

The baffling case of the body on Cape dunes

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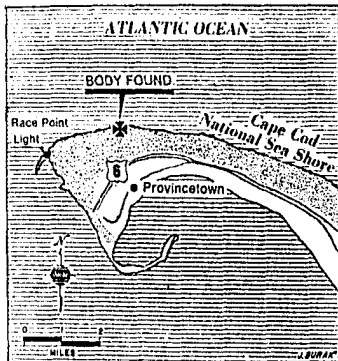
PROVINCETOWN — On a hot afternoon last July a 13-year-old Provincetown girl wandered away from a friend's cottage in the Cape Cod National Seashore looking for her dog.

She walked about 100 yards into the dunes, where she heard the dog, a beagle, barking. Fifty yards farther on, in a clump of scrub pine, she saw him sniffing at what looked like a naked woman sunbathing.

But the woman wasn't sunbathing. She was dead.

The little girl looked again to be sure her eyes weren't deceiving her. Then she turned and ran.

Four hours later police removed the badly decomposed body of a woman, about 30, with a fist-sized hole in her left temple. Both hands had been hacked off at the wrist.



Such was the discovery of one of the most bizarre murder mysteries to hit Cape Cod in recent memory — a mystery that is not much closer to solution now than it was five months ago.

To this day, no one has been able to identify the woman found on the beach that day in July.

Despite an intense investigation police can only guess who murdered her, or why. They have found no weapon, no motive, and few clues. After six months, the body in the dunes remains a puzzle.

Since July 26, as many as 30 police detectives have combed the dunes of Provincetown to no avail. And, while some new clue may yet identify the woman, police admit that for the moment they are stumped.

"We're still working on it," Provincetown Police Chief James Meads said last week. "We're hoping that if we can find out who she is, then maybe that will lead to whoever killed her. But it's hard work, and we haven't got much to go on."

Late in the afternoon on July 26, park ranger James Hankins returned to the dunes with the young girl's mother. A grim sight awaited him.

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In a slight depression in the sand, the dead woman lay face down on a green beach towel, naked except for a blood-soaked bandanna. Her arms, severed at the wrist, were at her sides.

Her reddish hair, pulled back in a ponytail and bound with a gold-flecked elastic, lay matted around her shoulders. Her dungarees were neatly folded beneath her hand, and part of the towel had been folded back to cover her face.

A medical examiner later determined that she had been dead for at least a week.

"It was ghastly," Han-

kins said. "It was as if she had been lying there, alone or on a blanket with someone, and someone came up and clubbed her. There was no sign of a struggle, even the sand hadn't been disturbed."

The next day, police from several surrounding towns searched the dunes for some clue to the woman's identity. They found none.

The medical examiner and pathologist inspected the body for identifying marks, internal injuries or traces of foreign substances. There were none.

A park service bloodhound and his handler prowled the dunes for two days. They found nothing.

The State Police laboratory examined the wom-

an's clothes for fingerprints, laundry marks or identifying labels. There were none.

Several early clues proved fruitless. Two sets of footprints were found leading toward the body, but they disappeared in the sand a few yards away.

Nearby, but in the opposite direction, someone had traced a large SOS in the sand. There was no indication it had been the victim.

Only 50 feet from the body, a set of tire tracks led toward the dunes. "They could have been connected, or they could not have been connected. How do you know?" said Meads.

The following week, six

state and two Provincetown police continued their search for leads. They canvassed local motels and rooming houses to see if anyone had disappeared unexpectedly.

They checked the woman's description against a computer list of thousands of missing persons and issued a nationwide police bulletin, seeking identification of an "unknown wf, 25-35 years, 5 ft. 6 inch to 5 ft. 8 inch, 140 to 150 pounds . . ."

They obtained a list of every vehicle licensed to drive on the dunes during the first three weeks of July, and asked local police to report on the owners and their families.

They identified and tracked down the owner of every deserted automobile and bicycle in the area.

They learned nothing.

On Oct. 19, the dead woman was buried in an unmarked plot in St. Peter's Cemetery. Funeral director Robert Roth arranged a brief, nonsectarian service.

"It may sound sentimental, but I felt there should be some kind of service. After all, she was a human being. She might have wanted it," said Roth.

The one remaining clue to the victim's identity is her teeth, which contained several gold inlays and other dental work valued at more than \$5000. State police have mailed her dental chart to 5000 Massachusetts dentists, dental societies in 49 states, the FBI, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and Interpol.

There have been several responses, but none matching the dead woman's description.

"It's certainly unusual that no one misses her. She must have a husband, or a boy friend, or parents, or someone. She had been pretty well taken care of, we know that," said Det. Lt. Bernard Flynn, one of two State Police officers still on the case.

Even without identifying the victim, Flynn and Lt. Richard Coughlin have developed several suspects and believe they may yet solve the case. But they are not optimistic.



Modern condominium provides a contrast to old fishing boats in Weymouth. (Jack Connolly photo)