

Rankin County Jane Doe Identified By Forensics After 45 Years Of Anonymity

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TONYA LEA WILLS MULLINS

A Rankin County Coroner's persistence led to the recent identification of an almost-forgotten Jane Doe who was found just south of the old Byram Swinging Bridge in September of 1978, but the investigation is far from over.

In September 1978, the body of a white female homicide victim between the age of 20 and 25 was discovered wrapped in a blanket, in an illegal landfill. The victim had likely been deceased for several days before she was found. There were no clues at the scene that could be used to identify her.

For more than four decades, years after the discovery of the remains, investigators pursued several leads across the United States and Canada in hopes of uncovering her identity. However, despite the investigative efforts, all leads were exhausted, and the

case went cold. In April 2021, the case was entered into the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs) as UP79780. The case did not match to known missing persons.

Rankin County Coroner David Ruth and his deputy, Heather Smith, took a renewed interest in the 1978 Jane Doe case after Ohio officials contacted them about a similar unsolved case. As a result, Ruth filed a petition with the courts to exhume the victim's body. After considering the evidence, Judge Dewey Arthur approved the exhumation.

In April 2022, Rankin County officials began the exhumation. Ruth collected, prepared, and shipped the forensic evidence in hopes of obtaining a DNA extraction that would ultimately lead to the female homicide victim's identification. [Carla Davis](#), a Mississippi native and philanthropist committed to helping the state resolve its backlog of unsolved cases, funded the exhumation, and committed to funding the casework necessary to identify the victim. Unfortunately, the first two attempts at DNA testing failed at a previous lab. Carla and the Rankin County investigators then decided to make a third attempt at [Othram](#), which at that point had helped produce identifications for more than a dozen other challenging forensics cases in Mississippi.

In July 2022, forensic evidence was sent to Othram for advanced DNA testing. Othram was able to produce a suitable DNA extract from the skeletal remains that previously failed elsewhere. Next, Othram scientists used Forensic-Grade Genome Sequencing® to produce a comprehensive genealogical profile for the 1978 Jane Doe. Carla Davis, now Othram's Chief Genetic Genealogist, used the genealogical profile to find potential relatives of the victim. A potential close relative to the unknown victim was found and in conjunction with additional DNA testing, investigators confirmed the investigative leads delivered by Othram.

After the additional testing and follow up investigation, the Rankin County Coroner's Office positively identified the female homicide victim as Tonya Lea Wills Mullins. Tonya was born on May 12, 1956, in Potter, Texas, and was 22 years old when she disappeared. She was married and had two children.

The investigation into her death continues as investigators try to determine what happened to Tonya in her final days.