

Santa Cruz County Sheriff-Coroner Teams with Othram to Identify 1998 Homicide Victim

After 25 years, an unidentified California murder victim has been identified as 22-year-old Eric Cupo.

Solved

Summary



In December 1998, the body of an adult man was found on a hillside wrapped in a tarp in the mountainous terrain of Santa Cruz County, California's Bear Creek Road. The remains were found to be in an advanced state of decomposition. An autopsy was performed and revealed the most striking aspect of injury to be blunt force trauma. A subsequent investigation conducted by the Santa Cruz County Sheriff-Coroner's Office led to the arrest and conviction of three individuals for the murder of the unidentified man. However, the man remained unidentified. For over twenty years, the Santa Cruz County Sheriff-Coroner's Office followed leads regarding the identity of the unknown man. In 2009, the case was entered into the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs) as #UP3067.

In 2021, the Santa Cruz Sheriff-Coroner's Office, including the Sheriff's Office Forensics Services team, made the decision to use forensic genetic genealogy to provide an identity of the decedent and notify his next of kin. Investigators enlisted the help of Othram to perform advanced forensic DNA testing of the remains. Skeletal remains from the homicide victim were sent 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 profile in forensic genetic genealogy research to produce new investigative leads. These leads were returned to investigators with the Santa Cruz Sheriff-Coroner's Office.

With the partnership of the California Department of Justice Jan Bashinski DNA Lab, Othram, the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs), and the Federal Bureau of Investigation Latent Print Unit, the decedent is now identified as Eric P. Cupo, who was 22-years of age at the time of his murder.

Detectives learned that Eric Cupo was born in California. As a young child, Eric was adopted into a family in Philadelphia and later moved to Florida with his adoptive father. Eric briefly returned to Philadelphia at the age of eighteen to live with his adoptive mother. From there, Eric moved around the country and his family lost regular contact with him. Eric is believed to have lived in both Arizona and Ohio. The timeline of his return to California is not clear.

Eric Cupo's adoptive family and biological relatives have been notified of his identification and are grateful to the Sheriff's Office for their dedicated and tireless investigation to identify Eric Cupo and bring resolution as to his whereabouts. The family respectfully asks to not be contacted as they mourn their loss.

Drifter's slaying detailed

Grand jury testimony alleges pair killed man to obtain gun

By **MAY WONG**
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Need a gun? Need some heroin?

Start your search in downtown Santa Cruz.

Grand jury testimony released this week revealed not only details of the slaying of an unidentified drifter, but also a sad portrait of a cluster of troubled youths who hang out around Pacific Avenue.

Most know each other only by their street names, and they rely on each other for companionship, drugs and places to stay.

In November, one of them wanted a gun, too.

Coincidentally, a young drifter happened to be trying to get rid of his .380-caliber handgun. The young man who had the gun wanted to sell it for \$25 or a packet of heroin. It ultimately cost him his life.

His body was dumped down a steep embankment off of Bear Creek Road in the Santa Cruz Mountains about eight miles north of Boulder Creek.

Motorists who stopped at a turnout Dec. 27 discovered the decomposed



Dotson



Labore

Please see **TESTIMONY** — **BACK PAGE**

