



F43 The Case of the Frustrating Floater

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After attending this presentation, attendees will gain an appreciation of the multiple avenues of investigation in missing/found persons. This case involves an extensive array of medical, dental, communicative, and investigatory procedures in an attempt to identify a found unidentified dead body.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by stressing the multiple ways an investigation of an unidentified dead body can be conducted. It will introduce the attendee to little known resources and will stress the value of persistence in an investigation.

The Connecticut River runs north to south separating the eastern third of Connecticut from the western two thirds. The Town of Old Saybrook is at the mouth of the Connecticut River where it runs into Long Island sound. It is about 45 miles southeast of Hartford, Connecticut. It has a population of approximately 11,000 people. The police department has 21 sworn officers. In late March 1998, the Hartford police informed the Old Saybrook police that they had a report of a body floating in the river. Hartford reported they were unable to find the body after a " cursory search." The normal current and tides would indicate that the body, unimpeded, would arrive in the Old Saybrook area in three or four days.

On March 31, 1998, the Old Saybrook police received a phone call that a fisherman spotted the body 1.1 miles north of the mouth of the river. Police responded to the scene to find a badly decomposed body floating face up in the river. With the help of the Coast Guard, DEP police, and a local towboat operator the body was brought to shore. The body appeared to be male, wearing a tan jacket, dark pants, and black sneakers. There was no wallet, jewelry, or other means of identification on the body. The local medical examiner spotted two holes on the back of the skull possibly indicating bullet holes but stated the sites needed further examination.

While the body was on the dock a silver cigarette lighter fell out of the coat pocket.

The body was sent to the medical examiner's office in Farmington, Connecticut for autopsy. The autopsy revealed that the victim was probably a white/Hispanic male, approximately 68 or 69 inches tall, and weighing approximately 200 lbs. A local oral pathologist completed the dental charting and took a full mouth set of x-rays. Evaluation of the skull by a forensic anthropologist confirmed the sex but also confirmed the holes to be anatomically normal orifices for large veins. The body was determined to have been the water for several years. Marsh grass in and around the body indicated it had been hung up in swampy ground before floating free. Due to the badly decomposed state of the body, a cause of death could not be determined. Fingerprints were also not possible.

The time and ingenuity spent on this case by a small police department with limited resources is admirable.

An extensive type went out via NCIC to all police agencies regarding the found person. A request was made of the Department of Defense through Senator Leiberman's office for a review of the dental chart for possible identification. Copies of the dental charting were sent to many dentists in the Connecticut and Massachusetts area asking for help. There were no matches found. The investigators focused on the cigarette lighter. Several lighter manufacturers were contacted to no avail. There is a National Lighter Museum in Guthrie, Oklahoma, the museum was contacted and was very helpful. They determined that the lighter was of Chinese origin, most likely made between 1992 and 1995. It was a very cheap model most likely sold to young people at flea markets or at convenience stores. In effect it had no individual characteristics to make a source for narrowing down an investigation.

The police then contacted the Center for Missing and Exploited Children in Alexandria, Virginia who agreed to do a facial reconstruction of the skull. The results now gave a face to the victim - giving him a persona. The facial reconstruction picture and pertinent information was placed on the America's Most Wanted website. The case went cold.

In 2003 the investigation was reopened. The skull was brought to the office where the teeth were photographed and recharted to update NCIC records. The dental chart and a picture of the facial reconstruction was submitted to the Connecticut State Dental Association newsletter requesting information from any dentist who might know the victim. A similar request was sent to all the New England state dental associations and the American Dental Association for publication. To date there has been no response.

The victim's dental chart has been resubmitted to NCIC and NAMUS. There has been no successful matches found on the SM reports as of this date but attempts will continue to be made. Everyone deserves a name.

Floater, Cigarette Lighter, Communication