H5 Houston Mass Murder Victims: 33 Years Later

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After attending this presentation, attendees will learn about the difficulties inherent in forensic identification of skeletonized decedents in general through a description and evaluation of the standard steps that are taken in a medical examiner setting to identify these individuals. Further, because the identification of homicide victims from "cold cases" presents a different set of challenges, an example of the process as it applies to an older high-profile case will be provided and discussed.

The description and evaluation of methodological solutions used to identify skeletonized individuals recovered from a forensic context several decades in the past will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by providing information on the efficacy of these solutions to other researchers in the field. Successful resolution of older cases also offers justification for the presence of at least one full-time staff anthropologist and a designated identification unit at medical examiner facilities.

Viewers of this poster presentation will be shown the difficulties inherent in forensic identification of skeletonized decedents in general through a description and evaluation of the standard steps that are taken in a medical examiner setting to identify these individuals. Further, because the identification of homicide victims from "cold cases" presents a different set of challenges, an example of the process as it applies to an older high-profile case will be provided and discussed.

Skeletonized individuals recovered under forensic circumstances often remain unidentified for an extended period of time even in light of modern DNA analysis, new investigative methods, and artist facial reconstruction efforts. Cold cases that were investigated prior to the routine use of these methods may have resulted in the release of the decedent for burial as an unknown individual, or the remains may have been retained in a medical examiner facility awaiting a positive identification. The presence of forensic anthropologists on staff in the medical examiner office setting and the formation of a designated identification unit provide the initiative, experience and person-hours to move forward on these difficult identifications. As a result of the development of such innovative programs, carefully conserved decedents from a mass murder case have received recent intensive study at the Harris County Medical Examiner's Office (HCME) in Houston, Texas.

The mention of Dean Corll, Elmer Wayne Henley, and David Brooks still elicit strong reactions from adult residents of Harris County and surrounding areas. It has been 33 years since the summer night that their murder spree was exposed, but the violent nature of the crimes still resounds, even in this age of graphic films and video games. Corll, also known on the street as "The Candy Man," died that night, but Henley and Brooks are both serving prison terms and continue to seek parole. The media interview Henley on a regular basis and this keeps the story fresh in the Houston community's consciousness.

On August 8, 1973, Henley called law enforcement after fatally shooting Dean Corll. Henley also advised officers that there were a number of bodies buried in a boathouse on the northwest side of Houston. According to documents from the time period, seventeen adolescent males in various stages of decomposition were discovered buried in the floor of the boathouse. Another nine adolescent males were subsequently recovered near Galveston and Lake Sam Rayburn, Texas, bringing the number of verified homicides in the investigation to 26. The 17 sets of remains recovered from the boathouse were brought to the HCME in Houston for postmortem examination. The nine sets of remains from the other two county jurisdictions were later transported to the HCME for additional examination. The majority of these decedents were identified and released. However, three of the recovered individuals and additional commingled remains (MNI = 4) were never identified and remain at the HCME.

The three discrete sets of unidentified remains were examined and a biological profile was developed by Dr. David Glassman, D-ABFA in 2004. Deoxyribonucleic Acid (DNA) was recovered from these individuals in 2006 and submitted to the HCME Forensic Laboratory for analysis. The additional commingled remains are currently being examined and profiled by HCME staff. The new information collected from these cases will be used to seek identification through reference samples obtained from living relatives and any corroborating evidence provided by friends or acquaintances. The objective of this renewed focus on the Houston Mass Murder cases is to provide an identity for these individuals and ultimately release them from the HCME facility.

Corll, Henley, Unidentified

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