

Homicide victim identified nearly 50 years after remains were found in New Jersey

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QUINTON TWP, N.J. (WPVI) -- New Jersey State Police have identified the victim in a nearly 50-year-old homicide using advances in DNA testing and genetic genealogy, though the killing itself remains unsolved.

Authorities say the victim is **Robert Dean Irelan**, whose body was found in a wooded area of rural Salem County in 1979.

His identity had remained unknown for decades until a renewed investigation led to a breakthrough.

According to state police, Irelan's body was discovered in June 1979 with a gunshot wound to the head in a wooded area off Jericho Road in Quinton Township.

Investigators believe he was shot during the winter months before his body was found. He was in his late teens or early twenties.

For years, the remains went unidentified. In 2023, the New Jersey State Police Cold Case Unit reopened the investigation and partnered with the Investigative Genetic Genealogy Center at Ramapo College.

Tracie Boyle, a case manager with the center, explained the process.

"We received a match list back from Match List Pro and Family Tree DNA and we would just start building back the family trees of his genetic relatives, hoping to find common ancestors among them," she said.

Before the identification, investigators had released a composite sketch of the victim. With the case reopened, police were also able to compare evidence to confirmed photographs of Irelan.

Among the key items was a jacket believed to belong to him, which included a small gold "R" on the pocket flap.

"That was another context clue that we had," Boyle said. "We do look at all the evidence that was found near the remains or could've been owned by the person."

State police are continuing to seek the public's help in solving the homicide. Investigators say Irelan lived in Pleasantville and was known to spend time in Atlantic City.

Anyone with information is asked to contact the New Jersey State Police Cold Case Unit at coldcase@njsp.gov.