

Pettis County Coroner identifies skeletal remains found in 2018

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Timothy Gibson

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After more than three years, skeletal remains found in wooded Pettis County have been identified as a Sedalia man who went missing six years ago.

Pettis County Coroner Robert "Skip" Smith has identified the remains as 39-year-old Timothy Gibson, of Sedalia, who went missing in 2015. Due to the condition of the skeletal remains, Smith was unable to determine a cause of death, but there is no evidence of foul play.

According to a missing person flyer from the Missouri State Highway Patrol, Gibson was last seen March 26, 2015, being taken to the hospital in Sedalia and was released shortly after. He had not been seen since. He was entered as a missing person with the Sedalia Police Department.

The remains were found Saturday, Oct. 27, 2018, by a Missouri Department of Conservation agent in a densely wooded area near the Eagle Brook Farm subdivision.

"It was a very densely wooded area," then-Sheriff Kevin Bond told the Democrat. "We had to hike a good way from anywhere that vehicles would be able to access."

According to Bond, the area is roughly bordered by 16th Street on the north, 28th Street on the south, New York Avenue on the west and Marshall Avenue on the east.

Little other evidence was found, only personal items in "an extended state of decay" that were not individually identifying, Bond said at the time.

The Pettis County Sheriff's Office and Smith contacted the Boone County Medical Examiner's Office for assistance, and a forensic anthropologist and an investigator helped process the scene.

"When the remains were discovered, it was very important to me that we found the entire remains. And I feel like we did that," Smith told the Democrat on Tuesday. "We took a lot of care, a lot of staff, a lot of long hours making sure we searched for and collected absolutely everything."

Smith said they chose to bring in assistance from Boone County to make sure authorities protected the scene as much as possible since it was unknown at the time if it was a criminal case.

"We didn't know if it was a crime and we wanted to make sure we collected everything in the proper manner to protect evidence if it was a crime," Smith said Tuesday. "Everything has to be meticulous if it's a crime and could be going to court, so we wanted to make sure we did our due diligence in doing everything properly and to the T."

Within a few days, Smith had released initial findings from Boone County that determined the remains were of a Caucasian male age 35 to 45.

Smith and the sheriff's office gathered records from area missing person cases to aid in identifying the person.

An anthropologist from the University of Missouri's Anthropology Department conducted an exam of the bones and gathered evidence. He had the remains for almost a year, Smith said, and returned them to the coroner's office in late 2019. The anthropologist had collected DNA fragments for Smith to submit to another entity for comparison to Gibson's DNA. Smith was preparing to send off the samples when COVID hit and labs were shut down.

"Then here about six months ago, I contacted them (the lab) and they said it's going to be a year to a year and a half before we get our DNA. I thought, 'I can't wait that long,'" Smith said. "So then we started trying to process other avenues."

The anthropologist had identified previous injuries on the bones, so Smith talked to Gibson's mother to learn about her son's medical history. He had been injured in a car accident and had other injuries as well. Over the last several months, Smith struggled to obtain Gibson's medical records to compare them to the injuries found by the anthropologist. Those records were finally released last week, Smith said.

According to Smith, the medical records indicated Gibson sustained a fractured pelvis in a car accident several years ago that resulted in an infection. He also fractured his right leg when he was younger and had a previous vertebrae fracture. All three documented injuries matched the injuries on the bones.

"Then we kind of circumvented the DNA, we felt we had enough," Smith said. "... We figured with the three that was pretty substantial — the likelihood of having someone with those three fractures in their lifetime is pretty minute. A fracture is almost like a fingerprint. If you have documentation of a fracture, you can probably identify it. There's not hardly any two that are exactly alike."

Smith has not received an official report from the anthropologist, as that is still in progress, but Smith considers the case to be closed.

After more than three years of investigating and almost exactly six years since Gibson was last seen, Smith was finally able to notify Gibson's mother on April 15 that the remains belonged to her missing son.

"I was wanting to give the family some closure. It's way past time," Smith said. "With COVID hitting, it just really delayed everything. I was wanting to just give them some closure."

"Seeing her and telling her was very emotional," he added. "... She was very emotional and it was very humbling to be the person to give word. You felt for her and her family."

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