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Restless Bones: Bellingham's 20-year Cold Case

By Lisa Harvey

Someone's missing, but no one seems to have missed him.

He had dark wavy hair, parted to the side so that a wisp swept across his deeply creased forehead. Large dark eyes juxtapose a beaky nose, settled between prominent cheekbones. His long upper lip protruded slightly over the lower, settled atop a strong square jaw line.

Or maybe he had short light hair, a smooth forehead, and deeply furrowed, arched eyebrows. Maybe his large ears matched an elongated nose.

Or maybe the missing person was a woman?

Come September 2007, 20 years will have passed since the discovery of a body in the No. 9 chimney at Bellingham's Georgia Pacific West Inc.'s paper mill site. Although different theories have surfaced, including the postulation that the victim was female, no leads have brought police closer to solving the mystery. The remains of a person who must have had a family and a home seemingly popped out of nowhere. Two sketches act as reminders of what many view as one of Bellingham's most well-known cold cases.

A forensic sketch artist at the Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation drew the first sets of sketches in 1987. A Bellingham police officer, who had just completed a forensic artist course, drew the second set in 2000.

The 1987 sketches depict a man with long hair and Native American features, whereas the 2000 set depict a man with shorter hair and more bulbous features.

Orman Darby, 63, former public relations director for G-P, says speculation existed in 1987 that the remains had been those of someone of Native American heritage or descent.

"Hopefully someday, someone will recognize that drawing and know who it might be," Bellingham police detective Al Jensen says.

While he was not involved in the initial investigation, Jensen, 53, has taken a special interest in following the case. Holding a thick white binder stuffed with G-P skeleton case documents, Jensen rarely has to look anything up. He nearly has the details of the case memorized.

"There has to be a family out there somewhere with questions," Jensen says.

Although the case has faded from public thought, it persists as one of Bellingham's biggest mysteries. Who was the G-P Skeleton? How did he or she die? Why has no one come forward missing a loved one, friend or co-worker? Why is the case unsolved?

WORKER FINDS SKELETON

The story begins Sept. 20, 1987, when a worker at the G-P site noticed a spike in the temperature graphs for the chimney of the No. 9 boiler, Jensen says. Because it was unusual and possibly indicated a steam leak, the employee went to check the stack out. Lying at the bottom of the chimney atop metal pipes were a human's skeletal remains.

Not exactly an everyday discovery.

According to facts listed on the Doe Network Web site, a volunteer organization that assists law enforcement agencies in solving cold cases concerning unexplained disappearances and unidentified victims, the pipes, which carried boiler exhaust-heated water, were 240 degrees. The air inside the chimney was 95 degrees, unless the boiler was running, when temperatures reached 370 degrees.

Although tissue remained, the skeleton was badly burned due to extreme temperatures in the chimney, Jensen says.

"I took pictures of it while it was still in the flue," Darby says. "It was most disturbing."

Darby says the G-P community was shocked to discover such a horrific scene.

"It was like something had just dropped out of the blue," he says.

No one could explain how or why the skeleton was in the chimney; the stack wasn't normally checked. No one knew how long the body might have been there.

DETAILS ADD TO MYSTERY

After an examination by the Whatcom County Medical Examiner, Dr. Robert Gibb, and personnel from the Bellingham Police Identification Unit, the victim was described as a 20- to 40-year-old male; the skeleton was likely male due to pelvic measurements. Officials estimated the body had been inside the chimney for a few days, according to a Bellingham Police press release dated Sept. 23, 1987.

He was between 5 feet 8 to 9 inches tall, and weighed somewhere between 130 and 155 pounds. The victim had small feet, probably wearing a size 8 shoe, and exhibited good dental work, including a number of fillings and evidence of a root canal.

Unfortunately, despite the presence of dental work, the victim's records did not match any of those of missing people who fit similar descriptions, Jensen says.

Police checked missing persons records filed up to three years before the date the remains were discovered, and as the case progressed, three years after. Jensen says eventually all missing person leads were eliminated in the United States and Canada.

Furthermore, the body was found with no identifying possessions, says Jensen. No wallet, no pieces of

identifying jewelry and no keys were found beside the skeleton. The only remnants found were jeans, the sole of a right shoe or boot and part of a Continental Airlines ticket or baggage claim slip. The remains didn't provide the police any clues as to who the person was.

What's even more unusual was how difficult it must have been for the body to get into the stack.

"I remember going and touring the location," says Dean Kahn, 55, The Bellingham Herald neighbors editor. "It was weird; it struck me more when I toured the location."

Kahn reported the initial discovery of the body, but his name was not attributed on the article. He has written most of the articles since, and his last article on the case was published in November 2006, with a column in October 2006 surmising the case details of the last 19 years.

Kahn says he remembers the chimney being difficult to reach. The person had to climb a number of stairs inside the plant, and then make his way to the roof of the building.

"It would be quite the fluke if someone just stumbled on it," Kahn says. "Getting to the entry point would take some doing,"

Jensen echoes Kahn's speculation. Although a metal door was present at the base of the stack, he says it took police two hours to pry it open, making it an unfeasible way for the person to have gotten in. Additionally, a medical examination yielded the presence of broken bones, indicating the body probably fell into the stack.

The unusual location of the body fueled speculation that the discovery was that of a murder or suicide victim.

But who was the killer, if any, who died, and why?

QUESTIONS REMAIN UNANSWERED

Darby says the finding disturbed the plant's employees, who wondered how the incident could have happened.

"It was like walking into your back yard and finding a dead body on your deck," Darby says.

Jensen says the plant accounted for all of its employees, mostly through pay records and personal contact. When it was evident no one was missing, police and plant employees had few clues to the identity of the mystery skeleton. The mystery deepened when the skeleton failed to match any other missing person's reports from the region and beyond.

By 1993 the case became inactive.

THE CASE REOPENS

Jensen says the case remained inactive until 2000, when an officer drew the second set of sketches.

Jensen received more leads on the case after the release of the new sketches, but none of them proved to be fruitful. In 2003, the remains were sent to the Washington State Patrol crime lab for DNA analysis. Jensen says he hoped the analysis might provide new avenues for solving the case. Unfortunately, the DNA analysis failed due to the extreme heat subjected to the skeleton; there wasn't any DNA left to test.

"When there was no DNA, that put an end to us," Jensen says.

The remains were cremated and put to rest, Jensen says. However, the police department still retains copies of all physical records involved.

When the Bellingham Police Department exhausted all leads in 2003, Jensen deactivated the case again. However, with the publication of Kahn's article in October 2006, Jensen has once again temporarily

reactivated it.

The Doe Network obtained information regarding the G-P skeleton from The Bellingham Herald's coverage of the story and published the case on its Web site, Todd Matthews, Doe Network media representative says.

He says the Doe Network hasn't received tips concerning the case.

Matthews says as of December 2006, the FBI National Crime Information Center has 110,484 missing persons, and 6,208 unidentified persons listed in the United States and Canada.

However, grisly mysteries, such as the unidentified skeleton, are not common in Bellingham.

"It's unusual," Jensen says. "It's something that doesn't happen a lot here in Bellingham."

Kahn also continues to follow the case, occasionally writing new stories on the subject.

"It's always been floating around in the back of my mind," he says.

Twenty years have produced no substantial leads, Jensen says. Although people have come forward with information, it hasn't materialized into any resolution, making the case as much a mystery today as it was in 1987.

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