

# Riverbank skeleton an unsolved mystery

## 4,000 new unidentified remains are found every year in the U.S.

By Natalie St. John  
EO Media Group

Wearing Levi's, a red button-down shirt, gaiters and hiking boots, the skeleton recently found on the bank of the Columbia River looked like it was dressed for a hike.

By the time a boater discovered him in late May a remote area near Pillar Rock, about 27 river miles upstream from the Pacific, the unidentified man's only possessions were a 1999 penny and a lens cloth in his jeans pocket. But he still had his teeth, complete with good-quality, modern dental work.

To Wahkiakum County Coroner Dan Bigelow, it seemed like a decent starting point for an investigation. But two months later, he is still trying to find the man's name. While his list of possible identities for the middle-aged man keeps growing, his list of promising leads has dwindled to practically nothing.

"Just about anybody who disappeared anywhere in the Columbia River basin could credibly be this person," Bigelow said in early July.

Despite these setbacks, Bigelow is still trying to find out who the man was, and how he ended up in Wahkiakum County. He recently delivered the remains to the state's only certified forensic anthropologist, and he is taking a closer look at missing persons cases from across the Northwest and beyond.

"It's a hell of a shame," Bigelow said. "I can't help thinking there is somebody out there looking for this guy."

### Bones on river banks

The source of so much life, the Columbia's deep waters and swift currents are also implicated in a lot of deaths. According to an ongoing *Oregonian* analysis, at least 36 people have drowned in the Columbia since August 2006.

The river also inevitably tempts individuals faced with the pressing dilemma of where to dispose of a body. In September 2006, a couple found a large bag floating in the river near Portland. It contained the dismembered remains of Doug Adamson, 52. In August 2012, Grant County, Washington, deputies recovered 75-year-old Toshio Ota, a missing Seattle man. He was the victim of a homicide by blunt-force trauma.



U.S. Coast Guard/ Petty Officer 1st Class Levi Reed

This March 21 file photo shows the Columbia River near Cathlamet, Washington, near Pillar Rock where an unidentified skeleton was recently found.

ma. In January 2015, boaters discovered the body of Jessica Newton, 40, on Bachelor Island near Ridgefield. She too had died a violent death.

Bigelow knows all about the misfortune that can wash in with the tide. In 1998 — well before he was elected — a local found a dead woman on a small island in the river. To his regret, no one has ever been able to identify her.

"I am going to keep it until I can hand [the remains] to her next of kin and they can give them a respectful burial. There's someone out there who's missing that person," Bigelow said. But he acknowledged that he has exhausted all of his ideas for finding her identity.

"I can't think of a single thing I can do to contribute to that investigation," he said.

In 2013, a beachcomber discovered an accumulation of bones strewn along the riverbank. Some of them appeared to be human, including a partial skull with the upper row of teeth still intact.

Bigelow sent the bones to Washington State forensic anthropologist Kathy Taylor, who determined which were human, and sent them on to the forensic laboratory at University of

North Texas. Experts there extracted DNA from the bones, and entered the results into the FBI's Combined DNA Index System, or CODIS, a database of DNA records.

Nearly two years after the discovery, Bigelow and Taylor had an answer: The bones belonged to 44-year-old Molly Newton-Waddington, a beloved but troubled Kelso mother and wife who was last seen in Kelso on March 14, 2012. Kelso police continue to investigate Waddington's death, which they consider suspicious.

### 'That was when I realized the heartbreak'

Coroner duties constitute a relatively small part of Bigelow's workload, but he takes them seriously. By carefully examining the latest remains, he found a few clues: The man spent at least a little time in western Washington, died after spring 2013, and had probably been dead for about two years. He was probably middle-class, and middle-aged. He probably died elsewhere, and his body then traveled up or down the river with the currents and tides.

Bigelow sent a detailed press release to media outlets and asked the public for tips, just as he had done in 2013.

"With Molly Waddington," Bigelow recalled, "all we had was a skull. We didn't know height, weight, gender, practically nothing. When I asked for assistance, the world called

me. Everybody who was missing anybody. That was when I realized the heartbreak — how many people had people missing." Bigelow began to feel guilty about "giving so many people hope of closure."

"They have some particular person deeply at heart, and they're just scanning all the time, looking, and when they see one of these things, they pick up the phone and call," Bigelow said.

This time, Bigelow was able to provide more detail in his release.

"As a result, I got very few calls," Bigelow said. People are often slow to file reports about people who have transient lifestyles, but it's rare for a middle-class person's disappearance to draw so little attention.

"This guy seems like the kind of guy that people would be looking for," Bigelow said. "He had Vibram-soled shoes — those things are like \$20 a toe. It's odd."

### Getting to 'maybe'

With small staffs and little technology at their disposal, rural coroners research cold cases on evenings and weekends, or whenever they can borrow a few minutes from the reams of appeals, briefs and dense county reports that continuously pile up. And they seek help wherever they can find it.

Bigelow took the man's teeth to a dentist, who created

records and turned them over to the Washington State Patrol. WSP, in turn, entered them into the National Crime Information Center, or NCIC, an FBI database. NCIC compared the Pillar Rock man's tooth charts to records going back to the 1980s, and spit out a list of 141 men who had gone missing in Washington during the time period when he likely died. NamUs, other databases, and tipsters added still more names to Bigelow's ever-expanding list.

When investigators ran Waddington's DNA profile through the CODIS database, it quickly found her identity, but such clear-cut results are fairly rare.

"Sometimes, you can come pretty close to knowing," Bigelow explained. "Other times, depending on the quality of the dental records or the remains, all you can do is say, 'I can't exclude this person.'"

After that, it was down to Bigelow to figure out which of the many missing men he could cross off of his list. Hours upon hours of reading, dialing, researching, and waiting, waiting, waiting on return calls, police reports and search results.

"There's a lot of detective work, even when there are other potential matches," Bigelow said.

### Bones, everywhere

Bigelow again called on Taylor, the forensic anthropologist, for help. In her lab, Taylor

will remove the man's remaining fatty tissue, then examine and preserve the bones. Just as with Waddington, she will send samples to UNT for DNA testing.

A Washington native who earned her doctorate at the University of Arizona, Taylor has worked out of the King County Medical Examiner's office since 1996. Though it's a relatively new field, the demand for her unique services is growing. Taylor sometimes responds to scenes when bodies turn up. People regularly call on her to examine bones, or photos of bones found around the state.

"A lot of what I'm doing is evaluating a bone and asking, 'Is this human?' Because there are bones everywhere," Taylor said. In addition to using the databases, she works with police, the media and other experts, including a forensic artist. She also spends a lot of time talking with the families of the missing, encouraging them to do their part to keep investigations active.

"We really try to explore every avenue," Taylor said. "If you know of somebody that's missing, you have to report them, and you have to be vigilant to make sure that somebody is getting them into the system."

### 'Everybody should get a name'

Taylor cautions that DNA testing is "not the magic bullet everyone thinks it is." Frustratingly, sometimes there's just not enough to work with, especially with old, weathered remains.

"What we have to do then is put it on the shelf and wait for the technology to get better, and then you resubmit it," Taylor said. "You never give up."

It's too soon to say whether this man's bones will provide usable DNA, or other clues to his identity. Without a name, investigators are unlikely to ever figure out how he died. Sometimes, though, families do get answers against all odds. Taylor and her collaborators recently solved a seemingly hopeless cold case from 1989. When she finally met the victim's sister, Taylor's first words were, "I have been waiting 20 years to talk to you!"

"Every one of these people that are in my care have families and are loved by somebody. It's excruciating not to be able to figure out who they are. You know that they are being missed. You just don't know by whom," Taylor said. "You want to return them to their families. Everybody should get a name. They came into this world with a name. They should leave it with a name."

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## Authorities remove explosive device from Wallowa Lake

By Scot Heisel  
EO Media Group

Federal, state and county law enforcement officials converged at Wallowa Lake on Friday afternoon to retrieve and disable a small device that was discovered under water near a public beach.

Wallowa County Sheriff Steve Rogers said a group of off-duty search and rescue members was diving near the area at the north end of the lake "about two weeks ago" and found the device during a recreational dive.

The divers identified their discovery as a possible explo-

sive device and reported it to the sheriff's office, which notified state and federal authorities. An FBI dive team was then assembled and tasked with removing the device.

Members of the Oregon State Police also were brought in to handle the device once it was removed from the water. OSP Explosives Specialist Dennis Wagner from the Hermiston office described the pipe bomb as a cylinder "about 1 inch in diameter and 8 inches long and wrapped in black tape."

Wagner and another OSP trooper took the device to a safe location outside of Joseph and detonated it soon after it was removed from the lake.

Wagner said it was difficult to estimate how powerful the pipe bomb was since other explosives were used to initiate detonation. However, he agreed that it certainly was more powerful than an M80 and closer to a stick of dynamite.

"In my opinion, it probably was some teenagers who made this and left it there," Sheriff Rogers said. "Our main concern was the safety of the public. There was concern that this thing would be dragged out onto the bank, dry out and then detonate."

The device was discovered just east of the public beach and boat launch area at the north end of the lake. It was in the small channel that feeds into the Wallowa River.

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*Sincerely, Nancy Morgan*

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