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LOCAL

A dogged investigator made sure the ‘Boy under the Billboard’ was not forgotten

BY TAMMY GRUBB

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Bobby Whitt’s body was found under an Interstate 40-85 billboard near Mebane, North Carolina, in 1998. An Orange County Sheriff’s Office investigator closed his career and the case last week after 20 years chasing DNA evidence.

By ABC11

HILLSBOROUGH

When a young boy’s skeleton was found under an Interstate 85-40 billboard in September 1998, Orange County investigators knew almost nothing about who he was, how he got there, or who killed him.

The case of the “Boy Under the Billboard” would remain unsolved until DNA science and a determined Orange County investigator caught up with his killer just last week.

“It took 20 years to finally get the name to be able to get off of ‘go’ where we had been stuck,” Orange County sheriff’s investigator Tim Horne said. “Once we were able to, things moved very rapidly, and I worked, as did a number of other people, until my very last day.”

ADVERTISING

[inRead invented by Teads](#)

Robert “Bobby” Adam Whitt was 10 when he and his mother, Myoung Hwa Cho, left their family in Ohio, Horne said. No one suspected the worst; Cho’s husband told the family that she and Bobby had moved back to her native South Korea, a relative said Tuesday.



Bobby Whitt is shown here with his mother Myoung Hwa Cho celebrating Christmas in 1989. Their family in Ohio learned last week that Bobby’s father killed his wife and son in 1998, leaving their unidentified bodies, respectively, in North Carolina and South Carolina.

Natalie Mosteller *Contributed*

Now they know Bobby’s father may have killed his son and wife, dumping their bodies along Interstate 85 in Orange County and in Spartanburg, S.C. The boy’s father confessed last week to both murders, sheriff’s officials said, but he has not yet been charged.

It was a good way to end a three-decade career, said Horne, who spent 20 years and delayed his retirement to make sure Bobby got justice.

“We were disappointed and we were disheartened at various stages when we didn’t get the results we were hoping for,” Horne said, “But we kept batting it around and we never let it hit the ground, and ultimately, we caught this one. We were fortunate.”



Myoung Hwa Cho

Spartanburg County Sheriff's Office *Contributed*

Bobby was born in Michigan on Jan. 7, 1988. An autopsy showed he died from strangulation, probably in July 1998. Cho’s unidentified body was found on May 13, 1998, in Spartanburg County, S.C., with ligature marks around her wrists from where they had been tied, Spartanburg sheriff’s spokesman Lt. Kevin Bobo said in a news release.

An autopsy determined she was suffocated before being dumped on a road that parallels Interstate 85 in South Carolina, Bobo said. The Spartanburg County Sheriff’s Office confirmed Cho’s identity with help from the Korean National Police and INTERPOL, he said.

Cho’s murder might never have been solved without answers for Bobby, Horne said, and increasingly accurate DNA testing. Her husband currently is serving a lengthy federal prison sentence for armed robbery and is not eligible for parole until 2037, Blackwood said.

Orange-Chatham District Attorney Jim Woodall said the husband won't be identified until a decision about where he should be prosecuted is made. The victims were not killed in Orange County or Spartanburg, he said.

BOBBY 'ADORED HIS FATHER'

Natalie Mosteller was 19 when Cho and Bobby, her cousin, disappeared. They had grown up together, but Bobby's family had moved a few years earlier from Sardinia, Ohio, to the Lake Norman area, near Charlotte, N.C., she said.

One of her fondest memories is dancing around the house with Bobby while his mom, who "was always fun," played Gloria Estefan songs, Mosteller said. She's also thankful for memories of the summer when they played air hockey and Bobby's favorite Mario-themed video games on his Nintendo 64, and that their grandmother, who died last year, never learned of her daughter and grandson's fate.

"Bob, he was a precious little boy. He was so sweet, he was so kind," Mosteller said. "I'm the oldest of three girls, and he was my only first cousin. He spent a lot of time at our house, and he was the little brother that I always wanted and never had."

The deaths — and the news that her uncle may be responsible — has shocked the family, Mosteller said. The night they heard about it, she and her mother bought a bottle of Jim Beam — Cho's favorite — and drank to her memory, she said.

She has started a [GoFundMe account to pay for the funerals](#).

"He adored his father," Mosteller said. "That's another thing that absolutely blows our minds about this, is how close of a relationship his father seemed to have with him and that he could actually do these things."

EVOLVING DNA SCIENCE

Bobby's clothing was the only clue to his gender when the body was found, Horne said. The boy had not reached puberty, which would have caused some changes in bone formation, and his body was badly decomposed.

Because he was never reported missing, no matches were found in the [National Center for Missing and Exploited Children](#) (NCMEC) database.

Horne spent the next 20 years working closely with Clyde Gibbs, of the N.C. Medical Examiner's Office, and NCMEC forensic expert Carol Schweitzer to find out who the boy was and how he came to be in Orange County. They tracked leads, testing and re-testing the evidence, from the insects recovered from the body to Bobby's bones and teeth, which offered clues to where he had lived.

Hundreds of people and multiple agencies worked on the case, Horne said.

"I always kept the case file box under my desk, where it was purposefully in my way," he said, reading a statement. "Every time I turned, I hit it with my leg. I did this so the little boy couldn't be forgotten."

Investigator Tim Horne retired Feb. 1 after more than 30 years with the Orange County Sheriff's Office. Solving the cold case of a 10-year-old boy found under a billboard off Interstate 40-85 near Mebane was a good way to go out, he said.

Colin Warren-Hicks *Herald-Sun file photo*

Investigators initially worked with a drawing of the boy prepared by Douglas Ubelaker, with the Smithsonian Institution. In 2011, Horne enlisted forensic sculptor Frank Bender to reconstruct a three-dimensional bust of the boy's face using the remains and DNA results from Parabon NanoLabs Inc.

The case of "The Boy Under the Billboard" was featured in "The Man Who Faced Death," a documentary about Bender.

The [Karen Mintz-directed documentary](#) is labeled “a documentary investigation in progress,” as Mintz has waited for the identity of the boy to be determined before finishing Bender’s story.

Bender, used by the FBI, Scotland Yard, INTERPOL and the television series “America’s Most Wanted” (most famously creating a bust of mass murderer John List for the show, which led to the fugitive killer’s capture) [died of cancer in 2011 at the age of 70](#). The Boy Under the Billboard was the last case he worked on.

A FAMILY CONNECTION

But the mystery remained, despite national and international media attention and calls about the case. The break Horne had hoped for came last year from Barbara Rae-Venter, a genetic genealogy consultant who had helped solve the Golden State Killer case.

Rae-Venter showed through DNA that Bobby was a first-generation child of Asian and white parents, and when she compared the results to online DNA ancestry services, it revealed a possible first cousin of Bobby’s parent living in Hawaii, Horne said.



Improvements in DNA analysis led to increasingly accurate renderings of what Robert “Bobby” Adam Whitt, 10, might have looked like before his skeletal remains were found in 1998 on the side of Interstate 40-85 in Orange County. An actual photo of Bobby is at left.

Orange County Sheriff's Office *Contributed*

That relative returned one of dozens of calls that Horne made on Dec. 26, providing the child’s name and critical information about the case, he said. The boy’s family in Ohio had not reported them missing, because they thought Bobby’s mother had taken him back to her native South Korea, he said.

Based on the man’s information, Horne said, they thought it was possible that Bobby’s mother also had been killed. NCMEC helped them locate a case involving an unidentified woman in Spartanburg County, matching the search criteria. A DNA comparison confirmed the unidentified woman was Bobby’s mother, Horne said.

The male relative “more importantly put me in contact with [family] closer on the lineage tree to Bobby,” he said. “That yielded a lot more information, the circumstances of what happened, how it happened, when it happened, all these particulars.”

‘A PLACE TO MOURN’

Blackwood noted both cases might have remained unsolved if not for Horne’s passion and dedication.

That passion was stoked, he said, by Horne’s experience at the Body Farm in Knoxville, Tenn., where law enforcement officers learn about body decomposition, and in using forensic science to solve the 2008 murder of Chapel Hill teen Josh Bailey. Horne and fellow investigator Dawn Hunter also relied on forensic science, including modern DNA testing, to track down a suspect in another cold case involving a couple killed in Durham on Feb. 12, 1971.

“It’s remarkable considering that years ago we weren’t even talking about DNA,” Blackwood said. “It’s changed the way we go into a crime scene. It’s changed the way we examine a crime scene. It’s changed the way that we approach looking for our suspect, and like Tim said, it’s getting better every day.”

Mosteller said she and her sisters had combed Facebook and other social media for Bobby, hoping that he also would try to find them when he was older.

“Once years had gone by, and there was no success in finding him, it was like a nagging in the back of my head maybe something had happened to him, but it’s not something you ever want to believe,” Mosteller said. “I was hoping that worst-case scenario her family had just turned him against us. I didn’t want to believe that he was actually dead.”

The family “cannot extend any more gratitude” to Horne and others who worked on the investigation, she said. Horne said Bobby and his mother will soon be home again. He will return Bobby’s ashes, which have been at the Medical Examiner’s Office for 20 years, and they will be buried in Ohio beside her mother’s grave.

“I would have been happy if anybody had been able to solve the case, because I simply wanted the case solved and little boy to go back to his family. At least they have a place to mourn and lay flowers,” Horne said. “But to be able to be part of it at the last minute, that was very meaningful.”

Staff writer Brooke Cain contributed to this story.