# Stark woman missing for more than 50 years — or was she?

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# A Minnesota woman says her mother was Anita Drake, a Stark County woman who went missing more than a half century ago.

By Lori Monsewicz / Repository staff writer

Anita Drake, 15, left her Nimishillen Township home in October 1963, never to return.

It is the oldest unsolved missing-persons case at the Stark County Sheriff's Office. And soon, 53 years later, it may be officially solved.

A woman from Minnesota believes Anita Drake was her mother and she's taking steps that could answer many unresolved questions about Anita's life and her connection to Stark County.

Danna Smith Casey submitted her DNA to a federal lab three weeks ago, enabling science to render proof.

Before moving to Minnesota, Casey was living in Texas when her father, Samuel Smith, died in 2010 of lung cancer. Her mother, Lynda Smith, had died years earlier — in 1994 — also of lung cancer. Casey, the couple's only child, was settling her father's estate in 2010 when she found a lockbox containing a puzzling document recording a name change. On Aug. 6, 1971, Lynda Smith's name had been changed from Anita Drake.

"I don't know why it was in juvenile court. Maybe they handled name changes," Casey said. "I was 4 maybe going on 5 (years old). My mother would've been 23 because she was 18 when I was born. That was the one thing she was open about — her birthday. She was never straight with me about where she came from or anything like that."

Lynda Smith typically described herself as an orphan whose parents were killed in a car crash.

"She told me she ran away to avoid becoming a ward of the state because she'd been orphaned," Casey said. "I think she told (my dad's) family that to keep people from looking. Everything that she did and said about who she was and where she came from, it seemed to be designed to keep herself from being found."

#### **Gone missing**

"Anita was not outspoken at all. She was very quiet, very conservative," said Debby Drake Ralston, Anita Drake's sister.

As a child, Ralston slept in a big double bed between Anita and their sister Cheryl, in a home that boasted 12 children. (Four siblings were already grown and out of the home by the time Anita turned 15.) Their brothers slept in another room where the mattresses ran wall-to-wall.

"Anita was always having to have everything real neat and pressed and everything clean. She was particular about how her hair was done all the time," Ralston said. "She wasn't into a lot of makeup and dancing or anything real flashy. She and Cheryl were opposites. They fought all the time."

Just 9 years old when Anita went missing, Ralston said she and their small group of friends knew Anita had been planning to run away.

"I wanted to go with her," Ralston said, adding, "I knew pretty much everything that was going on. She left for very good reasons."

Ralston said Anita was being abused by a relative and that their parents couldn't stop it. Their father worked hard to provide for their

family as a steelworker at Union Metal, she said. When he wasn't hunting or fishing to bring in food, he was working in the family's garden.

"Anita was pretty disgusted with all the abuse that was going on and Mom and Dad never did anything about it," Ralston said.

#### **Keeping secrets**

Anita had been out with friends the night of her 15th birthday and she came home "a little bit late," Ralston said.

"My Dad started yelling at her and she cussed at him," Ralston recalled. "He got up and beat her with a belt. After that, we talked about half the night. The next day, we rode the bus to school. But I don't think she actually *went* to school. We rode the bus home. We were walking up the driveway and we were talking. She said, 'I'm going to leave today.' I said I wanted to come with her, but she said she could cover for herself, but she couldn't cover for a kid."

Ralston believes Anita left Oct. 15, 1963, getting a ride out of Ohio with a friend who did magic tricks with a traveling show. About 11 p.m. that night, her parents, unaware, called deputies to their Victory Avenue NE home to report her missing. Her parents said she had been headed to a local teen hangout when she was last seen earlier that day.

In the years that followed, some family members surmised that Anita had been abducted and murdered by a family friend who drove a truck.

Ralston said the truck driver's wife — Lynda Lee Tucker — was Anita's best friend. Lynda Lee Tucker is the same name recently found listed in the Texas birth registry as the mother of Danna Casey.

Ralston said that although she, the Tuckers and all of Anita's small circle of friends knew Anita ran away, they vowed secrecy. "We all vowed to take it to our graves because it was really important to her."

Anita later called her twice — once in 1971 and again in 1975.

"She told me she had changed her name several times," Ralston said. "She wouldn't tell me where she was because she didn't want to put me in a position where I was nailed down to tell. She apologized for not coming back to get me, and she told me she was married and that she had a child."

Ralston said she was happy for her sister.

"She found her soulmate, which made me happy as can be," Ralston said. "She did not want to be bothered, and I respected her for that. After a while, when I hadn't heard from her in so long, I just got the feeling that she was gone."

Ralston said she is breaking the silence now because all of their friends are now deceased, and because the woman whom she believes is Anita's daughter is seeking answers.

## Texas life

Casey's parents always told her they had met around Halloween in 1963 in Dallas. Her mother had just started working as a waitress at "the Lucas B&B."

"I think she met my father fairly soon after she got to Dallas," Casey said. "I've got pictures of her working in a restaurant. Just a couple little snapshots. She was pretty young then, too." Casey said she has no photos of her mother any earlier than that.

"She was 15 and he was 24. I don't know if she was open with him at that time about her age. According to my Dad's side of the family, she told them that she and my dad were married on Dec. 11, 1963. I couldn't find any wedding photos. I could never find a marriage license. I think they were married under Texas common law."

Casey's father worked several jobs before becoming a manager at a telemarketing firm. He held that position for several years until the company downsized and he then became certified in pest control.

Her mother, still identifying herself as Lynda Smith, "did the homemaker thing for awhile after I was born," Casey said. "Then she and my dad got into a really bad argument one day and she put herself through business school and got a job working in an office. She worked her way into a customer service job at a company that provides scientific material for diagnosis."

Then her mother got sick.

Both of Casey's parents smoked, and although both would eventually die from cancer, Sam Smith was the heavier smoker, Casey recalled. Lynda Smith smoked a single cigarette over the course of a day or two, but her cancer was different. Doctors told Casey that the aggressive form of pulmonary adenocarcinoma is hereditary.

"When my mom got sick, I think she wanted to start reconciling with her family," Casey recalled. "She did tell me a few things, but by this time, I was skeptical. This was when she was sick. I didn't really pressure her for a lot of information because she had chosen to fight the illness and I wanted her to put her energy into that."

Casey recalled that her mother identified some family members: "Her mother's name was Virginia, her father's name was Kermit and that her grandparents —Virginia's parents — were Roscoe and Beulah Thompson, and that Roscoe was a minister. She said Linda Boyd is a friend of hers." (Linda Boyd is Anita Drake's older sister. Virginia and Kermit Drake were Anita Drake's parents.)

Casey's mother died at the age of 45 in March 1994, losing her sixmonth battle with lung cancer. Casey's father died 16 years later, still honoring his wife's wishes to leave her younger past behind.

## Search for truth

Told that her mother's cancer was hereditary and having discovered the name-change document in 2010, Casey began to investigate her mother's past, searching for answers on the internet. Initially, her search was fruitless.

Casey moved on with her life.

She eventually married and moved with her husband to Merrifield, Minn., to be closer to his family, as she had none left in Texas.

Her search resumed early last month when, surfing the internet, she saw something online that made her think of her mother.

"I don't remember right now what it was, but I Googled her name again, 'Anita Drake' and 'missing,' " she said. "One of the first things that came up on the search was the article from The Canton Repository."

The newspaper published an article on Oct. 13, 2013, entitled "Family hopes DNA can find Anita Drake after 50 years."

Drake had been missing for a half century when, in October 2013, her sisters and brothers told The Canton Repository they were allowing lab technicians from a Texas-based lab to collect DNA samples from them. Authorities in Delaware had been working to determine whether human remains they'd found were actually those of Drake because some characteristics of those remains matched her description. The Drake family's DNA test results were entered into the FBI's Combined DNA Index System (CODIS) and then the U.S. Department of Justice's NamUs or National Missing and Unidentified Persons System database, which helps authorities match missing persons or their remains with an identity.

Casey clicked on the article detailing the Drake family's quest.

An old black-and-white photograph of a smiling young woman with neatly groomed hair appeared on the computer screen.

"It was my mom," Casey said.

"I just went into shock ... She had the face of my mother. You don't mistake something like that. You know the face of your mother. It was my mom. She had the same facial features... Big almond-shaped eyes, long nose, dimples... Even the dimples are the same."

Casey called the Stark County Sheriff's Office. A deputy put her in touch with Anita's younger brother, Roger Drake.

He accepted the call from Casey at 1 a.m. that day. Casey sent pictures to his phone, photos that he and his family believe are those of their long-lost sister, photos that were taken long after she went missing.

"The picture that she sent me is Anita! It's unmistakable," he said.

Casey allowed authorities to collect DNA samples from her so that the Texas-based lab that has the Drake family's DNA can check for a match.

As of last week, neither she nor the Drake siblings have heard back from the lab. Authorities don't know how long it will take before they receive an answer they hope will solve a 53-year-old mystery.

"It depends on what kind of case backlog they have," said Stark County Sheriff's Lt. John Oliver, adding that until then, Anita Drake's missing person case will remain open. "We have to wait til we get the results and, hopefully, we'll get the clarification we'll need."

In the meantime, Casey is scheduled to meet the Drake family at the end of the month.

Casey said that despite her mother's reason for leaving home, she is proud of her mother, grateful for the life her mother lived and looking forward to meeting her mother's family, possibly *her* family.

"She lived the rest of her life on her terms. My mother refused to be a victim. And I had a good life with my mom."

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