

Police ID victim in 1984 cold case, hope to find suspect



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DES MOINES, Iowa —**

It's a case that has baffled Des Moines police for 33 years.

A man's body was found on the east side of Des Moines and the only clue to his identity was a tattoo.

Now, after three decades, police have identified the man as 39-year-old John Clifton Downey, of Texas. Authorities found the decomposed remains beneath some brush along a trail near East 24th Street and Scott Avenue on Des Moines' east side on Feb. 28, 1984.

An autopsy revealed injuries to the body, and the manner of death was determined to be a homicide.

"This case stalled pretty early on because we didn't have any information," Des Moines police Sgt. Paul Parizek said. "We didn't have a victim's identity, and there was very little forensic evidence at the scene."

Distinctive clothing, surgical intervention and multiple distinctive tattoos were present on the victim, but authorities were unable to identify the man at the time of the investigation.

But the body had very identifiable tattoos that were still visible when his remains were found. One even had his name on it.

The Polk County Medical Examiner's Office said they received a call from the

FBI's Latent Print Unit saying a new fingerprint identification technique made a positive match of the victim to Downey.

Polk County Chief Medical Examiner Gregory Schmunk said Downey's fingerprint, though partly decomposed, was one of the only available forms of evidence.

With the help of NamUS, fingerprint examiners identified the best areas of each print for the automated system to focus on, which improved over time.

Within hours, the Polk County Medical Examiner's Office was able to find next of kin in another state. The next of kin was notified of Downey's death and confirmed his distinctive tattoos.

"As technology advances, it definitely pushes us along with our investigations," Parizek said. "It gives us a little momentum. It gives us new leads to follow."

But after 33 years, some crucial evidence has been lost.

"We do not know what happened to Mr. Downey's remains," Schmunk said.

Despite the setback, police said the new information released Friday will help in capturing a suspect.

"If you know something about the case, you haven't forgotten it after 33 years. If your conscience is bothering you, now is the time to clear it," Parizek said.

The investigation of the homicide by the Des Moines Police Department continues.