

They may not be able to tell a child's gender because children's sexual differences generally do not appear in bones until puberty. The manner of death can be impossible to determine: Stab wounds may not leave marks on bones, and strangulation never does.

Race or ancestry can only be guessed at. Shovel-shaped incisors, for instance, are common among Native Americans. African Americans and Asian Americans usually have broader sinus cavities because they usually have shorter and broader noses than Caucasians.

"Southern California is a highly mixed society," said David Van Norman, deputy coroner for San Bernardino County. "If you find a skull with shovel-shaped incisors, does that mean the person was Native American? Absolutely not."

As the cases of Jane Doe No. 49 and John Doe No. 187 illustrate, sometimes investigators would be happy to trade a trove of evidence for a little luck.

### **Jane Doe No. 49**

The woman found by a hiker's dog was buried in a bluff with two forking paths, above Pacific Coast Highway and just below a Pacific Palisades neighborhood.

Investigators found one of the paths intentionally blocked by piles of sagebrush, scrub oak branches and other vegetation.

Someone had cut a false path, perhaps 10 feet deep, into the chaparral, apparently to divert hikers.

"By the time we got there, the brush had started to die and dry up and fall apart," said Grand Pre, a four-year investigator and former emergency room and trauma nurse at County-USC Medical Center.

The grave was found about 80 feet down the blocked path on a strip no more than 2 feet wide. The face of the skull jutted out of the ground like a person relaxing in a bathtub. Vegetation had been arranged over the mound.

Grand Pre, 45, knew she was dealing with a homicide. She surmised that the killer had buried the body in the dark and probably found the going rough.

"If it had been in the daytime, you would have thought he would have scouted for a better place to bury her than a path," she said.

The compacted soil probably prevented the killer from digging too deep or for too long, and the increasing steepness of the path as it snaked down toward Pacific Coast Highway kept him or her from finding a more isolated spot, Grand Pre reasoned.

The soil may have caused trouble for the assailant, but it was a potential boon for the investigators: Hard dirt is particularly good at preserving tool marks and other clues.

Forensic archeologist Kevin Buffington, 32, took as evidence a clod of dirt that showed the impression of a round-nosed shovel. Other soil samples bore marks from a pick. Using trowels and brushes, Buffington and other investigators cleared the dirt around the woman. They peered into rat holes to make sure small bones had not been carried away by animals for use in nests.

They found hairs and red fibers in the sap of shrub oak.

Near the body's abdomen, where the dark sweatpants and light-colored T-shirt met, Buffington saw the long stem of a banana tree leaf. He instantly recognized it as alien to the local ecology. He stuck it in a bag for evidence.

"It probably came here with her," Grand Pre said. "Whoever brought her probably brought the ... leaf too."

Back at the coroner's office, forensic anthropologist Elizabeth Miller examined the bones. She concluded they belonged to a woman who was probably between 26 and 40 years old. She stood about 5 feet 2. She was probably white or Hispanic, judging from the skull features, including the nasal cavity.

Then the case went to Tolbert, 55.

"We're not going to solve this case anytime soon," Tolbert recalled thinking. "There wasn't a lot to go on."

A few days later, a detective from the Los Angeles Police Department's missing-persons unit called about a woman who had not been seen since an argument with her boyfriend on June 8, 2001.

Tolbert called the woman's sister.

The investigator asked whether her sister had had any dental work involving X-rays. The woman agreed to help find them. When the X-rays arrived, forensic dental consultant Dr. Gerald Vale compared the images to the teeth in the woman's skull. He had bad news for Tolbert: The X-rays depicted a tooth in what was now an empty space—probably where a tooth had been pulled. He could not make a match.

Tolbert felt deflated.

"I thought, 'Aw, man!'" she said.

But Vale gave her a ray of hope: The charts indicated that another dental X-ray existed.

"My spirits went right back up," Tolbert said.

She called the dentist back and asked for the other X-ray. The office said it had been sent to an insurance company. Another phone call. The insurance company said it didn't have it.

Frustrated, Tolbert called the woman's dentist back and asked if she could look for the X-ray herself. "I told her I knew how busy she was," Tolbert said.

She said she was sure she would be shot down. "They never let you do that. But she said yes. I was shocked."

Sitting in the dentist's Mid-Wilshire office with the missing woman's file, Tolbert wondered whether this would be one more dead end.

Then she noticed something in one file. The tiny square X-ray had been stuck in its flap the whole time.

Later that evening, on Aug. 15, 2001, Vale confirmed a match — a little over a month after the bones were found.

Jane Doe No. 49 was Claudia Flores, a 23-year-old bank teller. When last seen, she was three months pregnant.

The next day, LAPD Det. Francene Mounger drove to an apartment complex in West Los Angeles to make the official notification.

She was greeted by Ana Flores, 34, the sister who had helped crack the case.

When she saw Mounger, Ana knew her sister was dead.

"I didn't want to hear it. I wanted to ignore it, like it wasn't happening. I wanted to hear that they found her alive," Flores recalled in an interview. "It was like one of those things you see in the movies, with the detective coming to the house, and you just know it's something bad."

Ana said she had not see her sister since early June. Claudia's boyfriend told her she had left after an argument. Ana spent six weeks searching for her, calling her work, fellow employees and friends.

She even got her sister's bank to check for any trace that she was alive somewhere, making cash withdrawals.

There was nothing.

Ana, a florist and psychology student, was the oldest of four sisters who emigrated from El Salvador. Claudia was the youngest. After their parents separated, they were raised by their father in the Mid-Wilshire area.

Police say they have a suspect in the killing, but not enough evidence to make an arrest.

As is typical of skeletal finds, Claudia Flores' remains left no clues as to the manner of death.

But there is one tantalizing piece of evidence.

The large leaf stem found with Flores' body — the one that Buffington knew was not native to the Santa Monica Mountains — could be from a banana tree found at the home of a man who knew Claudia, said forensic criminalist Michelle Sandberg. Authorities declined to release further details about the case.

Ana said her family has stopped following the investigation because it's too painful. But she's proud that she was able to help identify her sister.

"I guess we're lucky, in a way, that they found her body," she said. "At least we know, in some way, what happened, and we always say she's in a better place now."

### **John Doe No. 187**

The case started out promisingly, even though the bones were found over a large area.

Miller, the forensic anthropologist, concluded that John Doe was between 40 and 60 years old. He had had two broken ribs, which had healed.

All the evidence suggested a motorcycle accident.

Coroner's Lt. Fred Corral found a dirt road above the steep hill where the remains were found. A theory emerged: The victim was riding along the road and somehow lost control and tumbled down the hill. The body could have lain in the brush for a few months or several years. It was impossible to tell how long.

The real detective work would be in identifying him. But there were clues to chase: the vehicle identification number, the Navy sticker, the T-shirt bearing the name of an athletic club. Back in the office, Tolbert felt encouraged.

An LAPD detective called the Department of Motor Vehicles. The bike was not registered.

Tolbert called a Honda dealership about the VIN. The dealership said the number probably was issued in the 1970s, but VINs during that time were not computerized and thus not available.

Another LAPD detective called the Navy in San Diego to ask about a sticker bearing the name of an organization called the Alameda 12th Naval District. Military officials said the district had closed four years earlier and that no personnel records were available.

The "Torrance Athletic Club" shirt was another false lead. Tolbert could not find such a club.

There did not appear to be a missing-person report for the man. There would have been another obstacle even if a report were found: The man's skull lacked teeth. Dental X-rays, one of the most reliable forms of identification, would be useless.

"We had all these clues," Tolbert said, "and everything kept going nowhere."

Investigators went back to the hillside above Sunset Boulevard and came upon a small camp with clothing and other belongings. Corral and Tolbert came to believe that John Doe had lived in the camp, but there were no clues there to his identity. The case languished.

A state law passed in 2001 required coroner's offices to submit samples of all unidentified remains to a DNA lab in Richmond, Calif.

The lab keeps a sample of the DNA on file for comparison with missing-person reports and DNA samples sent by families of missing persons.

In March 2004, Tolbert got into her coroner's van and drove a sample of John Doe No. 187's remains to Richmond.

So far, there have been no hits.

"I used to be hopeful," Tolbert said. "But unless a family member provides DNA, we're not going to get anything more on him. He'll remain a John Doe."

The lack of resolution surprised Corral, who was one of the first investigators on the scene three years ago.

"I thought by now he would have been identified," he said. "We found so much on him, I thought for sure we would be more successful."