

Investigators close in on Beth Doe and her killer



Investigators hope new science and technology will help determine the identity of "Beth Doe," a woman who was dismembered and her body dumped off an Interstate 80 bridge in rural Carbon County in 1976. Above is a Pennsylvania State Police rendering of what the woman is believed to have looked... (Contributed photo, Pennsylvania State Police)

By **Bill Landauer**,
Of The Morning Call

NOVEMBER 29, 2014, 10:05 PM

In the early 1990s, when Tom McAndrew joined the state police, the older cops told him about Beth Doe.

Her case had been tough — as horrific as it was impossible. Nothing they could find led to who Beth Doe was. She'd literally fallen onto Carbon County soil from the sky. In 1976, so far as they could tell, someone had thrown her mangled corpse off an Interstate 80 bridge.

Solving a murder is hard enough when you don't know the killer's name. When you don't know the victim's name, decades can pile up.

Nearly 40 years later, Beth Doe is McAndrew's case. Her story, her killer and her name are still outside of his grasp, but thanks to new technology, the cold-case investigator could be closer than ever before.

Recently, an anthropology professor from the University of South Florida performed isotope testing of a tissue sample from Beth Doe's 38-year-old corpse. The new process can divine the chemical content of water a

murder victim ingested, and then match the chemicals to a specific location.

The findings suggest the woman found at the bottom of a bridge wasn't a local girl. Rather, she probably came from western or central Europe. She likely moved to the United States as a child or teen and lived somewhere in the Southeast.

Isotope testing is inexact, McAndrew said, so none of that is a guarantee. But it's something. A lead. Another straw in the haystack the state police have been taking apart, piece by piece, for four decades.

The needle they're hunting: the identity of a young woman, perhaps days away from delivering a baby. Police say someone strangled Beth Doe and shot her in the throat. The killer mutilated her remains, slicing them with neat precision with a fine, serrated knife.

And then, whoever did it disappeared.

A grisly find

On Dec. 20, 1976, a 14-year-old boy found the body near the borough of White Haven on the Luzerne-Carbon county line.

White Haven is a handful of homes, a hardware store and a few bars near Lehigh Gorge State Park, and few people there remember much about the Beth Doe story. It's an exit off I-80, roughly 20 miles west of the highway's intersection with Route 33, and one of dozens of similar hamlets the expressway encounters as it shoots across Pennsylvania.

Every day, thousands of cars roar past White Haven over the Lehigh River, suspended on a bridge 300 feet high, held up by concrete supports swirled with graffiti.

The boy made his grisly discovery near one of the bridge supports on the Carbon County side of the river.

Someone traveling west on the interstate tossed three suitcases over the edge of the bridge, presumably aiming for the water below. One landed on a frozen river bank, and two others fell in the woods nearby.

The impact broke open two of the suitcases, expelling the severed head of the young woman, her torso and the full-term fetus police believe she'd been pregnant with when she was murdered seven to 24 hours before.

The unopened suitcase contained her arms and legs.

The nose, ears and breasts had been removed. They were never recovered. Days later, an autopsy revealed the woman had been in her late teens or early 20s, and her death was officially ruled a homicide.

In 1983, Carbon County officials buried her near the borough of Weatherly in Laurytown Road Cemetery, hidden at the center of the row upon row of evergreen trees that make up a Christmas tree farm.

This is the county's potter's field, a place where people are buried when their families can't afford a funeral. Or, in Beth Doe's case, when no family can be found. White crosses mark each grave. Flowers often adorn Beth Doe's grave.

Long before officials had laid Beth Doe to rest, her case had gone cold.

The science

McAndrew is a member of the state police Criminal Investigation Assessment Unit, an arm of the agency that, in part, furthers the investigation of cold-case homicides. The group includes investigators from barracks throughout the state. They get together once a month and compare notes.

Cold cases are only part of McAndrew's job. He works other homicides and is an Amber Alert designee, for example. But he loves his cold-case work. He likes bringing closure to families — especially families for whom closure no longer seems in the cards.

"I became intrigued about her," McAndrew said.

For one thing, there was so much evidence, apart from DNA. In the 1970s, forensic science was still primitive. When Beth Doe was discovered, DNA wasn't part of the discussion, so even the most forward-thinking officers did little to preserve tissue samples 40 years ago.

But police knew what 95 percent of Beth Doe's face looked like. Artists were able to draw her. Many other found-body investigations aren't so fortunate. In some cases, police seek the identity of a pile of bones. In another unsolved Carbon County case, for example, police only have the torso of a man to go on. With Beth Doe, there were dental records, fingerprints, samples of cloth, a newspaper, writing on her skin and the suitcases.

In Pennsylvania, found-body cases are assigned random numbers, and investigators are required to update them once a year. So, when a new method or scientific advancement becomes available, officers check if it can be applied to a long-cold case.

On Oct. 30, 2007, a group of state police officers dug up Beth Doe's coffin — first using an excavator and later their hands to avoid breaking the small wooden box in which she'd lain. Inside, county employees had placed her remains in a green bag to protect them from the elements.

Doe's unborn baby was with her in the grave.

The officers took the remains to a lab and removed samples. Two days later, they returned them, marking the solemnity with a simple funeral and replacing the wooden box with a metal one. About 20 people attended. Local religious leaders said prayers over her.

Investigators sent the tissue samples from Beth Doe's corpse to the University of North Texas Center for Human Identification in Fort Worth.

There, forensic scientists developed a DNA profile and entered it into an international database. Families of missing people submit hair, nails or other tissue samples to create their own DNA profiles and use the database to find matches.

To date, no matches have been found for Beth Doe. That doesn't mean the exhumation was wasteful; actually, investigators were able to eliminate some possible missing person candidates they hadn't been sure of, McAndrew said.

As new science becomes available, and as state and federal funding materializes, investigators check their cold cases to see what techniques they can apply.

In this way, the trail in this cold case recently got warmer after 40 years.

Certain chemical elements — strontium, for example — that people absorb in drinking water can find their way into the bones, teeth and hair.

For the past decade or so, scientists have been applying this idea to forensics. For example, the New York Times reported that investigators in England applied the science to the remains of a small boy who was found near the Thames River in 2001. Using specialized equipment, investigators discovered a chemical that led them to believe the boy was from Nigeria.

Eventually, authorities were able to determine the boy's identity.

The practice, known as chemical stable and heavy isotope analysis, has been used for years by archaeologists and anthropologists. Its application in forensics is newer, and it has given McAndrew new hope.

A few months ago, McAndrew sent some of Beth Doe's tooth enamel, bone and hair samples, taken when investigators exhumed the body in 2007, to the University of South Florida for analysis.

The university recently presented McAndrew with the first new information about the Beth Doe case in decades.

If the findings are correct, Beth Doe was born and spent her early childhood in western or central Europe. She moved to the United States as a child or a teenager. She spent at least five to 10 years in the United States before her murder.

She also most likely became pregnant in this country. And she probably lived in the Southeast, possibly somewhere in eastern Tennessee.

The science is inexact, McAndrew said, although there is no telling what breakthrough will lead them down the proper path toward identifying Beth Doe. Already, McAndrew and his fellow officers are using the evidence to look into missing persons cases in the Southeast.

But the science isn't the only thing keeping the Beth Doe case current, and McAndrew isn't the only one searching for her killer.

The volunteer

More than a decade ago, in the Pittsburgh suburb of Penn Hills, Nancy Monahan first heard about the Beth Doe case.

She was perusing a missing persons website and clicked on a case from Pennsylvania.

Monahan found an artist's rendering of an olive-skinned teenage girl staring back at her. If the girl had been permitted to grow up, she and Monahan would be the same age.

"She looked like a girl I went to school with," Monahan said.

After that, Monahan was hooked. She became a volunteer victims advocate for NamUs, the Justice Department's National Missing and Unidentified Persons System — a repository of information on missing persons and unidentified bodies.

Today, at 60 years old and employed as a retail manager, she is the area director with the Doe Network, a volunteer organization that helps law enforcement agencies in missing person and unidentified body cases.

Eventually, she called McAndrew to learn more about Beth Doe.

"She's my pet case," Monahan told McAndrew.

"Mine, too," McAndrew replied.

Monahan made the case her own.

"The more I found out, the more horrified I became," she said. "It was such a vicious crime. Nobody deserves that, especially not a full-term mother. She's been like my main goal over these many years."

Monahan says the Beth Doe case inspired her to launch PennsylvaniaMissing.com, which catalogs information about missing persons and unidentified bodies exclusively in her home state.

"Is there any lonelier way to leave this life?" Monahan wrote on her site.

She started a Facebook page for Beth Doe, posting news articles to it and displaying McAndrew's phone number.

McAndrew says the attention keeps the case in the public consciousness, keeps armchair detectives on the hunt and helps him in his efforts to secure funding for emerging technology that can be applied to the case.

Through her website, Monahan has gotten Beth Doe leads, though none has panned out. For example, a tipster alerted her to the disappearance in July 1976 of a girl named Janet Hanna. Hanna's photo looked eerily similar to the artist's rendering of Beth Doe. Monahan couldn't find any news reports that Hanna had been found.

Later, however, she got confirmation that Hanna had, in fact, been located, alive. Another drop in a 40-year well of dead ends.

When Beth Doe's identity is discovered, Monahan said, she will drive across the state. She will weave through the Christmas trees at Laurytown Road Cemetery and find the white cross that belongs to her cause, the unknown girl whose face she looked into and saw herself.

That day is coming. She is sure of it.

"I think there's a very good possibility," Monahan said. "There's more of a chance now than there was 40 years ago."

blandauer@mcall.com

610-820-6533

Reporter [Pam Lehman](#) contributed to this story.

BETH DOE VITAL STATISTICS

- **Estimated age:** late teens to early 20s (year of birth 1954-60)

- **Estimated height:** 5 feet, 4 inches
- **Estimated weight:** 130-150 pounds
- **Hair color:** dark brown (natural, not dyed), medium length
- **Eye color:** brown
- **Blood type:** O
- **Distinguishing characteristics:** Small circular mole above left eye, mole on left cheek. 5 1/2-inch scar on left leg, just above the heel. No previous fractures.
- **Ethnicity:** She may have been of Mediterranean heritage.
- **Estimated time of death:** seven to 24 hours before being found
- **Cause of death:** She was strangled and then shot in the neck.
- **Other:** She had been carrying a full-term, white female fetus. The remains of the fetus were also found at the scene. It is possible the moles on her face developed at some time during her pregnancy.

Source: *Pennsylvaniamissing.com*

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