

Lincoln County Coroner's Office and Southeast Missouri State University Partner with Othram to Identify a 1978 Jane Doe

After nearly 50 years, a woman whose remains were found in the Mississippi River near Elsberry, Missouri, has been identified as 16-year old **Helen Groomes**.

Solved

Summary



In March 1978, a hunter spotted a body in the Mississippi River near Elsberry, Missouri. Lincoln County authorities responded to the scene and the individual's remains were transported to the St. Louis County Medical Examiner for autopsy. It was determined that the remains were that of a white female whose cause of death was drowning. No signs of trauma were observed, and the manner of death was classified as undetermined. The medical examiner estimated that she had died about four months prior to the discovery of her remains.

The woman was wearing a cat's eye ring and she had a tattoo that appeared to say "Dee" on her left forearm. Despite their extensive efforts, authorities were unable to identify the woman and her remains were interred in the Troy, Missouri city cemetery. A headstone marking the woman's grave was placed and she became known as Lincoln County Jane Doe. In 2009, details of the case were entered into the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs) as UP5295.

In November 2023, Lincoln County Jane Doe's remains were exhumed by the Lincoln County Coroner's Office and their local and regional partners, with assistance from Southeast Missouri State University (SEMO) Anthropology faculty and students. The remains were brought to SEMO for an updated anthropological analysis and sampling for specialized testing. SEMO's osteological and dental analysis revealed that Lincoln County Jane Doe was likely in her teens when she died, rather than being 30-40 years old as suggested in her case file and autopsy report from 1978. The remains were poorly preserved, but under the supervision of SEMO Anthropology professor Jennifer Bengtson, advanced SEMO anthropology and chemistry students applied chemical analyses and used published literature to choose the most promising samples for DNA extraction and advanced DNA testing.

In late November 2023, Southeast Missouri State University sent these samples to Othram in The Woodlands, Texas. Despite the poor condition of the remains, Othram scientists successfully developed a DNA extract from the evidence and built a comprehensive DNA profile using Forensic Grade Genome Sequencing®. Othram's in-house forensic genetic genealogy team then used this profile to conduct a genetic genealogy search, ultimately providing new investigative leads to law enforcement.

Lincoln County authorities launched a follow-up investigation and spoke to a person who stated that they had a close family member who had been missing since late 1977. The missing person matched the general physical description of the Jane Doe as reported in the original autopsy report as well as the recently-revised age-at-death estimate. A familial reference sample was collected and further DNA testing was performed, confirming the identity of Lincoln County Jane Doe as Helen Renee Groomes. Helen was just 15 years old in October of 1977, and some information suggests that she may have been last seen in Ottumwa, Iowa.

The investigation into Helen's disappearance and death is ongoing. Anyone with information that may help the investigation is urged to contact Detective Aaron McConnell of the Wapello County Iowa Sheriff's Department at [641-684-4350](tel:641-684-4350).

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