

New DNA Technology Helping Solve Mammoth Murder

ABC7 News Exclusive Report



May 10 (ABC7) — The Sierra resort town of Mammoth Lakes, California doesn't have a lot of crime. Its biggest concern is usually bears on the porch. But an unsolved homicide there has seized the interest of scientists all across the state and beyond. It's become a test case for experimental science and could become the model for the future of crime-fighting. ABC7 has this exclusive story.

Mammoth Lakes sits 8,000 feet high in California's southern Sierras. The spectacular setting draws thousands of visitors each year. Three years ago it attracted a killer.

The snow would be his accomplice, hiding the victim for months.

But when the snow melted in late May 2003, the Shady Rest Campground yielded up evidence of a crime, human remains in a shallow grave.

Detective Paul Dostie, Mammoth Lakes police: "We're not real experienced in homicide investigations. We've had three homicides in the department's history of 18 years."

Mammoth Lakes police detective Paul Dostie has been with the department for all those 18 years.

Detective Paul Dostie: "Just to the right a couple hundred yards is where the victim was found. The actual gravesite."

Dostie says wild animals, probably bears, dug up the body, scattering the skull and some bones. Among the remains -- clothes and a Jacqueline Smith brand watch still running.

Dostie sent the bones to the San Francisco Medical Examiner's office. It identified the victim as a woman, 30 to 40 years old, about 4-feet 6-inches tall and southeast Asian.

Dostie quickly found a witness.

Josiane Jones worked in the forest service visitor's center in the Fall of 2002. She remembered a woman fitting that description.

Josiane Jones, witness: "She just started mumbling, 'he's mean to me, won't let me go. Things like that, just caught me off guard, didn't know what to say or do.'"

Jones' boss referred the woman to a domestic violence resource center, while another forest service employee talked to the woman's husband about campgrounds.

Former visitor center employee: "He was a very large individual, kind of angry appearing, gruff."

Paul Dostie: "Kind of heavy set white guy with tiny Asian woman. Lots of speculation based on his demeanor that she was a mail-order bride ... kind of worked that theory. "

They worked that theory for an entire year, with no luck.

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Then, Mono County Sheriff's Deputy John Rutowski went to a homicide investigator's conference and discovered a Florida company called DNA-Print.

It promised its new technology could tell eye color and race, information always available in DNA, but never before had scientists been able to pull it out. Instead of a DNA test simply showing a kind of chart, this test could suggest what someone looks like.

The remains were sent to Florida.

John Rutowski, Mono County Sheriff's Dept.: "The next thing I know I get a call from Paul that they've got enough to test and it's a go and the next call I get says guess what? She's not Asian."

Paul Dostie: "The results came back that she was 100% Native American."

The investigation was now completely changed. Dostie continued to seek out scientists outside law enforcement -- labs in Santa Barbara, Alameda, UC Davis helped determine the victim was a Zapotec Indian from Oaxaca, in Southern Mexico.

A Canadian lab's tests on her hair showed a lot of corn in her diet, suggesting she's from inland Oaxaca. That same lab used an experimental technique, analyzing her teeth for what kind of water she'd been drinking.

Paul Dostie: "From that he can determine the geological formation where that water came from, the type of geological formation, and where in the world that geological formation is located."

That test showed she probably lived at one time in Southern California, though she was a native of southern Mexico.

With the DNA results as a guide, a facial reconstruction was done over her skull.

The similarity between the sketch, done by one artist based on Josiane Jones' memory, and the reconstruction, done by another artist, confirmed Jones' worst fear -- that the woman she remembered was the woman who was murdered.

Josiane Jones, witness: "Seeing the reconstruction was a little wicked because I didn't want to be the last person to see her was all. Just thinking sometimes if you could do more, but I don't think there was anything I could have done."

But for all the information about the woman, the man remains a mystery.

Paul Dostie: "If we believe that the people saw her at the forest service and the skull reconstruction are the same person, then the white guy is her husband and is probably the murderer."

And there's still no substitute for help from the public.

The suspect is described as a white man, 30 to 35 years old, 5'8 - 5'10, heavy build, brown to light brown hair and a bushy moustache.

If you know who this is and you want to contact the Mammoth Lakes police, call (760) 934 - 2011 ext. 0 or e-mail pdostie@mammothlakespd.org.

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