

Cold case closure: 1968 murder victim identified using hair sample, DNA technology

The Wake County Sheriff's Office, in partnership with forensic genealogists and the SBI, used advanced DNA testing on a preserved hair sample to finally identify the victim of a 1968 homicide as Myrtle Holcomb.

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By Flynn Snyder, WRAL reporter

The Wake County Sheriff's Office has identified a woman killed in a 1968 homicide using partner agencies and advancements in forensic genealogy.

On Thursday, the sheriff's office and State Bureau of Investigation held a news conference to discuss how investigators ended a 57-year cold case and identified the victim, **Myrtle Holcomb**.

"It's the oldest cold case in North Carolina solved with forensic genealogy as far as I know, so that's a first," said forensic genealogist Leslie Kaufman with First Genes LLC.

Kaufman helped investigators to develop Holcomb's family tree.

Authorities believe Holcomb died on April 27, 1968, in what witnesses described as a fire in a field near Ten Ten Road and Lake Wheeler Road in southern Wake County.

"We believe it's important to share this information to send a message to the public that law enforcement never gives up, that we pursue every lead and we embrace technology and partnerships to solve crimes," Wake County Sheriff Willie Rowe said.

Wake County investigator Sgt. Kenneth Kay said the investigation began on April 28, 1968.

"Deputies immediately called for assistance from the SBI as the body was identified as a white female who was burnt beyond recognition," Kay said.

Kay said, at the time, there was not enough evidence at the scene for an arrest and for authorities to identify the victim. He said deputies interviewed neighbors who lived nearby. They told deputies they'd seen a woman walking in the area, but no one could identify her.

Authorities identified a person of interest as Robert Reagan, Kay said. It wasn't until 36 years later until Reagan became a suspect.

"In 2004, investigators received new [information involving Robert Reagan as a suspect](#)," Kay said.

WRAL News previously reported [investigators interviewed Reagan in 1968](#). He admitted that he and a friend named David Baker drove up the road to get a look at the woman, but told detectives she had vanished when they got there.

According to Kay, authorities conducted interviews with a witness who provided details, clues and evidence that were left in the area that were not made public in 1968.

“This witness was also able to provide information saying that they had seen Reagan in possession of an identification card for a female by the name of ‘Holcomb,’” Kay said. “They could not remember the full name but knew the name ‘Holcomb’ when they provided that information.”

Kay said authorities contacted the Wake County District Attorney’s Office in 2004. The DA’s office advised it would pursue a murder charge against Reagan as a suspect.

By that time, however, Reagan had died.

“No charges were ever filed,” Kay said.

WRAL News previously reported in the mid-2000s that [Reagan's family does not accept the murder charge](#).

"I would like the public to know that there are two sides to this story," Jewel Madsen, Reagan's daughter, said at the time. "We've been shown no evidence, no proof. If he was alive today, he would have a trial. All the evidence would be put forward for us to make a rational decision."

Watch: [Wake County deputies, SBI discuss decades-old investigation](#)

How authorities identified Myrtle Holcomb

Kay said authorities found Holcomb's body with few belongings and no identification. He said she was disfigured so authorities could not positively identify her.

Kay said a pathologist in the area provided authorities information saying they believed the woman was around 35 years old.

“A facial reconstruction was completed, but still no identification was able to be completed at the time,” Kay said.

Even after Reagan’s death, Kay said the sheriff’s office did not close the case because investigators wanted to identify the victim.

“For generations, the sheriff’s office worked on this, hoping to bring closure to a family [for a body] that had yet to be identified,” Kay said.

Kay said authorities completed multiple DNA tests on the victim’s clothing, shoes and glasses.

“However, a DNA profile was never able to be established,” Kay said.

Kay said the coroner took a key item from the dead woman, cut hair.

“This evidence was kept in the sheriff’s office custody, in our evidence for 57 years,” Kay said. “Just recently, the hair was provided and sent off for a suitable DNA comparison.”

Kay said the sheriff’s office sent the hair to Astrea Forensics.

“It’s very rare that we’re being able to do cases with hair,” Kaufman said. “That’s a recent development with Astrea Forensics.”

Kaufman said it’s the second time that she’s helped solve a case using hair.

Astrea Forensics developed a profile for the victim, Kay said.

“The profile from this victim was sent to Leslie Kaufman with First Genes LLC, and she was able to identify a possible relative after hours and hours of working on a family dynamic for this victim,” Kay said.

Kay said the sheriff’s office met with relatives of Holcomb and conducted additional DNA testing, which confirmed her identity.

“It’s a wonderful feeling, being able to give somebody an answer after all these years,” Kaufman said. “It’s incredible. I understand that it’s devastating for the victim, but it’s also satisfying to know what happened.”

Kaufman said Astrea Forensics provided “a very good DNA profile and kit.” She said it allowed her to upload to two different databases: GEDmatch and FamilyTreeDNA.

“From those two, I was able to develop a family tree for Ms. Holcomb,” Kaufman said. “I actually had two trees built to a total of a little [more than] 4,000 people.”

Kaufman said it took her about four months to provide a lead to Kay.

“We were able to get a final identification in September,” Kaufman said.

“My mother was 8 years old when this case started,” Kay said.

Holcomb was born in 1919 and was traveling to Raleigh from Florida. She was married and had two children.

According to Kay, Holcomb’s family knew she was traveling to Raleigh, but didn’t know why.

Kay said Holcomb’s family was shocked by her murder.

“They had just lost touch with her,” Kay said of Holcomb’s family. “They weren’t sure where she was at the time or what had gone on with her, but they knew at some time she had passed since she was born in 1919.”

SBI Director Chip Hawley said the state provided more than \$10,000 to help cover the cost of DNA testing.

“These tests are very expensive, but what you get out of it is, you can’t put a price on it,” Hawley said.

Hawley said there are 37 open cold cases (unsolved homicides) across the state as of Thursday. Kay said the Wake County Sheriff’s Office had 32 of those.

“This just reinvigorates what we’re trying to do to bring closure to victims out there,” Hawley said.