

Daughter's DNA solves 40-year mystery: What happened to

Southwestern Ontario man's body

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MONTE SONNENBERG, SIMCOE REFORMER

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Wayne Shank

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SIMCOE — DNA testing has solved a decades-long mystery for the family of a Southwestern Ontario man who disappeared while fishing up north more than 40 years ago.

The testing compared the DNA of Wayne Shank's now-grown daughter to remains found on the shore of a northern lake in 2008. That helped confirmed the remains were those of Shank, who was a 30-year-old St. Williams resident when he and several family members went fishing near North Bay on Oct. 1, 1977.

The boat capsized on Martin Lake in a storm. Shank and his father-in-law, James Anderson, hung onto the overturned boat for several hours before Shank slipped beneath the waves. A search for his body was unsuccessful and a death notice was published within weeks.

"The boat was sinking and they had nothing to hang on to," Shank's widow Debbie Scott, who now lives in the Norfolk County community of Booth's Harbour, said Wednesday. "It was night time. People could hear them screaming but they couldn't find them.

"He said to my dad 'Tell Debbie and the kids that I love them.' He went under and didn't come back up."

STORY CONTINUES BELOW



Google Maps: Red icon denotes the location of St. Williams, in Norfolk County

Members of the fishing party were in separate boats, with Anderson and Shank fishing together. Several uncles and cousins had already come ashore when they began to worry about Anderson and Shank. Anderson was eventually rescued.

The pair was in an aluminum craft about 16-feet long. Authorities speculated that the boat had sprung a leak after hitting a log or some other object in the water. Martin Lake, which is near North Bay, is more than 100-feet deep in places.

For decades, the question persisted: What became of Shank's body?

Closure came a few months ago when Shank's daughter Tracy Resler, who lives in Lethbridge, Alberta, was on a website about missing people in Ontario. It had recently been updated with new information about one case and included an image of a swatch of green fabric.

Even though Tracy was only seven years old when her father drowned, the fabric looked familiar. The family decided to look into it.

Officials at the Centre for Forensic Sciences in Toronto took DNA samples from Scott and her younger daughter Tina Rupert, of Windsor. A test determined the torso recovered some 10 years ago belonged to Wayne Shank.

"It was a shocker," said Scott, who re-married 37 years ago. "It's sad and happy at the same time. At least now we have closure. I'm still shook up about it. It's like re-living the whole thing all over again."

Shank was an employee at the American Can factory in Simcoe at the time of his death. He was a general labourer who served on the union executive. Titles included president and past-president.

The family is making arrangements to retrieve his remains, which will be cremated. A memorial service will be held in the new year.

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