

Cold case: Police hope DNA leads to parents of abandoned baby



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35 years ago, a baby was found dead in a ditch. Police hope DNA testing can determine who his parents were



(Photo: Argus Leader File Photo)

Baby Andrew John Doe spent his life at the bottom of an icy ditch.

Wrapped in a sheet and blanket, he was left to freeze in the cold of February.

A driver spotted the bundle along Sycamore Avenue, but it was too late....

Baby Andrew would have turned 35 next month. Instead, his remains sit in a forensics laboratory in Fort Worth, Texas.

Sioux Falls Police exhumed the baby's skeletal remains and sent them south after learning about a method for extracting DNA from bones. Investigators think the technology gives them a chance to answer who the baby belonged to and why he was left to die in a ditch.

"Finding out who the parents are is a fundamental piece in getting this case resolved," Police Chief Matt Burns said.



Baby Andrew John Doe was found dead in a ditch half of a mile south of 26th Street and Sycamore Avenue in 1981. This photo shows the area today. Police in Sioux Falls have sent the baby's remains to a DNA lab in Texas hoping to learn who his parents were. (Photo: Joe Ahlquist / Argus Leader)

The afternoon of Feb. 28, 1981, police received calls from drivers on Sycamore Avenue who spotted the baby along the road.

The coroner at the time estimated the baby had been in the ditch about 24 hours and lived just a couple hours. The boy appeared to have been born healthy, nearly full-term, and the coroner concluded cold combined with blood loss likely killed him. The umbilical cord was still attached.

Police asked the public and local doctors for help identifying the mother, but no leads surfaced. A detective told the *Argus Leader* at the time that doctor-patient privacy rules made it doubtful that the woman's doctor, if she had one, would come forward.

One woman did step forward: a stranger who offered to arrange a funeral but wouldn't share her name. She did name the baby: Andrew.

A week after the infant was found, about 50 strangers gathered for a service to say goodbye. Children left stuffed animals — a brown bear, a black poodle — next to the tiny casket. A gold-plated pin was fastened to his yellow pajamas reading "You are loved."

At the funeral, detectives scanned the crowd in hopes of spotting the mother or someone else with answers, but none emerged.



About 50 strangers gathered to bury Andrew John Doe, an infant found in a ditch early March 1981. (Photo: Argus Leader File Photo)

Today, the case remains one of Sioux Falls' few unsolved homicides.

When Sioux Falls Police originally investigated the case, DNA technology had not yet emerged as a law enforcement tool.

Today, South Dakota's state crime lab routinely extracts genetic fingerprints from bodily fluids left behind at crime scenes. The state lab doesn't have the expertise or equipment, though, to isolate DNA from other remains such as bones.

"It's a different process, it's a different level of expertise and it's a different level of administrative work within the laboratory," said Mark Ingraham, associate director of the laboratory of forensic anthropology at the University of North Texas.

It's challenging work for most local crime labs, which are used to dealing with relatively easy extraction from blood or semen, Ingraham said.



Amber Bell, DNA examiner in SDFL, works in the biology section at the George S. Mickelson Criminal Justice Center on Jan. 12. (Photo: Emily Spartz Weerheim / Argus Leader)

In 2013, when South Dakota authorities found skeletal remains of two people in a car that was pulled out of Brule Creek near Elk Point, Attorney General Marty Jackley outsourced the job of identifying the remains.

The Texas crime lab determined the bones belonged to two girls who disappeared in 1971 on their way to a party at a gravel pit in Union County. It was a major break in a case that was previously thought to involve an abduction or homicide but was later ruled an accident.

“We have used them on other missing persons cases where we submit DNA from family members to their lab to try to develop a known (relative) of the missing,” said Sara Rabern, a spokeswoman for the South Dakota Division of Criminal Investigation.

Sioux Falls Police Chief Matt Burns said when the department learned about the Texas lab’s ability to draw DNA from skeletal remains, a decision was made to send Baby Andrew off for testing. His remains were delivered to the lab last year, and police expect results later this year.

Dr. Monte Miller, a forensic DNA expert who has worked in crime labs in Texas and South Dakota, said the strand of DNA the lab in Texas will hopefully extract could link the baby to his mother or anyone on her side of the family.

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Police Chief Matt Burns

The FBI maintains a DNA database called the Combine DNA Index System, which holds DNA profiles from criminal offenders, missing persons, unidentified human remains and relatives of missing persons.

If there is a hit — if the database includes a maternal relative of the baby — Sioux Falls police would be able to start piecing together Baby Andrew’s family tree, Miller said.

“Sometimes it literally can mean the difference in solving the case,” Jackley said.

Lt. David McIntire of the Sioux Falls Police Department’s Crimes Against Persons Unit said he didn’t want to say how confident he was that detectives would be able to close the case with some new information.

“If there is something new we can work with to develop a new lead, we will follow it until it runs into a dead-end or conclusion,” he said.



Lieutenant David McIntire (Photo: Joe Ahlquist / Argus Leader)

Baby Andrew is a victim, and no matter how old the case, police have an obligation to try to solve it, Chief Burns said. If the DNA tests don’t provide any new leads, detectives will still move forward on trying to solve the case, he said.

Minnehaha County State’s Attorney Aaron McGowan is among those waiting for a break in the case. He said he supports the police department’s decision to test the remains, and that he would consider bringing charges in the case.

Even though the case is three and a half decades old, McGowan said that depending on the facts he would be able to bring charges ranging from kidnaping to murder against whomever was responsible for Baby Andrew's death.

"If we are able to develop a suspect and had probable cause to believe that a crime occurred, my office would certainly review the matter to hold any offenders accountable," McGowan said.

For now, authorities will wait.

"This is our job," McIntire said. "What we do is try to bring justice for the victim and find out the truth."

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