

She died and became the ‘Christmas Tree Lady.’ Now we know her name.

A woman who took her own life in a Fairfax cemetery is an Iowa native, but many other questions remain

By Tom Jackman

July 7, 2022 at 6:00 a.m. EDT



Annette Clough displays an author portrait her sister, Joyce Marilyn Meyer Sommers, had commissioned for a book she self-published in 1968. (Caitlin O'Hara/for The Washington Post)

Many mysteries remain about the woman found dead in a Fairfax County cemetery in 1996, but one has just been solved: her identity.

She was Joyce Marilyn Meyer Sommers, originally from Davenport, Iowa, the oldest of five children of Arthur and Margaret Meyer, according to DNA analysis and her family. She was 69 years old when her body was found, and her family has no idea how or why she decided to end her life in Annandale, Va., shortly before Christmas.

“The way she planned it out, that was her,” said her sister, Annette Meyer Clough, one of two remaining immediate family members. “She was very careful. We couldn’t find her.”

[Who is the ‘Christmas Tree Lady’? Lab seeks to ID woman in 1996 suicide](#)

For a quarter-century, the unidentified woman in Pleasant Valley Memorial Park was known as “the Christmas Tree Lady,” because she had placed a small Christmas tree on a blanket next to her, sometime early on Dec. 18, 1996. Neatly coifed, smartly dressed, her pockets contained no identification but two envelopes with a \$50 bill and the same typed note in each: “Deceased by own hand...Prefer no autopsy. Please order cremation, with funds provided. Thank you, Jane Doe.”

Then she laid down and suffocated herself.

Fairfax police tried for years to identify the woman, and her death became a lasting subject among true crime groups on the internet. In 2000, with help from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, the [police released a color drawing](#) of the woman. Nothing.



A composite drawing of the woman who died by suicide in an Annandale, Va., cemetery in 1996 and whose identity remained a mystery for more than 25 years. (Fairfax County Police Department)

In recent years, genetic genealogy has blossomed as a law enforcement tool, in which forensic analysts try to match one person's DNA profile with another similar DNA pattern, and comb through the family tree for connections. So in January, Othram Inc., a Houston-area lab which has had success identifying remains found as far back as 1960, took on the "Christmas Tree Lady."

In May, Othram got a potential hit: an 88-year-old man in Virginia Beach, David Meyer, might be the woman's brother. Fairfax police cold case homicide detectives drove to Virginia Beach, Detective Melissa Wallace said, and showed him the color drawing of the woman. But he couldn't confirm that it was his sister because he hadn't seen her in at least 50 years, Wallace said. The woman had distanced herself from her family long ago.

The man's family directed the detectives to a sister living outside Phoenix: Clough. Clough told the investigators that the color drawing was "1000 percent" her older sister, Joyce Meyer Sommers. The detectives submitted DNA from Clough, and forensic genetic genealogist Carla Davis confirmed that the woman who had been unidentified since 1996 was Sommers.

"I was stunned. Just stunned," Clough said. "The family had looked for her. They were still looking for her a year after she had died. ... I am relieved to know that something horrible didn't happen to her. It sounds like something she'd been planning for a long time."

In an interview, Clough related what the family knew of her sister, who essentially vanished in the 1980s. She said Joyce Marilyn Meyer was born in July 1927, the oldest of three girls and two boys, and grew up on a farm outside Davenport, Iowa. Sommers attended Iowa State University, then moved to Los Angeles where she got a job at Seventeen magazine and lived with an aunt, Clough said. "She was very creative and very smart. She was artistic," Clough said.

[From 2000: Unsettling tales of the unknown dead](#)

Then Sommers left Seventeen to begin teaching second grade at a Catholic school in Los Angeles.

"It was difficult," Clough said of her sister's life as a teacher in the 1950s. "She had 60 second-graders and she didn't have a background in education. She was very meticulous, staying up until the wee hours to do lesson planning." Around that time, Clough said, Sommers began seeing a psychiatrist. "At that time, psychoanalysis was all about blaming the family, blame the mother. It sort of estranged her from the family." Clough said her sister was first married around 1959 and later divorced.

At some point in the 1960s, Clough said, their mother traveled to California for a 24-hour confrontation session with Sommers, in which Sommers accused the mother of being a terrible parent. "It was just awful," Clough said. "It broke my mother's heart."

Clough continued to write letters to her older sister, but Sommers rarely revealed much when she replied. Sommers moved to Seattle and married James E. Sommers, but didn't tell her family of the event. Police found a divorce certificate showing that Joyce and James Sommers divorced in 1977, and did not have any children.

Sommers then moved to Tucson. "She had a trailer in a trailer park," Clough said. "She wasn't very happy in that situation." In the 1980s, her siblings all went to visit Sommers in Tucson, where she asked the family to build her a house, Clough said. The family couldn't do that and Sommers was unhappy, Clough said.

"After that visit, she dropped off the face of the earth," Clough said. Her family did not hear from her again.



The unidentified woman in Pleasant Valley Cemetery was known as "the Christmas Tree Lady," because she had placed a small Christmas tree on a blanket next to her, sometime early on Dec. 18, 1996. (Fairfax County Police Department)

The siblings tried to locate her in the early 1990s, Clough said. Her brother Larry Meyer, now deceased, traveled to the trailer in Tucson, but it had been abandoned, Clough said. Inside a refrigerator in the trailer, the brother found four copies of a book called “The Target Child,” which Sommers apparently wrote and self-published, about what she claimed was a traumatic childhood. Clough said she didn’t think her parents were abusive or that any of her siblings suffered while growing up.

In the early 1990s, Larry Meyer and Clough’s ex-husband hired a private detective to try to find Sommers, Clough said. “We were surmising she was with a cult someplace,” Clough said. She said the effort to locate her sister was extensive, and there were some hints that Sommers had moved to the East Coast, but “they never found her anywhere. The case was cold.”

Wallace said police databases show that Sommers may have lived in Northern Virginia sometime in 1996, possibly in Alexandria. A LexisNexis database — which compiles public records — revealed one address for Sommers in downtown Washington, a townhouse on Massachusetts Avenue which has since been incorporated into another building.



Kristen Mittelman, the chief development officer for Othram Inc., and her husband David Mittelman, the founder and chief executive of Othram, stand next to a high-powered DNA sequencer used exclusively for criminal forensic investigations. (Othram Inc.)

And then, somehow, Sommers chose the cemetery on Little River Turnpike in Annandale, in a section near where babies and children are buried. Detectives found no connection between Sommers and any of the graves, and Clough said she believed her sister did not have any children, despite a large scar across her stomach that detectives thought might have come from a Caesarean delivery. Clough theorized that her sister chose the children's section of the cemetery as a symbolic nod to her belief that children can be permanently damaged by their parents.

But where Sommers spent the last decade of her life, what she did during that time, and why she decided to take her own life are still unknowns.

"I always had the expectation that some way, somehow, we'd find a way to identify her," said retired Fairfax homicide detective Steve Milefsky. "I was excited to learn that somebody's family would find out what happened to her." He said detectives "always figured she was from out of the area, and she didn't want to be found." Milefsky noted that Fairfax has some other unidentified bodies, and "I think it's meaningful to identify these people."

Wallace said she is hopeful that more Fairfax cases will be solved. Virginia has 222 active "long-term unidentified" cases statewide and created a position specifically for investigating them last year, according to Arkuie Williams of the state medical examiner's office. Nationwide, the Justice Department's National Missing and Unidentified Persons System, or NamUs, aims to match missing person cases with unidentified bodies or skeletons, and about 8,200 unidentified people are in the database.

[Data on a genealogy site led police to the 'Golden State Killer' suspect. Now others worry about a 'treasure trove of data'](#)

Othram and other genetic genealogists use open public databases of DNA profiles to search for matches with unidentified remains, a process which some have criticized as an invasion of privacy. "We're hoping it doesn't get shut down," said Detective Jon Long of the Fairfax cold case squad. "It's a really great tool, to be able to get some of these cold cases solved, when we can't get it done any other way."

Othram, which specifically built its lab to use genome sequencing to help law enforcement, has helped "crack several-hundred cases at the local, state, and federal level," chief development officer Kristen Mittelman said, "many of which had been unsolved for decades and were previously deemed 'unsolvable' by all other technologies. There is no better feeling than knowing that you play a key role in identifying victims, perpetrators, giving answers to families and facilitating justice."

If you or someone you know needs help, call the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) at 800-273-TALK (8255). [Crisis Text Line](#) also provides free, 24/7, confidential support via text message to people in crisis when they text to 741741.