

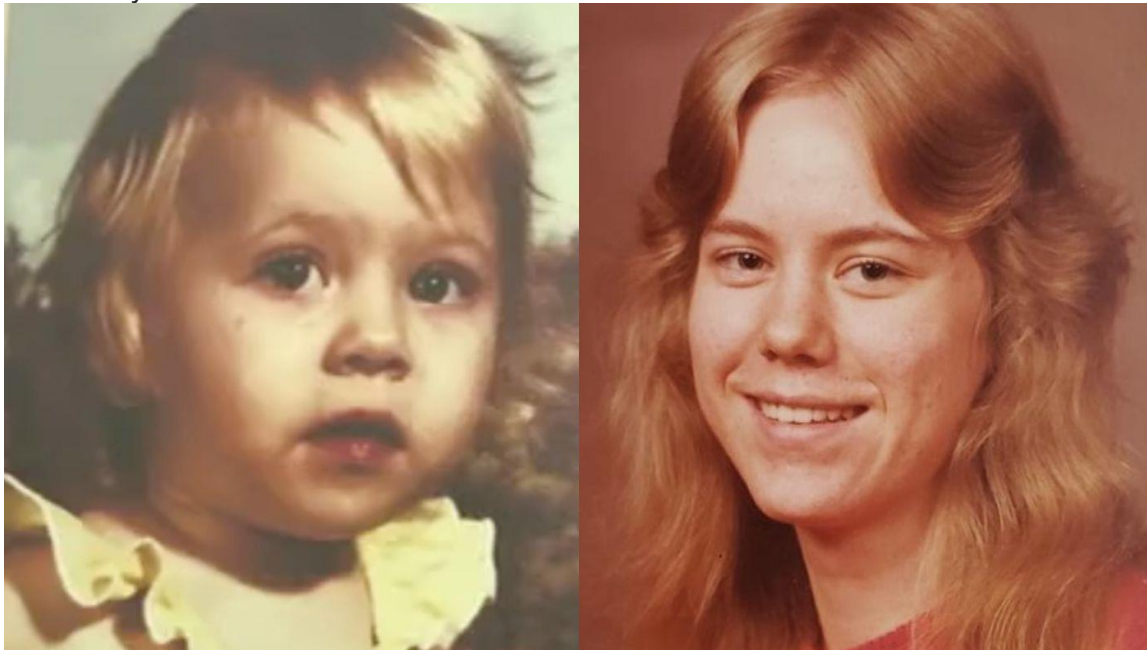
Delta Dawn and her mother identified as Missouri woman, child child missing since 1982

PASCAGOULA, Miss. (WLOX) - Nearly four decades after a child's body was found in the Escatawpa River, she has been identified thanks to persistent investigators and DNA technology.

It was 38 years ago this week when the body of a small child was found in the Escatawpa River under the I-10 bridge. That child has remained unidentified since she was found in 1982, despite numerous efforts over the years to figure out who she is and how she got into the river.

The toddler - believed to be between 18-24 months old - was dubbed "Delta Dawn" and "Baby Jane."

On Friday, Jackson County Sheriff's Department announced that they have identified Baby Jane as 18-month-old Alisha Ann Heinrich and her mother as 23-year-old Gwendolyn Clemons.



After 38 years, Baby Jane - also called Delta Dawn - has been identified as 18-month old Alisha Ann Heinrich. Her mother, who is still missing, has also been identified as 23-year-old Gwendolyn Clemons. They were last seen Thanksgiving 1982 in Joplin, Missouri. (Source: Jackson. Co. Sheriff's Dept.) Sheriff Mike Ezell said Gwendolyn was last seen by her family on Thanksgiving 1982 in Joplin, Missouri. The young mother, baby Alisha, and an unidentified man left the state together, reportedly traveling to Florida to start a new life, according to the family.

They were never seen again. Less than two weeks later, the toddler's body was found in the Escatawpa River.

The Update

On Dec. 4, 2020, the Jackson County Sheriff's Department gathered together the many investigators and volunteers who have spent years working on this case to update the public about Baby Jane's identity.

The break in the case came after the DNA was received by Othram, a state-of-the-art DNA laboratory in Houston. They were able to match Alisha's DNA with family members in Missouri, leading investigators to travel there and confirm with the family that the missing child and her mother were Alisha and Gwendolyn.

According to family members, Gwendolyn and Alisha left the state headed to Florida with a man the young mother was dating. That man, who the family said is now deceased, is suspected of killing Alisha and possibly Gwendolyn.

Sheriff Ezell said the man - whose name has not yet been released - returned to Missouri without the mother and baby. For years, Gwendolyn and Alisha's family have hoped that they were alive.

"The family were under the assumption that Alisha was alive and living somewhere," said Ezell. "I guess they were just hopeful. They were thankful that the case was still being worked and (finding out what happened) gave them some closure. The aunt and the grandmother were present along with one of the cousins and they were extremely thankful that we were able to identify (Alisha) and give her name back. And now they know where she was and they were very thankful."

To date, Gwendolyn has not been found and authorities can't be sure whether she is dead or alive.

"We do not know if she is dead or alive at this point," said Ezell. "We're assuming the worst but we don't know that for sure."

The sheriff said they were reaching out to other law enforcement agencies, asking anyone who may have a body matching Gwendolyn's description to please contact them.

For the officers and volunteers who worked this decades-long case, it's an emotional end. Several of them were moved to tears during the press conference, wiping tears from their eyes, unable to speak publicly about the case that has haunted them and taken up so many hours of their time.

"One of the hardest things that law enforcement officers deal with is the death of a child and it brings back a lot of memories, I know, but it shows you the devotion of these folks and their commitment to public safety and public trust, that they'll get out there and do the hard work," said Ezell.

FULL NEWS CONFERENCE: Authorities update 1982 "Baby Jane" death in Jackson County

Eyewitness Reports

On Dec. 3, 1982, witnesses reported seeing a woman carrying a toddler. The woman was reportedly seen between midnight and 1 a.m. on Dec. 3, 1982, carrying the child on Highway 63. A woman matching the same description was also reportedly seen shortly after on I-10 close to the Alabama border, walking west near the exit for the truck scales.

One of the witnesses who came forward told investigators she was monitoring the CB radio on the night of Dec. 3, 1982, when there was a lot of chatter about a woman with a child walking down the interstate and being in distress but refusing to let anyone help her.

Two days later at 7 a.m. on Dec. 5, 1982, a truck driver called police to report seeing the body of an adult woman in the Escatawpa River. A deputy responded and, while searching for the woman, came upon the body of Baby Jane.



Forensic facial reconstruction renderings show what Baby Jane may have looked like before her death. (Source: National Center for Missing & Exploited Children)

The Discovery of Two Bodies

The toddler was found partially submerged and face up in the weeds close to the bridge. Authorities believe the child was thrown from the bridge into the general area where her body was subsequently found. Investigators said at the time that it was unlikely the child's body was the one seen by the truck driver because that section of the river was heavily infested with weeds, making it difficult to view from the road. Over the next few days, a large search effort was launched to try and find the woman. Despite an exhaustive search with helicopters, boats, and divers, a woman's body was never found.

However, the body of an unidentified African-American man - who also still remains unidentified - was discovered on Dec. 8, 1982. To this day, the man remains unidentified, but authorities say they believe he had been in the water undiscovered for at least six months before being found and that his death is not believed to be connected to Baby Jane's.

An autopsy on Baby Jane - also called Delta Dawn - revealed that someone attempted to smother her before she was put in the river. However, she was still alive when she

landed in the water and her official cause of death was determined to be caused by drowning.

The toddler was 2'6" tall and weighed around 25 pounds. Her hair was strawberry blonde and she was found wearing a pink and white checkered dress or shirt and a disposable diaper. She had 12 teeth and appeared to have been well-nourished and cared for.

Baby Jane's body now lies interred at Jackson County Memorial Park thanks to a Jackson County deputy and his wife who stepped forward to give her a proper funeral and burial. Her grave bears the inscriptions: "Baby Jane" and "Known Only To God."

An Investigation That's Lasted Decades

For decades, investigators have exhausted all efforts to identify Baby Jane and to find the woman seen on the interstate that night. All efforts have proven fruitless.

As technology progresses, forensic facial reconstruction software was used to guess how the child may have looked before she died.

In 2009, the body of Baby Jane was exhumed so that DNA could be obtained from her body. That sample was then entered into the data registry for the [National Missing and Unidentified Persons System \(NamUs\)](#) and the [National Center for Missing & Exploited Children](#).

WLOX FLASHBACK: Steve Philips shares 'Delta Dawn' story

What's Next?

Now, investigators will continue to conduct interviews and gather evidence to try and determine if the man last seen with Alisha and her mother is the person responsible for the child's death. They are also working leads to try and find Gwendolyn to learn more about what happened to her.

Anyone with information about this case is asked to contact Jackson County Sheriff's Department at 228-769-3036 or [Mississippi Coast Crime Stoppers](#) at 877-787-5898.