

Serial Killings.txt

Forensic Anthropologist "Digging" for Answers to 37-year old Murders

By Barbara Gibson

When Dr. Sharon Derrick was a teenager she watched the horror of Houston's Mass murders unfold on her family's television in Austin, Texas. She watched, as the world did, Houston and Pasadena police detectives remove one body after another from a boat storage shed in southwest Houston.

The boat shed was revealed as Dean Corll's private cemetery where, after sadistically torturing and raping his victims, their nude bodies were wrapped in plastic, bound with rope, covered with lime and placed in shallow graves. The discovery was made after an early morning phone call on August 8, 1973 to Pasadena Police from 16-year old Elmer Wayne Henley, Jr. Henley said to police "y'all better come, I just killed a man." Once in custody Henley explained that the man he killed was Dean Corll. Henley shot Corll five times in self defense after Corll handcuffed him and threatened to rape and kill him, or so he said.

Once in police custody, Henley began to weave a tale so inconceivable that, at first, the detectives didn't believe him. He described how he and another teenager, 18-year old David Owen Brooks, had over the past three years acted as "procurers," luring unsuspecting boys, many lifelong friends, to their deaths at the hands of Corll. Over the next few days, Henley and Brooks would lead police to two more burial sites at Lake Sam Rayburn and High Island in Galveston County. The final body count in 1973 climbed to 27 boys ranging in ages from 13-20. Thirty five years later, three victims remain unidentified.

Never did Dr. Derrick imagine that one day she would be walking in the shoes of legendary forensic pathologist and Harris County Medical Examiner Dr. Joseph Jachimczyk in identifying the victims of Dean Corll, and his accomplices Elmer Wayne Henley, Jr., and David Owen Brooks most of whom were her own age.

Dr. Derrick's journey into the unknown began at the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences formerly known as the Harris County Medical Examiner's Office in 2006 when at her own request she was assigned to identify the remaining three victims. Her task was to dig through the depths of time utilizing her skills as a seasoned forensic anthropologist.

Derrick is in the Anthropology Division which includes three forensic anthropologists and an identification specialist. They analyze skeletal remains to build a profile consisting of age, race, sex, height, presence or absence of trauma, and time since death to aid law enforcement in positive identification of an individual when no other means are available. Sometime it is not possible to gather all of the pertinent information because the remains may be badly damaged or fragmented. Whenever possible, however, forensic anthropologists create a detailed profile of the remains, with the

Serial Killings.txt

ultimate goal of positive identification.

In a personal interview with The Police News Dr. Derrick said, "The three victims were autopsied in 1973 and at one point were sent to an outside anthropological service and there was a report from that anthropologist for each of the three cases, but I wanted to go in and do my own analysis as well and see if we jived and make sure we could submit some DNA to develop a profile on these three individuals. This had been done previously but it was back in the antiquated days so the type of DNA analysis that was done was unable to produce any results. I did a full anthropological examination on each of the three cases and my report was very similar to the results of the prior anthropologist's report. We combined these reports and took samples from each of the individuals and sent them to the Texas Missing Person DNA database for identification."

This database provides a very powerful tool for investigators trying to locate missing persons or identifying remains by allowing federal, state, and local crime laboratories to electronically exchange and compare DNA profiles.

Derrick said, "We had mixed results on all three, because, even though they had been kept refrigerated since 1973 at the proper temperature and storage, DNA does get contaminated over time. We then submitted some teeth and long bones from the individuals. It's a very long process especially when you're dealing with old bones. It took awhile to get the first negative test results back. So we just kept trying, sending samples of bones until we were able to get a mitochondrial DNA profile on all three. You don't make an ID on mitochondrial DNA alone as you are not really narrowing down the population to a specific person or family. We can't absolutely identify a person from the mitochondrial DNA, but on the other hand the nuclear DNA, because in most cases it encodes more of the genome than the mitochondrial DNA, we can usually get a pretty good comparison if you have enough of the DNA sample.

"On one of the victims we were able to identify a full mitochondrial DNA profile and enough of the nuclear DNA profile to be completely comparable, but that wasn't one of these three boys. It was the 28th victim that we were able to identify just this past year.

17-year old Joseph Allen Lyles was reported missing on February 1, 1973. He was identified because I had already collected DNA from the family. At first we thought he might be one of our three victims, but he wasn't. Lyles' remains were not recovered back in 1973, he was found in 1983 and no connection was made at that time to the mass murders even though he was found right next to where some of the other victims were recovered on High Island. The senior anthropologist and I split up the cases, she took the 1983 case and sent in the DNA sample for the profile just like we do as part of our standard operating procedure and it came back with a hit with Lyles' family. It was amazing. We were very excited. I suspected that Joseph Allen Lyles was one of the victims, but he wasn't one of the known victims. Given the fact that he knew Dean Corll, was seen in his company and lived very close by, his family has always suspected he was a victim.

"It's all very much detective work even though we aren't law enforcement. We have a missing person report but it was 1973 and

Serial Killings.txt

people do move around and all the phone numbers in Houston have changed since then. We had to get on multiple search engine databases to try and find the family. I was finally able to find his niece who in turn contacted her mother who was Lyle's sister who then contacted me and then the whole family got involved. But it took months, because we have a full time case load as it is with current cases and so these cases although we are working very hard to get them resolved, sometimes they just have to sit on the desk for a little while because we have to do our daily work. It takes a long time to do these searches and then get the family to actually come in, although every family I have contacted asking them to come submit DNA have responded with "oh yes ma'am, thank you for calling me, I've always wanted to do this."

In addition to the DNA testing, Dr. Derrick contacted the LSU FACES (Forensic Anthropology and Computer Enhancement Services) laboratory in Baton Rouge which was able to produce facial reconstructions of the victims. With these photographs Dr. Derrick contacted David Owen Brooks and Elmer Wayne Henley, both serving life sentences in prison. Henley was not able to offer any assistance. Brooks, although unable to provide a name, was able to describe the accurate manner of death of one of the victims as well as draw a map to the boy's home. This information already confirmed what Dr. Derrick had long suspected. One of the victims was Randall Lee Harvey. On March 9, 1971, Randell Lee Harvey left his home in the Heights on his bike to work at a Fina gas station on Ella Blvd in the Oak Forest neighborhood. The 15-year-old finished work that night, then disappeared. His mother reported him missing two days later, but he was never heard from again. His bicycle was never found. DNA tests, skeletal analysis and circumstantial evidence helped lead to Harvey's official identification.

Before Dr. Derrick left the prison, Brooks told her that the location of the first victim Corll murdered was at an apartment complex on Judiway St. prior to September of 1970. Brooks' original statement to police stated that the first murders he knew about occurred in southwest Houston at the Yorktown House apartments on December 15, 1970 where he had seen James Glass and Danny Yates, both 14, tied to Corll's bed. Corll promised Brooks a car if he kept his mouth shut about what he had seen. The boat shed in High Island was rented by Corll in November 1970, making Glass and Yates the first victims to be buried there.

The two unidentified victims remaining, known as case number ML73-3378 found at Lake Sam Rayburn, is described as a white male 15-19 years old, 5'8" tall with dark brown hair approx 3.5" in length and case number ML-73-3356 which was a boy found at the boat shed, and described as a white male 15-20 years old, 5'2"-5'7" tall with dark brown hair approx 7" in length. He was found with blue corduroy pants, a Henley style shirt decorated with a peace symbol, a multicolored, striped swim suit with an attached belt and brown cowboy boots. Facial reconstruction was developed for both boys but additional DNA testing later concluded that the lower jaw bone used in the reconstruction of the Sam Rayburn victim did not belong to the victim and was removed from the photograph.

Was Brooks suggesting that case number ML73-3356 aka "swim suit"

Serial Killings.txt

boy, may have been from the Oak Forest area as Judiway is across the street from the Oak Forest Park that kids would flock to during the summer to enjoy the facility's swimming pool? Since Corll didn't rent the boat shed until November of 1970, is it possible he moved the body? Dr. Derrick speculates, based on the decomposition and the sequence of burial spots in the boat shed, "swim suit" boy's death could more likely be placed in 71 or 72, probably around the summer time.

The second remaining victim, case number ML73-3378, was found in a shallow grave in a remote woodsy area near Lake Sam Rayburn. His level of decomposition was similar to or a little more advanced than the victim Homer Garcia, who's body was recovered in a shallow grave about ten feet away. Garcia was last seen on July 7, 1973. He had had met Henley at the Coaches Driving School in Bellaire and had been tortured and murdered at Corll's house in Pasadena. Dr. Derrick speculates that he may have disappeared at the same time as Garcia or some time in June. Another June victim was William "Billy" Lawrence, also a friend of Henley's. Lawrence's father last saw him on June 4, 1973 and received a letter from him post marked June 8th from Austin. Could this victim be a hitch hiker from the Austin area? Dr. Derrick would like to hear from those that have a loved one that has been missing any time in 1973.

"What I am hoping for, is that the Police News will be able to get some information out there to the public," explains Derrick. "I don't care if you don't think it's going to match, give law enforcement your DNA and get it into the system because if we don't have your unidentified missing loved one, someone else in the country may and will never be able to make that comparison especially for cases along time ago. If you have a missing family member from any time get your DNA in the system, because it's a wonderful database because all ME offices in the country are going to put information into the NamUS (National Missing and Unidentified Persons System) database and it will have all the particulars of the case and then the DNA will be put into CODIS (CODIS stands for Combined DNA Index System) so that if they submit their DNA without having an idea of what they might want to look for on NamUS they might get a hit. They run CODIS every week.

"If they are local here and they think it might be a Harris County death, they can always come to us, the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences' office, and we'll be glad to do that, however, other than that small portion of the population, call your local law enforcement office, whatever is closest to you and ask them how you need to go about submitting a DNA sample. It has to be law enforcement and not your doctor and it takes just 15 minutes. Providing a DNA sample is a simple and painless process of swabbing the inside cheek of the mouth for about 15 seconds.

"The process does take awhile, usually a few months before the submitted sample is processed. It takes about 2-4 weeks to analyze the swab and get it entered into the system. Then they can get a hit in a week if the unidentified person's DNA is already in the system. Give it a couple of months before you start calling law enforcement for the results. If there's a hit, they are going to contact you."

If you have a missing loved one in Harris County or have any

Serial Killings.txt

information that could help identify the remaining Corll victims, please call the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences' office at 713.796-9292 and ask to speak with Dr. Sharon Derrick or any of the other forensic anthropologists if she is not available.

Barbara Gibson is an investigative reporter based in Friendswood, Texas and a regular contributor to The Police News.