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Teen hitchhiker killed in 1961 Alabama crash identified after 60 years: 'It's really a shocker'

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More than 60 years ago, a young teen boy ran away from home, hitchhiking his way to freedom from a home life fraught with strife.

On March 27, 1961, the boy was picked up on Alabama Highway 25, just south of Wilton in Bibb County.

A short time later, the driver and the boy were involved in a crash on River Bend Road.

Authorities said not long after picking up his young passenger, the driver struck a guardrail near River Bend bridge and the vehicle plunged into the Cahaba River below.

The driver survived, but the boy didn't.

The boy had told the driver he ran away from home after his parents separated, but he wasn't in the car long enough to give the driver more details.

The boy's identity was a mystery for 60 years. Until now.

Bibb County Coroner CW West said a team of genealogists, using DNA from a 2016 exhumation of the body, confirmed the remains to be those of 15-year-old Daniel Paul "Danny" Armantrout.

According to Identifinders International, Danny's identification represents the oldest case of a National Center for Missing and Exploited Children subject ever solved by genetic genealogy.

"Unknown in life but recognized in death."

West said the announcement is made with "a joyful heart."

"It's really a shocker to all of us. I had my doubts at first just because of how long it's been," West said, speaking about the possibility of finally identifying the young victim. "I am very relieved and excited and overwhelmed."

When the boy, now known as Danny, was killed, there were few clues to identify him.

He had light brown hair and blue eyes. He was approximately 5-feet, 6-inches tall and had a homemade tattoo on his left arm that read "R.Y.in love" or "R+Y in Love."

He was wearing a Timex watch and carrying a suitcase full of clothing. He also had a pack of Pall Mall cigarettes with a South Carolina tax stamp on it.

According to Identifiers International, it is believed that Danny hitched rides with at least three different motorists prior to his death.

One claimed that the traveler had stayed with relatives as he moved between Montevallo and South Carolina trying unsuccessfully to find work.

Another good Samaritan claimed that he might have connections to the military service or have been an inmate at some kind of institution.

There was little else to go on.

Bibb County authorities at the time kept the boy's body in the morgue for about two weeks and exhausted all efforts to identify him and find his family. He was eventually buried in the Centreville Memorial Cemetery on Mill Street with money raised and donated by the community for the funeral.

The headstone reads, "unknown in life but recognized in death."

Daniel Paul "Danny" Armantrout

Known only as "Unknown Boy," from 1961 until 2021, Danny Armantrout was buried in Centreville with a headstone paid for by the community. (Identifinders International)

In 2016, however, authorities were contacted by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, and learned the agency was providing money to pay for the exhumation of the body to examine the remains in hopes of using modern technology to now identify him.

The exhumation began about 7 a.m. June 9, 2016, and workers reached the vault about 7:25 a.m.

The story of Danny

The remains were taken to the Alabama Department of Forensic Science in Montgomery to obtain parts of the remains to send to researchers at the University of North Texas in an attempt to get DNA.

The boy's body was then reinterred in Centreville later that afternoon.

West said a pathologist took bone fragments and teeth to send to Texas.

Experts did tests around the perimeter of the bone to try to extract DNA.

"They couldn't find any DNA on the outside perimeter of the bone," he said, "so it's been sitting in north Texas all this time."

The exhumation stirred interest in the community and in the news but things then went silent again, as the case had so many times before.

Just a month after West was elected Bibb County coroner in October 2020, he was contacted by Colleen Fitzpatrick of Identifinders International.

Fitzpatrick is a pioneer in the use of forensic genealogy applied to cold case violent crimes.

In November 2020, Fitzpatrick contacted West, and they talked about again exhuming the boy's remains. It was, however, a costly task.

It was then that West remembered that former Coroner Scott Cox has sent what samples they had to the University of North Texas, and Fitzgerald turned her sights on obtaining those samples, with help from West.

The samples were returned to West, and then sent to Salt Lake City.

West said experts there carried out a TissueLyser process where the bone fragments and teeth were pulverized and then sent to another lab in California.

"They did extensive work there to extract DNA," West said. "They had a lot of complications, but they did not give up."

Daniel Paul "Danny" Armantrout

The body of an unidentified teen killed in a 1961 car crash is exhumed in 2016 in hopes of obtaining DNA to identify him. (Bibb County Sheriff's Office/AL.com)

It was a lengthy process, but ultimately, they were able to obtain the DNA.

From there, West said, Fitzpatrick and her team of genealogists took control of the search which eventually led them to the identification of Danny.

West said they learned Danny was born Dec. 28, 1945, in Miami.

His parents, father Alfred Valentine Armantrout and mother, Virginia Leocadie Berner, had divorced when Danny was young and Berner had remarried another man with the last name Hamilton.

Fitzpatrick and team then tracked down a cousin who is currently living in Germany. “He remembers him,” West said, “but it’s been such a long time.”

Eventually they found one of Danny’s brothers, 77, who is living in Florida.

Investigators learned Danny’s mother and stepfather had moved to Tennessee with her three sons – including Danny. It wasn’t the happiest home for the boys.

The older brother now living in Florida was in the U.S. Army at the time Danny ran away.

“When he came back home, he realized Danny had run away,” West said. “He didn’t know where he went or how to find him.”

Shortly after Danny ran away, West said, the third brother did the same. He has never been heard from by family since then. If he’s still alive, he would be 79 years old now.

The surviving brother believes Danny was trying to hitchhike from Tennessee to California to enlist the Army as well when he was picked up in Alabama and then killed in the crash.

The surviving brother, West said, was “very emotional” at learning what happened to Danny. He and his wife are planning to travel to Alabama.

“He wants to come up and have a memorial service and meet some of the people who worked behind the scenes to locate his brother.

Danny’s father, investigators learned, was born in 1910 in Georgia and died in 1973, also in Georgia.

Danny’s mother was born Sept. 2, 1921, in New Jersey and died in Florida on Feb. 22, 2011.

The formal announcement identifying Danny was made Saturday on Gray Hughes Investigates.

Gray and his YouTube audience of “Freaks” funded the expensive and time-consuming investigation that required almost a year of work to gain viable DNA for a SNP profile, according to Identifinders International.

Identifinders International now plans to help try to find Danny’s other brother who ran away.

In the meantime, West said, a headstone bearing Danny’s name will be added to his grave site in Centreville.

“It’s really amazing,” he said. “I cannot express enough how grateful I am, as well as many others, to finally be able to put his name on his headstone. Thank you all for the ones that never gave up on him.”