



E16 John David Brown Brought to Justice 20 Years Later — A Multidisciplinary Approach to a Cold Case Homicide Investigation

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After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand the many facets of cold case skeletal recovery sites. Attendees will be introduced to the many different forensic disciplines used in conducting an excavation of a 20-year-old body disposal site.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by demonstrating the different disciplines needed to accomplish a cold case homicide skeletal recovery. This presentation will also demonstrate a unique method of engaging young forensic scientists in real world criminal investigation.

Synopsis: In 1985, Mary Ellen Nobles, then age 26, of Bolivar, MO, went missing. The investigation went cold until mid-2005. In mid-2005, the family of Ms. Nobles reported that Mr. John David Brown, who was confined in the Missouri Department of Corrections on an unrelated murder charge, had corresponded with the family and admitted he murdered Ms. Nobles in 1985 and disposed of her body in a wooded area of Pulaski County, MO.

A year-long investigation occurred. Law enforcement interviewed Brown, who provided additional details about the murder and disposal site. Multiple searches using cadaver dogs, aerial overflights, and law enforcement on foot eventually developed a probable body disposal site. The site was a pond overgrown with 20 years of vegetation.

In the spring of 2006, an excavation of the site was planned in concert with several forensic disciplines. First, as the potential remains would be skeletal, a forensic anthropologist and the University of Missouri Human Remains Identification Laboratory was engaged. Second, as the site was in a the Mark Twain National Forest, agents from the United States Forestry Division and the Missouri State Department of Natural Resources were engaged to assist. Next, coordination was established with a local contractor for excavation equipment and the local rural fire department to provide assistance.

In an attempt to further ignite interest in the forensic science field, forensic science and forensic anthropology college students, supervised by their professors, were engaged for the recovery.

On May 22, 2006, a two-day site recovery was accomplished. A total of 18 pieces of skull, including a full mandible, were recovered over the course of two days. Forensic anthropology students, supervised by their professor, made initial determinations as to human or animal remains.

Following the recovery efforts, the services of a local forensic odontologist were engaged to obtain postmortem dental X-rays. Fortunately, pursuant to a court order, antemortem dental records were obtained. The antemortem records had been retained by the dentist because, in his words, "You never know."

Dr. Daniel Wescott, a member of the Anthropology section of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, and at that time the chair of The University of Missouri Human Identification Laboratory, made a positive identification of Ms. Mary Nobles. In an abundance of caution on the part of the prosecutor, mitochondrial DNA was obtained and a comparison was made confirming Dr. Wescott's opinion.

On January 23, 2008, John Brown entered a plea of guilty to a charge of first degree murder for the death of Mary Nobles. Brown was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

This presentation will detail the investigation, the interaction with multiple forensic disciplines (crime scene examination, skeletal recovery, forensic anthropology, forensic odontology, and DNA) and the engagement of young forensic scientists, who used this case as a springboard to their careers. Some of the outside-the-box investigative methods and non-traditional coordination will also be discussed.

Cold Case, Skeletal Remains, Forensic Odontology