

How an amateur genealogist solved a 48-year-old ‘Jane Doe’ case

By [Brenda Gazzar](#), Los Angeles Daily News

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A painting of Cheryl McMillan stands on the right, as John Paul Manzo Jr. of Clovis looks through photographs with Rita Hood in Santa Clarita on Friday, Sept. 23, 2016. Hood, who practices genealogy as a hobby, recently discovered the identity of a “Jane Doe,” Cheryl McMillan, who is Manzo’s half sister. McMillan was found dead on a bench in Los Angeles’ Griffith Park 48 years ago. (Photo by Ed Crisostomo, Staff Photographer)

The petite woman with bleached blonde hair was found slumped over a picnic table near Mount Hollywood Drive inside Los Angeles’ scenic Griffith Park.

The brown-eyed beauty in her 20s was clad in a red-and-white polka dotted bikini, a white or light tan overcoat and dark sandals. On her manicured finger was a gold wedding ring with the inscription “C.B. to E.J. 9-4-20.” The date was June 8, 1968.

The woman with elegantly shaped eyebrows had no identification and was pronounced dead that morning. She reportedly had been staying at the Hollywoodland motel in Studio City and “had the possible name of Sherryl Miller,” according to Los Angeles County coroner records. However, authorities could not confirm that, and she was given the moniker Jane Doe #18.

She was discovered the same day that the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassin was captured and The Rolling Stones released their hit single “Jumpin’ Jack Flash.”

She would remain unidentified — and nameless — for 48 years.

The old [black-and-white photo](#) of the Jane Doe that Carl Koppelman spotted on the coroner’s website back in 2010 was striking.

She “looked almost like Marilyn Monroe,” the El Segundo resident said. “I was surprised that this woman from 1968 had never been identified.”

A moderator on Web Sleuths, where unsolved cases are discussed by amateurs online, Koppelman uploaded a facial reconstruction he had created of her onto the Web Sleuths website in April 2010 and later on his personal Facebook page.

Using the graphics application Corel Photo-Paint, the 53-year-old Koppelman reconstructs faces of the missing and unidentified dead with the hope that these images will be shared and recognized by someone. The accountant-turned-caretaker of his elderly mother was first asked to create the reconstruction of the “Griffith Park Jane Doe” by a volunteer at [The Doe Network](#), he said.

Koppelman revised and reposted the image on his Facebook page a number of times, including in September 2014, with the iconic Hollywood sign partly showing in the background.

Rita Elin Hood of Santa Clarita was on her lunch break in July of this year when she saw the compelling image and story on her former colleague’s Facebook page.

The accountant at Princess Cruises, where Koppelman worked a decade ago, was intrigued that the wedding ring the unidentified woman had been wearing was inscribed with two sets of initials and a date — similar to the wedding ring she wore from her own husband. Hood was also struck by the fact that the date on the inscription — Sept. 4 — happened to be her birthday.

Wondering if she could find the corresponding marriage record on [Ancestry.com](#), the amateur genealogist began poring over thousands of records that are published online in 36 states. But that excluded California, which does not have online marriage records for that period.

To focus her search, she found the 10 most popular women’s names of the era beginning with E, including Elizabeth, Ethel and Edna. She then searched records for these women with last names beginning in J. who married men with the initials C.B. on Sept. 4, 1920.

The 44-year-old mother of two daughters searched diligently in her spare time — usually late at night after her family was asleep — until she found a match about four weeks later: Edna Lydia Jay married Charles J. Bush in Detroit on Sept. 4, 1920.

Hood discovered through online census records that Edna Bush had two daughters before she died of ill health in 1932. She was 30 years old.

Marriage records revealed that one of Edna Bush's two daughters, Geraldine or "Jeri" Bush, married three times — the last time to a man by the name of John Paul Manzo in Florida in 1960.

Hood found a John Manzo living in California on Facebook and sent him an instant message on Sept. 9 to determine if he could be a relative of Edna Bush.

On Sept. 11, John P. Manzo Jr., a resident of Clovis in Fresno County, replied that Edna Bush was indeed his grandmother, and Geraldine, who died in 2014, was his mother.

Hood then asked him if he knew who had received Edna's wedding band because "it appears there was a Jane Doe found in California" who had possession of that ring.

"Call me," Manzo replied.

Manzo was so nervous, he later said, that he ended up giving Hood the wrong phone number. So she asked him to call her instead.

When they spoke a minute later, Manzo blurted out: "My sister's been missing since 1968. When was your Jane Doe found?"

Hood, who by this time was trembling, told him "June 8, 1968."

Manzo was only 6 years old when his half sister Cheryl Ann McMillan — who was 15 years his senior — had disappeared for good.

The 54-year-old U.S. Army veteran recalls his sister "taking him everywhere" in the Silicon Valley and using him as "boy bait" with their cousins at the beach. She was the product of their mother Jeri's short-lived first marriage but was formally adopted by her second husband, Douglas W. McMillan, in Michigan.

"I know she doted on me a lot," Manzo, a construction splicer, said of his sister. "I definitely remember that — just the feeling of love and being cared for."

Cheryl McMillan moved to Los Angeles after graduating from Campbell High School in the Bay Area in 1964. The family lost contact with her, and at one point, her mother hired a private investigator to look for her. But when she was found, McMillan reportedly told the investigator: "leave me alone; tell them I'm fine."

Some time later, McMillan — who had become entangled in drugs and had dated a man with the last name of Miller — was scheduled to be maid of honor in her cousin Ellen’s wedding on June 22, 1968, in San Jose. She never showed.

Manzo was told by relatives that his family had spoken to police about her disappearance, but detectives could not find a missing person’s report in recent weeks. Manzo said he recently learned from a relative that his sister — who died of a morphine overdose — was being used as a mule to run drugs from Mexico.

“We always looked for her alive,” Manzo said. “We never looked for Jane Does.”

After Hood brought her discovery to police, Detective Mario Santana of the Los Angeles Police Department Operations-Valley Bureau Homicide’s unsolved unit methodically interviewed McMillan’s relatives in three states.

“I told them to pull up pictures, pull up letters, try to remember things that happened in the past, certain details about her that maybe I can go ahead and use to identify her,” including scars, Santana said.

On Sept. 22, 2016, Santana confirmed with “100 percent” confidence that Cheryl McMillan was indeed the Griffith Park Jane Doe from 1968. She died at the age of 21.

For McMillan’s cousin Cindy Adams, who was about the same age and grew up with her in Florida for a time, the news was bittersweet.

“I was happy to know what happened to her but brokenhearted that she actually was gone forever,” said Adams, who lives in New Port Richey, Florida. Just last year, Adams threw away all the letters her cousin had written her and her parents, she lamented, thinking “I can’t do this forever.”

As for Manzo, the realization that his big sister didn’t just leave and abandon him means a great deal.

“It’s like ‘don’t be close to anybody, they might leave,’ so I usually make sure I’m the one that leaves first,” he said, adding he “now has a whole different perspective.”

He also knows that McMillan, who had struggled with drug use for years, could have easily pawned her grandmother’s wedding ring for cash nearly five decades ago. But because she didn’t, and because of the deep curiosity of an amateur genealogist in Santa Clarita, who Manzo now considers “part of my family,” Jane Doe #18 finally has her name back.

She “wasn’t just another heroin drug addict found in the park,” Manzo said. “She was my sister.”

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Doe Network Case