

John Doe case in Saskatchewan solved with DNA evidence 26 years later

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Officials have not released the name of the man hit by a train in Regina in 1995

[Ronna Syed](#) · CBC News · Posted: Aug 05, 2021 2:00 AM CT | Last Updated: August 5



This composite sketch of John Doe was released to the public by the Regina Police Service. On July 28, 1995, police were dispatched to the Canadian Pacific Railway crossing at 13th Avenue and Courtney Street in Regina for a report of a fatality. (Regina Police Service)

WARNING: This story contains details some readers may find distressing.

A 26-year-old case involving a John Doe in Saskatchewan has finally been solved with DNA evidence.

The Saskatchewan Coroner's Service and Regina Police Service declined to confirm this. But *The Fifth Estate* has learned that the victim, hit by a CP train in Regina on July 28, 1995, is a man from Winnipeg.

"It's the only case where I cannot give a loved one back to their family ... It's important everyone has a burial," said Saskatchewan coroner Jerry Bell. He spoke with *The Fifth Estate* in July.

"It's to get a son home to his family ... I'm old, I need to retire and I hope, and I mean this from my heart, I hope that I can put a name to John Doe, and then I will retire. He'll be my reason to retire."



Jerry Bell with Saskatchewan's Coroner's Service poses for a photo. (Submitted by Jerry Bell)

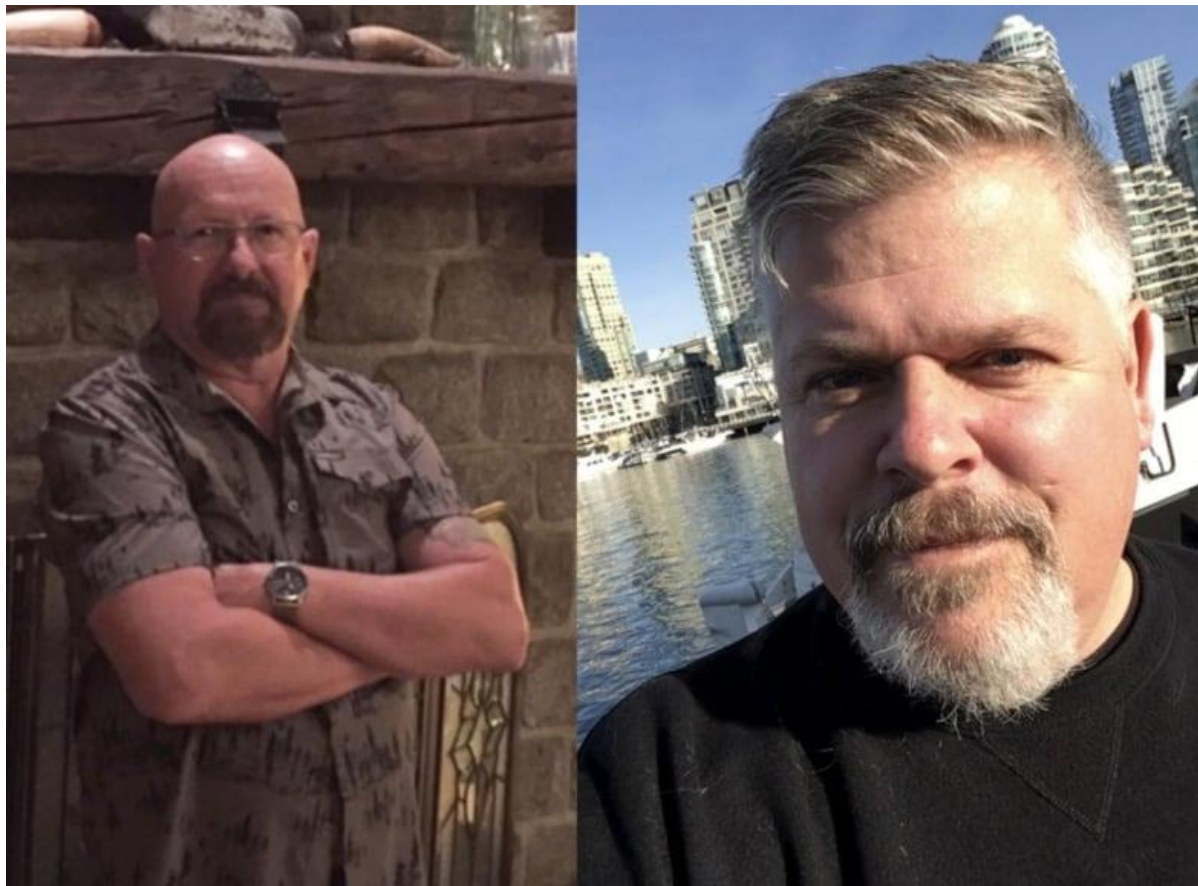
Both the Saskatchewan coroner's office and the Regina Police Service (RPS) had been participating in a *Fifth Estate* documentary about unidentified human remains before suddenly pulling out in July without providing an explanation, apart from stating that there had been "a potential development."

Nearly 700 cases with unidentified remains

Attempts to put a name to unidentified human remains in Canada have been a challenge, with almost 700 unsolved cases, according to RCMP in Ottawa. These figures do not include the recently uncovered unmarked graves at former residential schools.

RPS officer Curtis Kemp, now retired, was one of two officers first to arrive on the scene after the man died 26 years ago.

"We were just in the middle of general patrol," Kemp told the *Fifth Estate*. "When you come to the scene it's pretty macabre.... It's horrible to observe.... The one you feel the sorriest for is the poor person who operated the train. I remember it very distinctly because he [the train's conductor] was just pacing, he was absolutely beside himself."

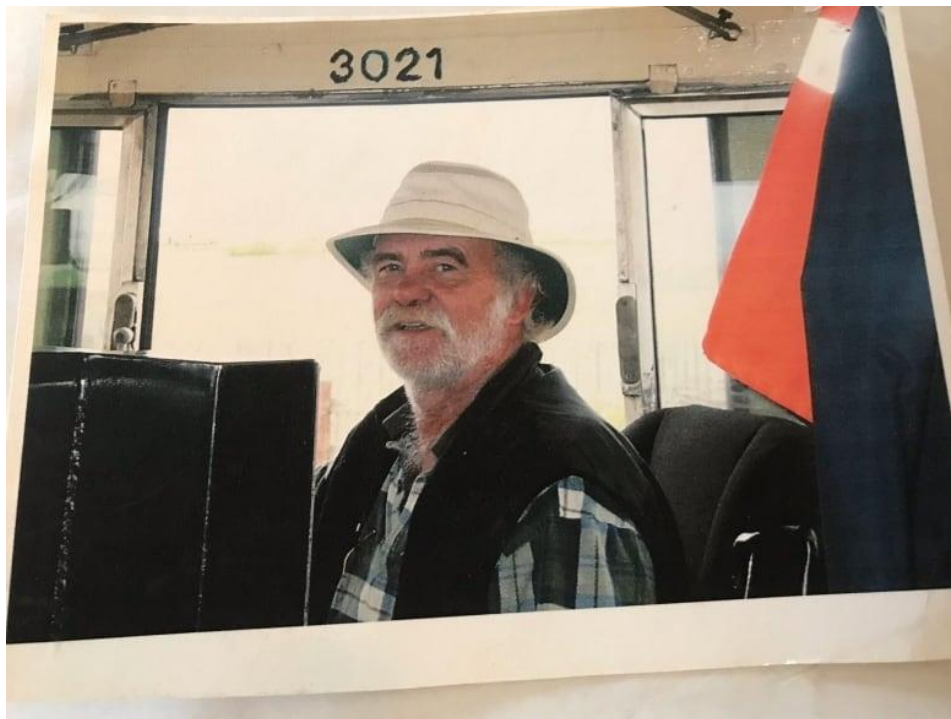


Former Regina Police Service officers Stephen O'Leary, left, and Curtis Kemp are both now retired. They were the two officers to arrive at the scene of John Doe's death in 1995. (Submitted by Stephen O'Leary/Curtis Kemp)
Kemp never saw the train conductor again or learned his name.

In Canada, railway companies have their own police forces. Kemp and his partner were not allowed to interview the conductor or engineer of the train.

"You think this is some young kid who was riding the rails and was down to his last dime Everybody has somebody. To me that's so incredibly painful," said Kemp. "It brings it all back. I see him there, just as if it was yesterday."

'There's a guy on the tracks, walking down the tracks'



Former CP engineer Bruce Henderson was driving the train on July 28, 1995 in Regina when a young man was hit and killed. (Submitted by Bruce Henderson)
The Fifth Estate tracked down the train conductor, now retired, but he declined to speak.

The train's engineer, Bruce Henderson, also retired, said he remembers every detail vividly, even 26 years later.

"I was driving the train from Moose Jaw to Broadview, Saskatchewan. There's a guy on the tracks, walking down the tracks, in between the rails, in the same direction I'm going," said Henderson.

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THE FIFTH ESTATE

Man whose burned body was found in septic tank on Alberta farm identified by DNA 44 years later

- **10 years later, train death victim still 'John Doe'**

"I am leaning on the horn and the bell and the whistles because maybe he has his headphones on and he thinks it's easier to walk on the tracks than on the side of the tracks.

"He turned around and looked at me, he got off the tracks and I thought 'good, at least he got off the tracks.' He started walking on the gravel on the side of the rails ... He looks back at me, he then turned to the rail and just tried to dive in front of the train, towards the track."

According to the RPS website, the man is described as Caucasian, between 20 and 30 years old, clean shaven, with short, medium-brown hair and blue eyes and five feet, nine inches tall.

He was wearing a black denim button shirt over a white t-shirt with the words "Boca Authentic" on the front. He also wore blue jeans and a pair of Reebok running shoes. He had no personal identification inside his knapsack but did have some personal belongings, including a silver brooch shaped like a rose.

Company hired for DNA analysis

Before the identification had been made, the coroner's office had confirmed to *The Fifth Estate* that they had hired Othram Inc. in Texas to use genetic genealogy to try to identify the man.

David Mittelman, a geneticist and the CEO who runs Othram Inc., declined to comment.

Othram is a private laboratory that specializes in the recovery and analysis of human DNA from degraded or contaminated forensic evidence. They also do genealogical research to try to identify the person the DNA belongs to for policing agencies in Canada and the U.S.

They have solved several cases in Canada, [including identifying Gordon Sanderson](#), a man nicknamed "Septic Tank Sam" by the Alberta RCMP after being found in a septic tank 44 years ago outside of Tofield, Alta.

Kemp's partner, Steve O'Leary, now also retired, said the Regina victim was kept in the morgue for six months before being buried.

"There was a small graveside funeral for this kid. The coroner was there and my partner and I and a minister and that was it. We buried him. He was a John Doe," said O'Leary.

"I cannot even imagine what it must be like to lose a family member like that, always wondering if they're still alive or living somewhere else under a different name."

The dead man is buried in Riverside Memorial Park Cemetery. The name on the granite headstone says John Doe.

If there is a case of unidentified human remains from your town or city that you would like us to investigate, please email fifthtips@cbc.ca.

If you're experiencing suicidal thoughts or having a mental health crisis, help is available. For an emergency or crisis situation, call 911.

If you are thinking of suicide or know someone who is, help is available nationwide by calling the [Canada Suicide Prevention Service](#) toll-free at 1-833-456-4566, 24 hours a day, or texting 45645. (The text service is available from 4 p.m. to midnight Eastern time).

You can also contact the Saskatchewan suicide prevention line, toll-free and 24/7, by calling 1-833-456-4566, texting 45645 or [chatting online](#).

You can also text CONNECT to 686868 and get immediate support from a crisis responder through the Crisis Text Line, powered by Kids Help Phone.