

A MURDER MYSTERY IN TWO CHAPTERS, SOLVED BY GENETIC GENEALOGY

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The body of a young woman who was found shot near Lake Tahoe in July 1982 read like a murder mystery. There were no leads to her identity. Although there was biological material left on her body, in the absence of a CODIS hit, her assailant remained unidentified.

In fact, the story of Sheep's Flat Jane Doe was a murder mystery for 37 years until April 2019 when the combined efforts of the DNA Doe Project and Identifinders International identified both the victim and her killer using genetic genealogy.

What appeared at first as an easy case to solve turned into more than our teams bargained for. Although Jane Doe's DNA matches were as close as a half niece, that half niece was adopted. The team first had to solve a mystery within a mystery.

But there were more twists. Even as we tentatively identified Jane Doe as Mary Edith Silvani, family lore told us that the Silvanis had two daughters; genetic genealogy would not be able to distinguish between Mary and her presumed sister. Weeks later we tracked down Silvani neighbors who stated that the family had only one daughter. Although we had Mary's name within the first three days, we wasted months searching for a sister who never existed.

The identification of Mary's assailant was just as convoluted. Thanks to GEDmatch, we had identified his 2d cousin on the first day. And thanks to a Y-STR match in the genetic genealogy Y-DNA databases, we also had a possible last name for her killer. There was only one candidate among hundreds of cousins in the tree who fit the description. But no. That individual had a son in CODIS, but the son was not a familial hit with suspect DNA.

It took over 1000 hours of genetic genealogy analysis of the top 109 matches, and a total of over 16,000 people in a composite family tree, to identify the killer as our candidate's illegitimate half-brother, who had been raised by his mother under a different last name. That brother was James Richard Curry, a serial killer arrested in 1983 for three other murders. Curry died from a suicide attempt shortly after his arrest. A CODIS match with Curry's son and daughter confirmed him as Mary's killer.

The 1982 murder of Mary Silvani by James Richard Curry began with just the body of an unidentified female found on a hiking trail. There were no clues to her identity, nor to the identity of her killer. Perhaps they did not even know each other's names. Now 37 years later, we know both. The mystery has been solved, the case has been closed, and the story's last chapter has been written thanks to the power of genetic genealogy.