

CRIME

For 40 years, her identity was unknown. Now, a Delaware homicide victim has been identified

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In June 1977, a teenage boy was riding his bicycle on a rural road south of Odessa when he passed a drainage ditch.

It was dusk, and he was headed home. As he rode by the ditch, located near a wooded area, the teen looked down. There, he spotted something shocking: the decomposing body of a naked woman.

The woman, who had no identification, had likely been there for weeks, a medical examiner said at the time. She was between 40 and 55 years old and was 5 feet, 3 inches tall with dark blonde hair.

A medical examiner ruled her death a homicide, but police had no leads as to who she was or how her body got to the ditch. Detectives couldn't link her to any missing person reports, and dental records didn't prove helpful. After an extensive investigation, the case went cold.



More than 40 years later, the woman has been identified as Marie Petry Heiser. She was 50 when she was killed.

New Castle County police on Tuesday announced the break in the case, saying Heiser, who was from Philadelphia, was identified through DNA and genealogical records. The agency did not say how she was killed.

Police are still investigating Heiser's death and are "specifically interested" in speaking with anyone who knew the woman or her family. They lived on Crafton Street in Philadelphia for a period of time.

William Heiser Sr., the woman's husband, was a Philadelphia police officer in the 1950s and '60s. He moved to South Daytona Beach Florida in the late 1970s and died in 2006.

Heiser is survived by two children, a son and a daughter.

Cold case gets renewed attention

For three decades, police made no progress in the case.

In 2008, detectives submitted information about Heiser's discovery to the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System, which included a DNA profile of the woman's remains.

That was entered into the Combined DNA Index System, or CODIS, a national DNA database run by the FBI. Though police hoped something would turn up, the database returned no matches, and as it had 30 years before, the case stalled.

About a decade later, in February 2017, New Castle County police were told of a Virginia company, Parabon Nanolabs, which specializes in DNA phenotyping. Phenotyping is a process of predicting physical traits and ancestry from DNA.

Detectives sent the woman's information to a forensic artist at Parabon Nanolabs, who created a sketch. The lab also produced a digital image of Heiser and sent genetic information to ancestry databases to create a potential family tree.



The breakthrough came when Montgomery County, Maryland, police officer Steven Smugeresky got involved in the case in 2019.

New Castle County cold case detectives had consulted with Smugeresky after he held a law enforcement cold case seminar, and he agreed to help research Heiser's DNA ancestry.

"He worked tirelessly on potential family trees in an attempt to develop information on the identity of the remains," New Castle County police said Tuesday. "New Castle County police followed up on these leads and obtained DNA samples from possible relatives."

Once police collected the samples, the Delaware Division of Forensic Science created DNA profiles and entered them into CODIS, where Heiser's information had been submitted years before. Forensic science personnel got back a "positive (DNA) comparison," police said.

Chief Medical Examiner Dr. Gary Collins confirmed Heiser's identity through the analysis and also confirmed the ruling made by a Delaware medical examiner 40 years earlier: Heiser's death was a homicide.

She had never been reported missing.

When Heiser was killed, she was a part-time employee at the Ashbourne Country Club in Cheltenham, Pennsylvania.

After her disappearance, Heiser Sr., who was a truck driver at the time, told their children that "their mother had packed her bags and left" their Crafton Street home. He said she'd given no information about where she was going.

The couple's daughter now lives in California, while their son, William Heiser Jr., is a retired deputy from the Volusia County Sheriff's Office in Florida.

Anyone with information about the case is asked to contact New Castle County Police Detective Jeffrey Sendek at 302-395-8110. He can also be reached via email at Jeffery.Sendek@newcastlede.gov.

Reporter Jeff Neiburg contributed to this report.

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