

Contact:

Kent Patton

Kent.Patton@snoco.org

425-388-3883

Snohomish County Identifies “I-5 Stilly Doe” Using Forensic DNA and Genealogy

Othaniel Philip Ames had been born in 1898, died in 1980, and his remains were recently returned to his family

SNOHOMISH COUNTY, Wash., November 10, 2022 – Today, Snohomish County Medical Examiner Office’s (SCMEO) staff announced the identification of “I-5 Stilly Doe,” an individual who had been found in the Stillaguamish River near I-5 in 1980 but had been unidentified for the intervening 42 years. Using advanced DNA extraction techniques and genetic genealogy, investigators were able to eventually track down relatives of Othaniel Philip Ames and confirm he was their missing ancestor.

“We are incredibly proud of the long line of people in the Medical Examiner’s Office and elsewhere who continued to pursue this case from 1980 until today,” said Snohomish County Medical Examiner Dr. Matthew Lacy. “As technologies advanced and we had new tools to use, we kept making progress until we found out who this gentleman was. No matter how long it takes, we want to make sure people can be returned to their families.”

“It is extremely satisfying to be able to reunite Mr. Ames with his family,” said SCMEO Lead Medical Investigator Jane Jorgensen. “We are extremely grateful to our partners who helped us solve this mystery. As technologies become more sophisticated, we hope to resolve all four outstanding cases and bring some peace to those families who are missing loved ones.”

“Othram is honored to bring its expertise to bear on reuniting Mr. Ames with his family,” said Othram, Inc. CEO David Mittelman. “After 42 years of absence, our cutting-edge tools provided important keys for unlocking this mystery. We look forward to working with others who are trying to bring resolution to their own cases.”

Mr. Ames had been found in the Stillaguamish River in Arlington, Washington on July 23, 1980 by a fly fisherman. On July 24, 1980, Dr. Clayton Haberman, a local pathologist, performed an autopsy and determined that the decedent did not have any apparent trauma. Dr. Haberman also found no evidence of drowning. However, there was severe coronary artery disease present, leading the cause of death to

be classified as “Undetermined” with an “apparently natural” cause. But they did not know who the man was.

Dr. Haberman determined the decedent to be a male, about 5ft 7in tall, around 150 lbs. with gray hair. An age estimate was not given. A local dentist, Dr. Keith Leonard, performed postmortem dental charting for comparison to known missing persons. After being unable to identify the decedent, he was buried on August 15, 1980 by Weller Funeral Home at the Arlington Cemetery. Burying the identified after an unsuccessful attempt at identification was a common practice at the time. However, the SCMEO no longer buries people until they are definitively identified.

In 2008, Snohomish County Sheriff’s Office (SCSO) Detective Jim Scharf with the SCSO Cold Case Team, along with retired Snohomish County Superior Court Judge Ken Cowsert, began reexamining old unsolved homicides and unidentified persons cases in the county. The improvement of DNA technologies gave them hope that exhuming unidentified bodies may lead to the collection of a DNA profile that could be used to identify decedents. They were right.

In December 2017, the decedent was exhumed and named “I-5 Stilly Doe.”

In May 2018, SCMEO entered the decedent into the National Missing and Unidentified Person System (NamUs) and forensic odontologist Dr. Gary Bell performed more postmortem dental charting and radiographs. The resulting radiographs and charts were uploaded to National Crime Information Center (NCIC) and NamUs in hopes of matching with a known missing person.

In September 2018, the late Dr. Kathy Taylor, who was the WA State Forensic Anthropologist, performed an exam of the remains and estimated the decedent to be an adult male, likely Caucasian, and possibly Hispanic or Native American. She estimated “I-5 Stilly Doe” to be between 5ft 5in and 5ft 9in and between 45-59 years old when he died. Again, no perimortem trauma was discovered, though there was evidence of well-healed rib and spinal compression fractures.

In September 2018, a section of the decedent’s femur was sent to the University of North Texas Health Sciences Center for DNA extraction. A sample was successfully obtained and uploaded to the Combined DNA Index System (CODIS) in March 2019. Unfortunately, no matches were made as a result.

From 2018 to 2021, the SCMEO Investigators, primarily Jane Jorgensen, ruled out numerous reported missing persons via circumstances, DNA comparisons, and dental comparisons.

In 2021, SCMEO began collaborating with Othram, Inc. to obtain advanced DNA profiles suitable for genetic genealogy. DNASolves.com fully funded the laboratory work by Othram. In July 2021, Othram successfully obtained a suitable DNA extract after multiple rounds of extraction and human enrichment. Biogeographical analysis of the DNA revealed the decedent to indeed be Caucasian.

SCMEO uploaded this profile to GEDmatch, where a few very distant matches in the 5th-7th cousin range were identified, allowing Deb Stone with Kin Forensics to begin the genetic genealogy investigation.

In May 2022, the Othram DNA profile was uploaded to FamilyTreeDNA.com. Low level matches were once again found; however, they were different from the ones found in GEDmatch, allowing Deb Stone to triangulate the different matches and build additional lines back to common ancestors.

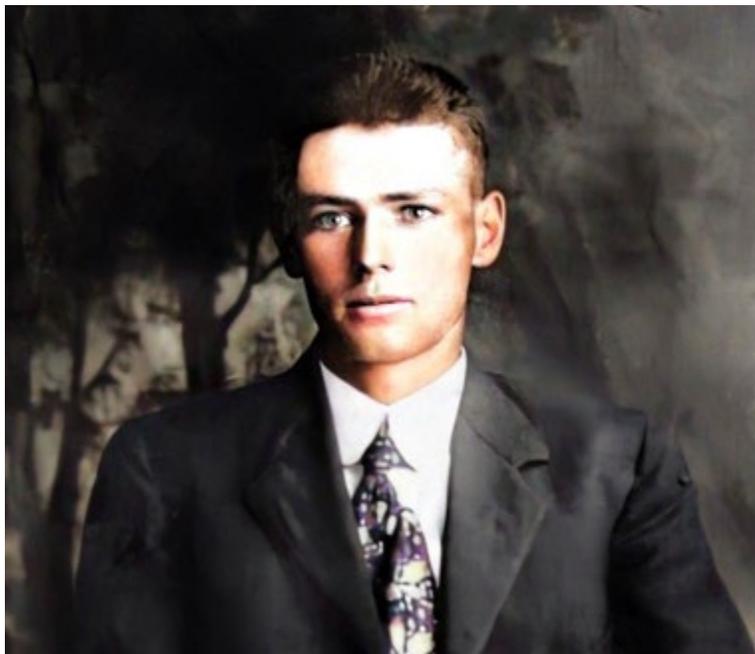
Deb Stone identified a possible matching set of great-great-great grandparents who had descendants in WA state. Deb Stone then spoke with a relative who mentioned an uncle, Othaniel Philip Ames, who went missing from Arlington in 1980 at the age of 82. Othaniel either hadn't been reported missing or was reported missing but his records had been lost.

Othaniel's granddaughter agreed to DNA testing that confirmed that "I-5 Stilly Doe" was in fact Othaniel Philip Ames.

Othaniel moved to Washington in 1951 with his wife and children. He worked at a paper mill and had a small dairy farm in Arlington. He was also a woodworker and a winemaker. In the early 1960s, Othaniel and his wife separated. Othaniel moved to a small cabin in the woods of Arlington. He was last known alive in early 1980, after telling relatives he was traveling to Oregon and California to visit relatives.

On September 29th, 2022, Dr. J. Matthew Lacy officially identified "I-5 Stilly Doe" as Othaniel Philip Ames, born on August 23, 1898 and died sometime in 1980. Mr. Ames has been reunited with his family.

The Snohomish County Medical Examiner's Office has four additional sets of unidentified remains that they will work to identify.



###

Please credit the "Ames Family" for use of the photos.