

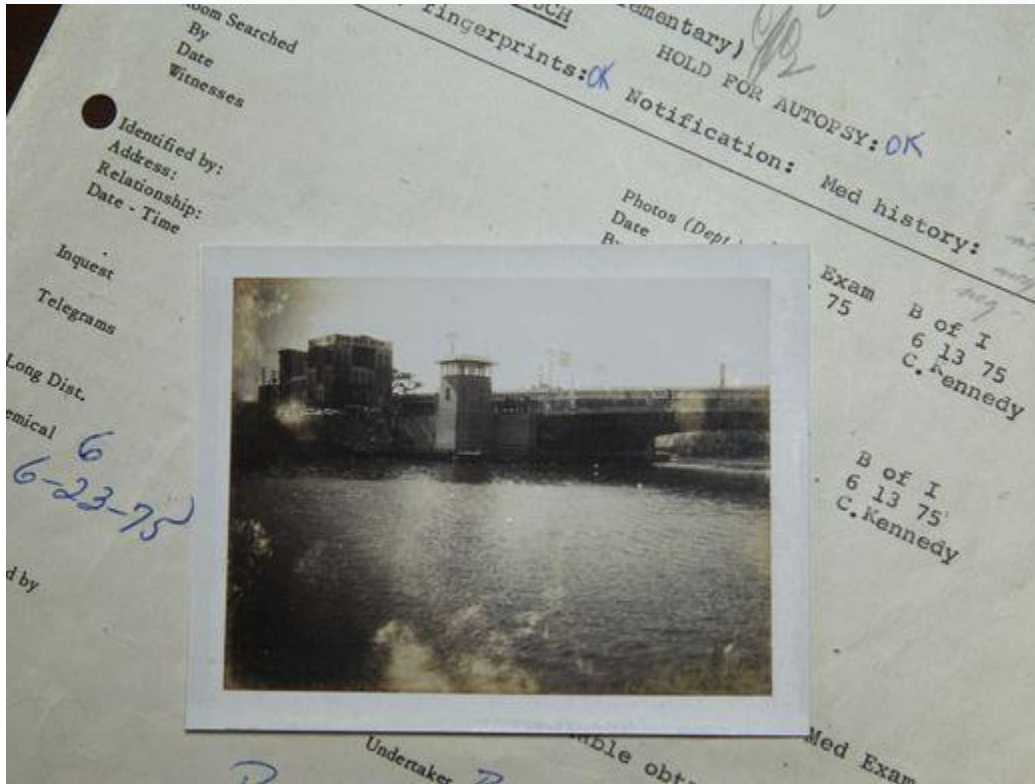
# After 42 years, train ticket receipt leads to dead man's identity, family

Jesse Garza, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel | Published 10:42 a.m. CT Aug. 10, 2017 | Updated 3:28 p.m. CT Aug. 10, 2017

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Photos: Identity of dead man determined after 42 years

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## Photos: Identity of dead man determined after 42 years



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(Photo: Mark Hoffman / Milwaukee Journal Sentinel)  
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For 42 years, the only clue to the identity of David Conner was the water-soaked receipt for a train ticket found on his body when it was recovered from the Milwaukee River.

It was also the only link to his family, which for decades could only wonder the fate of the young man from Florida who eventually became “ME Case Number: 1975-1209” at the Milwaukee County medical examiner’s office.

Now the fragile, worn receipt serves as a memorial of sorts for the family, finally located in July after a dogged, yearslong search by medical examiner’s investigators.

But the success of that search is tempered by a new mystery: the body of David Conner — committed for county burial in 1975 — is nowhere to be found.

“My emotions just went haywire,” Conner’s niece, Tina Franks, said.

“I’m just amazed and appreciate so much all the time and effort that was put into this. It does a heart good,” Franks said.

“But at the same time, it almost starts everything all over again because, realistically, he’s still missing.”

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Undated family photo of David Conner. *(Photo: family photo)*

The body of David Conner was seen floating facedown near the pilings beneath the northwest corner of the Juneau Ave. bridge on June 13, 1975, a Friday afternoon.

Milwaukee firefighters used pike poles — usually used to pull away drywall and window frames from burning buildings — to pull the body to the east shore, where it was lifted from the river in a wire basket.

“The body appears to be that of a Negro male, adult,” medical examiner’s investigator J.R. Endrizzi wrote in a report.

“The body is clad in outdoor clothing and covered with mud.”

The body was conveyed to the medical examiner’s office, where clothing was removed and fingerprints taken.

Among the possessions found: A silver-colored wristwatch; a silver-colored pocketknife; a white comb; a small key chain; 45 cents.

A small fish was found dead in the left leg of the man’s trousers and a folded paper was found in the left, rear pocket.

The paper came apart as it was slowly unfolded and placed on a towel to dry.

It turned out to be a receipt for an Amtrak train ticket from Jacksonville, Fla., to Chicago, with a departure date of June 6, 1975.

The receipt — the only indication of the man's identity — bore a handwritten initial and a last name: "D. Conner."

The man's death was ruled a "probable drowning, manner undetermined."

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Endrizzi contacted hospitals and the Milwaukee county welfare department, but no records for anyone matching the man's description and the name D. Conner were found. The man's fingerprints were not on file with police in Milwaukee and Jacksonville and were not located by the FBI.

On Aug. 2, 1975, the unidentified man was supposedly buried at Forest Hill Cemetery in Oak Creek, which is now Forest Hill Memorial Park.

"The deceased's identity remains unknown," investigator Warren Hill wrote at the time.

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David Conner was born July 29, 1946, in Swainsboro, Ga., one of 13 children in the family of Willie and Josephine Conner.

Willie Conner was a sharecropper, growing cotton and "pretty much anything you could eat" on a small farm in Emanuel County, said David's brother, Jethro Conner Sr.

In 1956, Willie Conner moved the family to Oslo, Fla., where he worked as a groundskeeper in orange groves, said Jethro Conner, who last saw David in 1974.

"He was kind of a wanderer," Jethro said of his brother. "He didn't like staying in one place too long."

David Conner performed odd jobs and restaurant work and lived with relatives in the south and east, his brother remembered.

He was also well-spoken and intelligent, said his niece, Tina Franks.

"I remember so clearly having trouble with my homework," Franks said. "And he sat at that kitchen table and explained it to me as if he had invented math himself."

David Conner was once admitted to a hospital in Florida for mental health issues, but the symptoms of his illness were subtle and difficult to discern, his brother recalled.

And though his restlessness caused him to disappear from time to time, he would eventually show up, Jethro Conner said.

But when his last absence went from weeks to months, David Conner's family reported him missing.

“When he started missing funerals, I knew something had to be wrong,” Jethro Conner said.

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**Buy Photo**

Milwaukee County medical examiner's office investigators Jenni Penn (left) and Michael Simley helped track down the identity of David Conner, whose body was found in the Milwaukee River in 1975. (Photo: Mark Hoffman / Milwaukee Journal Sentinel)

For decades after David Conner was supposed to be buried, his case was filed away in a dust-covered box in the basement of the medical examiner's office.

Then in December 2011, the office launched a link on its website for unidentified deceased.

The link grew out of its involvement with the [National Missing and Unidentified Persons System](#) (NamUs), a database created by the [National Institute of Justice](#) in 2005.

“We decided to dust off some of these old cases to see if we could give them some life,” said medical examiner’s investigator Michael Simley, who had posted ME case number

1975-1209 onto the medical examiner's website after investigator Jenni Penn entered it into the NamUs database in August 2010.

In January 2012, Penn sent a letter to the Florida Star newspaper in Jacksonville requesting that information on the man be published, but received no response.

Then in August 2012, Simley located possible relatives for another unidentified man who, coincidentally, was found in the Milwaukee River a month after Conner's body was found, and near the same location.

Simley obtained a disinterment permit for the man's body — which was supposedly buried near Conner's — in order to obtain a DNA sample for comparison against the possible relatives.

However, no remains were found in the cemetery plot nor in the plot in which Conner was supposed to have been buried.

"This case had so many ups and downs," Simley said.

"Knowing where the body is should be the easy part, but it turned out to be another roadblock."

Ground-penetrating radar did not locate the bodies, which had been picked up at the same time from the Brett Funeral Home by cemetery staff.

But their supposed burials were not witnessed by a funeral director, and though Forest Hill Cemetery installed a crematory sometime during 1975, the first recorded cremation there was not until October 1975.

"After a thorough investigation ... it could not be determined what specifically happened to the bodies or where they are currently located," Simley wrote in a report.

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The internet and social media sparked a renewed sense of hope in Tina Franks that she might somehow find out what happened to her uncle.

"I went to Ancestors.com and different kinds of search engines. A lot of times I'd come across a David Conner but it never went any further than that," Franks said.

Jethro Conner feared what might have happened to his older brother, but felt sad at the thought that David Conner just abandoned his family.

"But after his brothers and sisters started dying, I knew he would have shown up if he could have," Jethro Conner said.

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On Oct. 17, 2013, Penn sent photos of the train ticket receipt to Amtrak police in the hope that they might be able to glean further information on the purchaser, but the effort proved fruitless.

Then in May of this year, Simley was contacted by the FBI about a new system that matches fingerprints of unidentified deceased from the NamUs system to prints on file with the FBI.

The prints from ME case number 1975-1209 matched those of a David Conner, born July 29, 1946, who was arrested by police in Savannah, Ga., for an unknown offense on June 4, 1975.

"Jenni and I were ecstatic," Simley said.

Simley and Penn then turned their efforts toward locating David Conner's family.

Databases were scoured, hospitals faxed, property, real estate and baptismal records checked and police re-contacted.

Most leads led to dead ends, but Conner's arrest report included addresses in Orlando and Mulberry, Fla.

Letters were then sent to the Polk County Historical and Genealogical Library and the Mulberry Historical Society in Florida.

The letters led to a story published in the [Mulberry-Polk County Press](#) newspaper on the David Conner case, which was read by one of his relatives.

Finally, on June 21, another niece, Juanita Conner Warner, who David Conner had been staying with before he disappeared, called investigator Penn.

"She said her family had many questions," Penn said.

Penn learned that David Conner had no relatives in Milwaukee or Chicago and that he could swim. She also learned that even though he did have some form of mental illness, David Conner was not suicidal or depressed, had no problems with alcohol and his family does not believe he would have committed suicide.



Penn then sent Jethro Conner a copy of the case file and a photo taken of David Conner after his death.

"He stared at that picture for a long time. He was silent," said Jethro Conner's wife, Gail Conner.

"It was a very hurtful thing, but at least now we know what happened to him."

But there is no body or remains, "not even ashes," to bring home, Jethro Conner lamented.

"We can't even give him a proper burial," he said.

"Some of my family still don't believe he's really dead."

The only physical remnant of the life of David Conner — the receipt for the train ticket that ultimately led him to the pilings beneath the northwest corner of the Juneau Ave. bridge — was sent to his brother in July.

The receipt — which will serve as the centerpiece at a memorial service being planned by his family — could be seen as the final proclamation of a restless wanderer: "I am David Conner."

"It's gratifying to give names back to the unidentified deceased," Simley said. "It's our way of giving them a voice."