

53 years after a body was found in a large trunk in a St. Pete field, police say the 'Trunk Lady' has a name

St. Petersburg Police detectives revealed new details in two cold cases Tuesday morning. More than 50 years after the body of an unknown woman was found in a trunk in a field in St. Pete, subsequently dubbed the "Trunk Lady" case, police said they've identified her. Sylvia June Atherton was 41 at the time that she was killed, police said. She left behind five children and was from Tucson, Arizona, with seemingly no ties to St. Pete.





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More than 50 years after the body of an unknown woman was found in a trunk in a field in St. Pete, subsequently dubbed the "Trunk Lady" case, police said they've identified her.

Sylvia June Atherton was 41 at the time that she was killed, police said. She left behind five children and was from Tucson, Arizona, with seemingly no ties to St. Pete.

Atherton's body was found in a large black trunk on Halloween Day in the 4200 block of 32nd Street South. Police said two kids told officers at

the time that they saw two men pull up in a pickup, put the trunk in the field, and leave.



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Atherton was found wrapped in plastic inside the trunk. Police say she had visible injuries to her head and had been strangled with a man's Western-style Bolo tie. She was partially clothed in a pajama top.

Assistant Chief Mike Kovacsev said detectives at the time searched for missing person reports that matched the description of the body found but after years of trying, the case went cold.

Kovacsev said in 2010, as part of an effort to identify unknown victims, the police department exhumed Atherton's body to try to get a DNA sample. She was buried as a Jane Doe.

The attempt was unsuccessful, Kovacsev said, because her remains were too degraded.

In late 2022 and early 2023, Kovacsev said detectives went back through the case again to see if anything was missed. Kovacsev said detectives found hair that was never tested and sent it to a private lab, which was able to get a DNA profile from it.

The lab was able to run the profile through a genealogy database which led authorities to identify Atherton and find some of her living relatives.

Kovacsev said Atherton left Arizona with her husband Stuart Brown, her 5-year-old daughter Kimberly Anne Brown, her adult son Gary Sullivan, adult daughter Donna and her husband David Lindhurst, and went to Chicago.

Authorities said Atherton's 9-year-old daughter Syllen and 11-year-old son were left with their father from a previous marriage in Arizona. Gary Sullivan eventually returned to Arizona to live with them.

Kovacev said police don't have information on who killed her at this time.

"This is where like amateur sleuths will come in," Kovacev said. "This is where we're asking for assistance to kind of put the pieces together."

Kovacev said the trunk Atherton was found in belonged to her. Her husband Stuart Brown died in 1999 and never reported her missing, authorities said, and didn't list her in any court records.

"You can see there's some inferences there that we kind of have to fill in the gaps," Kovacev said. "We want to bring forward the fact that she has a name now after 53 years, her family does have the closure, and that's the closure we're trying to bring forward."

Kovacev added, "We may not always be able to bring an arrest forward, but we need to be able to show that we still care."

Atherton's daughter, Syllen Gates said it's a relief to finally know her mother has been found.

"A sad relief that they finally found her and she, of course, this was a terrible way to die," said Gates, who was nine at the time her mom disappeared.

Police said they've been unable to locate Atherton's daughters Kimberly Brown, who was five at the time, and Donna Lindhurst, who was 20 at the time.

Anyone with information is asked to contact Detective Wallace Pavelski at 727-893-4823.