson of Edmonton. Sanderson would have been approximately 25 years old at the time of his death.

The Alberta RCMP Missing Person Unit is now seeking anyone who knew Gordon Sanderson and might have information about his final days before his murder. If you are able to provide information on this case, please contact the Tofield RCMP at 780-662-3353.

Timeline

April 1977

Septic Tank Sam is found

2019

Sam's profile fails to match National database

June 2021

Gordon Sanderson is identified

October 2017

National DNA Program launched

2020

RCMP and OCME partner with