

# HUNTER: Has Toronto Sun solved missing-persons case from 1978?

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What happened to George Norman Heys? He disappeared from downtown Toronto in 1978 and has not been heard from since. PHOTO BY TORONTO POLICE SERVICE

They found the body floating in the icy waters of Lake Ontario near the mouth of the Oswego River on the New York side.

It was March 23, 1979.

In the parlance of unidentified bodies, the man —who carried no identification —was dubbed John Doe. In the ensuing decades, John Doe he has stayed.

For 42 years, John Heys and his siblings wondered what happened to their brother George on that chilly November day in 1978.

Now 77, the former Scarborough resident who has a terminal illness and very little time left on this mortal coil, had one last wish: To find his brother and bring him home to bury him.

On Monday, the family confirmed that the *Toronto Sun* had matched identifiers from the floating man to George Norman Heys who disappeared on Nov. 28, 1978, never to be seen again.

Tuesday is John Heys' birthday.

"The Toronto Police advised my dad that there could be a match to the Oswego John Doe. The weight and height matched and the man had a tattoo," his niece, Kimberley Heys, told the *Sun*, adding that American cops had lost a photo of the tattoo taken at the time.



John Heys has been looking for his little brother "Georgie" since 1978. The family believes The Toronto Sun has found him. PHOTO BY COURTESY /KIMBERLY HEYS

"I really wanted dad to know if the man was his brother. By the description of the tattoo, it is. That's information my grandfather gave police in 1978."

On the [doenetwork.org](http://doenetwork.org) website, the *Sun* found what appears to be the correct Joe Doe under the New York state unidentified bodies section.

The tattoo on the dead man's upper right arm told the tale: a fire-breathing devil holding a pitchfork in his right hand; Japanese or Chinese characters beneath the image completed the skin illustration.

Just like the one George Norman Heys, who will be 22 forever, was so very proud of.

"My grandparents died without knowing what happened and the police haven't been helpful despite putting out a release last year. They told us if we called Oswego we'd be 'harassing' police in New York," Heys said, adding that cops have been vague.

Three of the missing man's siblings even offered their DNA to help get a match. Heys said she was told it would cost \$10,000.

George Norman Heys was a "troubled person," his niece said. He never held a job, maybe he was on drugs, maybe not.

The family doesn't know.

"Maybe it was suicide, maybe he was murdered because he owed someone money. My dad didn't know. Was he gay?" Heys said. "We did not know any of that."

She added: "But he was kind to me. I still have a doll he gave me when I was a little girl."

In their press release last March, the newly-formed Toronto Police missing persons squad admitted they didn't have much to go on.



An undated photo of George Norman Heys with his niece Kimberly. PHOTO BY COURTESY /KIMBERLY HEYS

It is as if he never existed. Det.-Sgt. Mary Vruna told the *Sun* at the time that details on George Norman Heys were sparse.

“Unfortunately, there’s very little to go on,” she said in 2019. “There were no problems that we know of. He basically left home for an appointment and was never seen again.”

Vruna added that so far, there is no evidence of foul play.

While DNA hasn’t confirmed a match yet, the tattoo and everything else points to the man floating in the icy waters of Lake Ontario being George Norman Heys.

What happened that November to the man his family called “Georgie” may be locked forever in time, but his siblings can now begin efforts to bring him home to rest with his parents and siblings in a quiet Scarborough cemetery.

The end of a heartbreaking journey that began with a missed appointment and likely ended in Lake Ontario.

## Update:

# EXCLUSIVE: Man who vanished from Toronto in 1978 finally identified and home

*Decades later, the family of George Norman Heys finally has some closure*

Author of the article:

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George Heys has finally been returned home. PHOTO BY SUPPLIED /TORONTO SUN

NIAGARA FALLS, Ont. — Kimberly Heys made a solemn, final promise to her father, John Heys, as he neared the end of his life.

The Huntsville woman vowed she would never stop searching for her uncle George until he was brought home.

Consider it a promise kept.

“I kept my word to my dad. I promised him I would not quit until my uncle George was home,” Heys told The Toronto Sun.

## What happened to George?

On Nov. 28, 1978, George Norman Heys, 22, disappeared from Toronto. When his brother John couldn't contact him, he called Toronto cops to report the young man missing. There were no answers.

Was he voluntarily dropping out? Was it drugs? Was it suicide? Was it foul play?



An undated photo of George Norman Heys with his niece, Kimberly. PHOTO BY COURTESY /KIMBERLY HEYS

The search for George Norman Heys would make a stellar Lifetime movie with a boffo international cast.

In March 1979, the remains of a male were recovered from the shoreline of Lake Ontario by members of the Oswego Police Department in New York. A postmortem was conducted; however, the male was never positively identified and remained a “John Doe.”

How the body ended up in the chilly lake and why were unknown. Detectives said there was nothing suspicious, meaning the dead man was not murdered.

## New life in a cold case?

The Oswego John Doe remained unidentified and was laid to rest in the cold case files. But sometimes, a simple mistake can send an investigation off the rails — or breathe new life into it.

Currents in the Niagara River and then Lake Ontario are unpredictable. A body can end up anywhere.

“Toronto did exhaustive work trying to find out what happened,” TPS Det. Sheena Cannon said, but added that the era in which Heys vanished had roadblocks.

## **‘This group persisted’**

For most of the past century, cops worked in silos and communication between police services was poor. In the case of George Norman Heys, it took a village to bring him home.

“It truly does,” Cannon told the *Sun*. “Partnerships are crucial. This group persisted. We were all focused and determined to bring George Heys home.”

In the summer of 2020, I received a call from Kimberly Heys. She told me about her uncle George, who vanished when she was eight years old. A quick search of one of the unidentified human remains turned up a John Doe found floating in Lake Ontario near Oswego, N.Y. He had a tattoo, a devil with a pitchfork.

An excited Heys began pestering officials in the Empire State.

## **Photo was misfiled**

While relations between Ottawa and Washington are ice-cold, cops on both sides of the border are a model UN. One of the key pieces of evidence attached to the Oswego John Doe case was the tattoo.

Sgt. John Chodubski of the Oswego Police said an unrelated case put him on the trail. He told the *Sun* he was contacted by a California man who believed his friend, who was fishing in Oswego in the early 1980s, had drowned. He felt his pal may have died under suspicious circumstances.

Investigators disproved that, but during the probe, cops determined the Medical Examiner’s office had misfiled a photo of a tattoo featuring a devil with a pitchfork within the man’s file.

That prompted Oswego officers to look closer into the John Doe case from 1979. Chodubski advised that he had multiple meetings with representatives from the Riverside Cemetery, and Irving Hill was an integral part of the process. He assisted in surveying and plotting the area where Heys had been buried.

Heavy equipment had been brought in to exhume the body, and much to everyone’s surprise, the body had been interned in a vault. The collaborative effort between all agencies was responsible for bringing George home.

Oswego cops originally believed George was buried next to another John Doe. He was close but not next door.

The cops who brought George Heys home: Det. Const. Sara Mummery, NRP, Lieut. Lori Burger, and Sgt. John Chodubski, Oswego P.D., Investigator Rob Obrist of Oswego County Sheriff's Office and Det. Sheena Cannon, TPS. BRAD HUNTER/ TORONTO SUN

“We thought it had been in one spot and lost in a flood, but it had been misfiled by the ME,” Chodubski said. “We had to bring in heavy equipment to the cemetery. We had many meetings with the District Attorney to get this done.”

Chodubski and partner, Lieut. Lori Burger were astounded to learn that John Doe's body had been buried in a vault, not the usual wooden coffin.

## **Currents unpredictable**

When it comes to John and Jane Does floating in Lake Ontario, American cops frequently work with Niagara Regional Police Service Missing Persons and Unidentified Remains Coordinator Det. Const. Sara Mummery.

Currents in the Niagara River and the mouth of Lake Ontario often send jumpers from the falls as far east as Oswego, around 240 km by car. The falls is a favorite for end-it-alls.

In April 2024, Mummery was contacted by Heys' family, suggesting a possible match between their missing loved one and Oswego John Doe.

“At the time of his disappearance in 1978, Canadian officials were never made aware, and thus the connection between the two countries was not made,” Mummery said.

DNA was submitted to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) National DNA Databank and profiles were uploaded successfully in November 2019. Detectives on both sides of the frontier carried a “strong belief” that Doe was George Heys.

## **Positive identification**

Approval was obtained to exhume the remains in Oswego's Riverside Cemetery last October. They were then repatriated to obtain forensic samples.

On Jan. 8, 2026, the unidentified remains of “John Doe” were positively identified via DNA comparison by the RCMP National DNA Databank as being George Norman Heys.

“For nearly half a century, this family has endured the pain of not knowing what happened to George,” Mummery said.

“Without the unwavering support of the family and the cooperation of agencies across Canada and the United States, cases like this would not move forward. Times have changed, and as a police service, we are committed to leaving no stone unturned. Regardless of how much time has

passed, families rely on us for support, and it is our responsibility to stand with them and do everything we can to bring their loved ones home.”

Heys said without the combined efforts of the NRP, Oswego Police, the Oswego County Sheriffs, and TPS, George Norman Heys may never have come home. On Saturday in Niagara Falls near the Rainbow Bridge, they were all there: Mummery, Cannon, Burger, Chodubski and Oswego County Sheriff’s investigator Rob Obrist.

Heys has a message.

“One of the things I really want to express to other families in our situation is that it’s really important for people to submit their DNA,” she said, adding, “and never, ever give up.”

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