

Body found in Winneshiek County in 1980s identified with DNA breakthrough

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DECORAH, Iowa (KTTC) – On Friday, Winneshiek County Sheriff’s Office announced it has identified a body found in 1986 with the help of a DNA breakthrough.

The body has been identified as **Clifton Todd Womack**, 28. Womack was last seen on April 6, 1985, in Eastlake, Ohio when he left his mother’s home to look for a job.

On March 23, 1986, a rural resident called to report the discovery of a decomposed body in his hay barn in northeast Winneshiek County. The resident reported while he was moving hay bales, he found a pink blanket on the ground. When he moved the blanket, he discovered a shoe and then a body. The sheriff’s office reports the body was wedged between two large round bales stacked two high, weighing 1,500 pounds each. The bales had been stored in the barn since the summer of 1984.

Authorities report two autopsies were conducted with the help of the Iowa Division of Criminal Investigation (DCI).

Investigators remembers an earlier encounter of a hitchhiker on April 9, 1985. The hitchhiker reportedly asked for directions on Highway 44 South. The man stated he was from Ohio but trying to get to California. Authorities note records from Des Moines weather services confirmed the temperature that night was 23 degrees.

Efforts to identify the body found in the barn have continued for years and included bringing the skull to Mayo Clinic in Rochester where a clay facial reconstruction was completed in 1986. The Winneshiek County Sheriff’s Office coordinated a burial of the unidentified man at the Freeport Cemetery near Decorah. Authorities explain at the time of burial DNA technology was not yet available and no DNA samples were collected.

Authorities secured the necessary funding, permits, and legal authorization to disinter the grave to retrieve DNA. The grave was unearthed on April 16, 2026, and the body was well preserved.

The remains were transported to the Iowa DCI Crime Lab for a third autopsy and DNA retrieval.

On June 11, an expert used NamUs (National Missing and Unidentified Persons System) database to compare the dental x-rays against reported missing persons. The x-ray matched Womack.

DNA analysis and forensic genealogy further supported the identification. Authorities were able to identify other family members of Womack, finding his brother, Terry Womack.

The autopsy report still lists the manner of death as “undetermined”, leaving an incomplete picture of what led to his passing.

Clifton was one of five children and his siblings, brother Jay and Terry, and sisters Sherry and Amber, never gave up searching for him.

Winneshiek County authorities were able to meet with the family virtually on June 18. The siblings explained that Clifton suffered from schizophrenia and depended on medication to manage it.

WCSO touted the determination of Deputy Cole Tweten. Tweten has been with the office since 2022.

“Though still early in his career, one can’t dismiss his resourcefulness, diligence, eagerness, and heart. Once Deputy Tweten set sights on the Womack case, there was no turning back,” WCSO wrote.

WCSO said Tweten was not even born when Womack’s remains were found in 1986 but grew up in Winneshiek County hearing about the case.