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1996 Cold Case Solved: Jessica Baggen Killer Identified through DNA

Suspect in Arkansas commits suicide as investigators were getting warrant to seize DNA

August 11, 2020 (Sitka, Alaska) – Today, Alaska State Troopers and the Sitka Police Department announce the closure of the Jessica Baggen cold case. Steve Branch, 66 of Austin, Arkansas, the suspect of the sexual assault and murder of Jessica Baggen, killed himself on August 3, 2020, after denying to investigators that he had any knowledge of the crime and refusing to provide a DNA sample for comparison to the DNA collected on scene 24 years ago. Investigators, after securing a search warrant, collected Branch's DNA during his autopsy. On Monday, August 10, 2020, the State of Alaska Scientific Crime Detection Laboratory in Anchorage confirmed Branch's DNA matched the suspect DNA found on Jessica and at the scene.



Jessica on her 17th birthday, May 3, 1996, hours before she disappeared.

Jessica disappeared in the early morning hours of May 4, 1996. She just turned 17 the day before and was visiting with a friend and her sister at her sister's residence, when she decided to walk home alone, which was about a mile away. Her parents woke the next morning to find

that she never made it back. Jessica's father reported her missing to Sitka Police Department in the early morning hours of May 5th; he returned to Sitka PD later the same evening to confirm that she still hadn't returned home nor had any known contact with friends or family.

Sitka PD mobilized the local search and rescue team. They focused their efforts in the wooded area west of the Indian River, between the campus of Sheldon Jackson College and Sawmill Creek Road. Soon a shirt, later identified as the one Jessica was wearing when she was last seen alive, was located. Jessica was found dead less than two hours later; it was May 6th. Jessica was left discarded and hastily buried in a hollowed-out area beneath the trunk of a large fallen tree, approximately 70 feet off the bike path which paralleled Sawmill Creek Road. Most of her clothing and belongings were found in the immediate area, as well.

Nine days after Jessica was discovered deceased, a man confessed to her sexual assault and murder. While there was plenty of circumstantial evidence, it was determined months later that none of the physical evidence collected from the crime scene connected the suspect to the actual crime. The man went to trial for Jessica's sexual assault and murder in early 1997 and was found not guilty on all charges; the hunt for Jessica's killer, the man with the matching DNA, went on.

Despite years of investigation by Sitka PD, with occasional assistance from the Alaska State Troopers, and a private investigation commissioned by Jessica's family, the case remained unsolved. More than 100 potential suspects were cleared through DNA comparison and the trail went cold.

In 2007, with the original Sitka police officer that investigated the killing serving as the lieutenant that oversaw the Alaska State Troopers Cold Case Investigation Unit (CCIU), the investigative efforts into Jessica's sexual assault and murder were vigorously renewed.

"Every retired officer seems to have that one case that they can't let go—that just haunts them. This case was mine," said now-retired Lt. Dave Tugmon. "I walked into the captain's office with the file and I told him we had to take on Jessica's case."

Years of potential leads ended with DNA comparisons clearing suspect after suspect, forcing investigators to pour over the files looking for new angles. In September of 2018, the CCIU and Sitka PD discussed utilizing a new forensic DNA procedure called Genetic Genealogy. After reviewing the DNA evidence in the case, the State of Alaska Scientific Crime Detection Laboratory determined there was sufficient DNA from evidence collected from the original investigation to generate a Single Nucleotide Polymorphism (SNP) profile. The suspect DNA was submitted to Parabon Nanolabs a few weeks later.

In February 2019, a SNP-DNA profile was developed and uploaded into public genealogy databases. By the end of the year, after months of genealogical research, a new suspect emerged: Steve Branch. Investigators established that Branch lived in Sitka at the time of Jessica's murder. The CCIU also learned that in March of 1996, Sitka PD investigated Branch for

sexually assaulting another teenaged woman. He was indicted and arrested for the incident in June of 1996, but he was subsequently acquitted after a trial in 1997.

Branch moved from Sitka to Arkansas in 2010 and took up permanent residency. In January 2020, the CCIU reached out to the Arkansas State Police (ASP) and requested assistance. For weeks, ASP unsuccessfully attempted to obtain a discarded DNA sample from Branch. In the Spring of 2020, Sitka PD was able to obtain a discarded DNA sample from a relative of Branch. Kinship DNA analysis completed in May of 2020, determined that Steve Branch was most likely the source of the suspect DNA found on Jessica's clothing and body.

In early August, investigators from the Alaska Bureau of Investigation (ABI) traveled to Arkansas. On August 3, 2020, investigators made a preliminary contact with Branch at his residence to question him and obtain a DNA sample in order to positively confirm he was the source of the suspect DNA. Branch denied any involvement in the homicide case and refused to voluntarily provide a DNA sample. Investigators left the residence to apply for a search warrant, as well as interview other witnesses who also lived in Arkansas. The plan was to secure a DNA sample directly from Branch after getting the search warrant and to take Branch into custody following a positive DNA match. However, approximately a half hour after the investigators departed, Branch shot himself. The Lonoke County Sheriff's Office investigated the incident and uncovered overwhelming evidence that Branch took his own life.

"For over 24 years, investigators have vigorously pursued leads in hopes of resolving this incident. What ultimately solved this case was the tireless efforts of two genealogists, one with Parabon and the other with the Alaska Department of Public Safety, Criminal Intelligence Analyst Patty Busby, who finally pointed the investigators in the right direction," said Inv. Randy McPherron, Cold Case Investigation Unit. With the help of several civic-minded private citizens who voluntarily uploaded their DNA profiles into public genealogy data bases like GEDmatch and FTDNA and then authorize their profiles to be accessible to law enforcement, the genealogists were able to piece together a very complex family tree that eventually exposed Branch as Jessica's killer. I am very grateful to have played a small role in this investigation and to bring closure to Jessica's family and the community of Sitka."

The Alaska State Troopers and the Sitka Police Department would also like to thank the Arkansas State Police, Company A, Criminal Investigation Division; the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission; the FBI Little Rock, AR Field Office; the FBI Behavioral Analysis Unit (BAU) in Virginia; and, personnel in the forensic biology section of the Alaska Scientific Crime Detection Laboratory, for their assistance with the investigation.

"While nothing will ease the pain or bring Jessica back, I am humbled and proud of the work that many law enforcement professionals did over the years to bring closure to her family and friends. They never forgot about Jessica or the people that loved her," said Commissioner Amanda Price, Department of Public Safety. "Each cold case represents a victim and a family that is grieving while awaiting justice. Each case, no matter how old, matters to us."



Jessica Baggen disappeared while walking home in the early morning hours after celebrating her 17th birthday with friends and family. She would have been 41 this year. Her cold case is now closed by exception, as the man that matched the DNA from the crime scene killed himself before troopers could arrest him for Jessica's sexual assault and murder.