

Benton County 'Jane Doe' identified after almost 50 years

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- A woman found dead in a Benton County field in 1976 has been identified as 69-year-old Jane Hart.
- A father and son found Hart's body, shot and wrapped in plastic in a box.
- The DNA Doe Project used investigative genetic genealogy to identify Hart nearly 50 years later.
- A breakthrough in 2024 traced Hart's lineage, and surviving family members helped confirm her identity.

Almost 50 years after her body was found, a former Benton County "Jane Doe" has been identified as **Jane Hart**, a 69-year-old woman last seen in Chicago, according to the DNA Doe Project.

On Oct. 8, 1976, 16-year-old Curtis Skoog and his father, Norman, discovered a heavy box in one of their fields about 15 yards from County Road 200 South, six miles north of Otterbein.

After nearly running into it with his farm's combine, Norman found the unusually heavy box and called for help.

“When they got back, they passed me on the lane, and I was like, ‘Man, something’s off,’” Skoog said in a [2019 Journal & Courier article](#). “That smell – it was something else.”

Curtis jumped onto the bed of his family's truck, cut open the box and revealed piles of plastic wrap that was knotted with rope, he said in an interview this week. Hart's body was in the wrapping.

Hart was shot in the back of the head and stuffed into a box that measured about 3 feet by 2 feet by 1 foot. She was wearing a green pantsuit with a two-tone green jacket. The only item with her was a broken bottle of perfume.

"It's tattooed. It's like a sniper looking to a sniper gun for months on end with the crosshairs tattooed in your retina, and that's the way it is in my mind," said 66-year-old Curtis, who said the coroner told him and his wife that the woman's identity was discovered about three days ago.

"What they did to that little lady," Skoog said in 2019, "they were bad people, to get her in that box like that."

Police reports in the J&C at the time pegged her age between 60 and 65. Police told the J&C that she had sandy hair with some gray mixed in. Police said she was 5 foot 2 and 170 pounds to 180 pounds. She had little to no makeup on. She had an upturned nose with a bump beneath the bridge, large ears and calloused hands. An autopsy showed she'd had a radical mastectomy on her right side.

Police at the time believed the woman had been killed seen to 10 days before she was found, according to a J&C account. Police cordoned off miles of county roads for days, treating the wet fields as a crime scene.

In 2019, Hart's body was exhumed from Fowler Cemetery under an order from Benton County Coroner Matthew Rosenbarger.

"She had not been identified and we were wanting to try to put a name to her and try to get some closure for her family," Rosenbarger said Wednesday, July 15.

Rosenbarger said in 2019 that the unsolved case had nagged at him through the years, too. He'd been a grade-schooler in Fowler in 1976, when the woman was found, so he didn't remember much from then. As a deputy with the Benton County sheriff's office for 13 years and later as a detective with the Purdue University Police Department, he'd read up on the Jane Doe case, as investigators asked to pull files to chase hunches or trail leads that wound up going nowhere.

The police department in Ohio had found a copy of the Oct. 9, 1976, Journal & Courier and a story with a headline that read, "Body stuffed in box, left in Benton cornfield." Rosenbarger said the police in Ohio were tracking a cold case that dated to a woman's death a year earlier. That didn't match up with Benton County's Jane Doe.

But Rosenbarger said that call piqued his curiosity about putting new science to an old case.

"It may have been the ghosts of investigators past, saying, 'Help us figure this out,'" Rosenbarger said in 2019, noting that several of the key players in the initial investigation, including then-Sheriff Don Steely, had died since then or had faded from the scene.

“I know it really bothered all of them that they couldn’t resolve that,” Rosenbarger said. “The previous investigation deserved the extra effort now that science has caught up. They worked so hard, and I wanted to carry that torch for them, I guess.”

The nonprofit organization DNA Doe Project used investigative genetic genealogy to distinguish Hart's Croatian descent, which made the identification more difficult because "people of European heritage are unrepresented in the DNA database," according to a news release.

In 2024, a breakthrough led them to a woman who immigrated to the United States in 1905 and gave birth to a daughter who was later sent to an orphanage. This daughter, Jane Hart, then from Ohio who later lived in Chicago as an adult, vanished from public records in the 1970s.

With the help of Hart's surviving family members, the organization was able to confirm the identity.

Jane Doe’s fingerprints turned up no leads in criminal databases, Steely told the J&C in 1977.

“As for theories?” Rosenbarger said in 2019. “There’s the wide variety that everyone has. Possibly a mob hit? Was it one of those wrong-place-at-the-wrong-time things? Who knows, for sure? We just know we had no missing cases around here at the time. And someone went way out in the middle of Benton County to leave her.”

Although the case was never solved, Curtis is convinced the box with her body was dropped into the field by a helicopter, although this theory never made it into the official police report.

Sheriff Steely told the J&C in 1977 that he subscribed to a similar theory. State police detectives told the J&C they were less sure about a helicopter's role.

But "it's pretty obvious there was some type of air rotation in that field, right around that area, and there is no way anyone could throw that box from that road," Curtis said this week.

He is unconvinced that Benton County Sheriff John Cox will reopen the investigation, because those who killed the woman are "probably all gone by now." Cox did not respond to attempts to contact him Wednesday.

Curtis said he hopes "everybody has peace of mind now and she can be put to rest ... I'm sure that karma has maybe dealt with those people that did that to her."