

# The Pagosa Springs Sun News Article

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## Second victim in 1982 double homicide identified

By Pagosa SUN Online



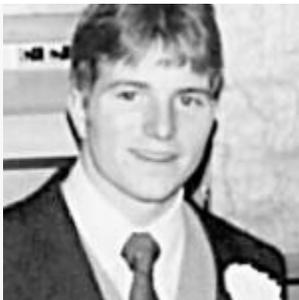
Walden

Nearly 32 years after her body was found washed up on an island in the San Juan River, the female victim of a 1982 double homicide was positively identified as Margaret Ann Walden earlier this week — the week she would have turned 72.

Coincidentally, Walden's body was also rediscovered on Wednesday — after years in an unmarked grave in an Espanola, N.M. church cemetery and several previous attempts to locate her body in the same cemetery.

Walden was 39 at the time of her disappearance.

"I can't tell you how strange this is," Barter said of the timing of this week's discoveries, adding that this is also likely almost 32 years exactly after the murders would have taken place. "A lot of things came together."



Simmons

The male victim of the incident was positively identified Feb. 19 as Stewart Eric Simmons, a 20-year-old Navy sailor at the time of his disappearance.

Simmons' and Walden's bodies were found along the banks of the San Juan River about a month apart in the fall of 1982, one found on each side of the Colorado-New Mexico border about a mile from the Caracas Bridge.

Both victims were buried in New Mexico, and much of the evidence in the case has been kept in New Mexico over the decades.

The case may have gone cold, but it was never left behind, and Barter is still seeking information that can lead to a conviction in the case.

## **A case gone cold**

After an initial investigation in 1982, the case of the double homicide went cold and untouched until a few years ago, when Detective George Barter of the Archuleta County Sheriff's Office took it on.

“The case lives because I’m working on it,” Barter said previously.

Over the years, Barter has worked to retrieve the skulls out of museum storage in New Mexico, and had new facial reconstructions created.



In 2009, shortly after Barter reopened the case, an old, abandoned bus located off the beaten path in the area of Caracas was searched, with positive results: a long, narrow strip of carpet attached to the bus's floor that tested positive in five places for blood, in addition to four .22 caliber shell casings found.

At the time, Barter said the presence of blood found soaked into the bus carpet meshed with a number of testimonies gathered after the murder.

About a year later, an old car believed to be related to the case was dug up in the area of Caracas (the car buried to serve as erosion control) and searched, with a few more belongings found.

Since 2009, Barter has completed numerous interviews in efforts to further the case, including many of those named in earlier police reports and other documents.

## **A possible scenario**

According to testimonies received over the last 32 years, a scuffle ensued inside the bus — possibly over a dope deal gone bad — that ultimately led to the man's death and the death of his female companion.

According to bits of evidence patched together during the initial 1982 investigation and Barter's reopening of the case in the spring of 2009, evidence shows the killer (or killers) shot John Doe at least twice with a

.22 caliber weapon, and strangled Jane. After the murders, the killers dumped both bodies in the San Juan River and, later, John and Jane washed up on the river's banks just west of the Caracas Bridge.

Archuleta County rancher Frank Chavez found the woman, Walden, Sept. 19, 1982, on an island in the river about a half mile west of the bridge and about 75 yards inside the New Mexico border.

Chavez said he was out looking for his livestock when he spotted Jane Doe's foot protruding from beneath the silty river soil.

About a month later, on Oct. 22, Jerry Killough was walking with his two daughters from Grants, N.M., along the northern bank of the San Juan (the Colorado side of the river) when they discovered John Doe — now known to be Simmons — badly decomposed and partially buried along the river bank.

Although Simmons' body was almost completely skeletonized, the autopsy showed, in addition to gunshot wounds, that he suffered broken ribs before his death.

At the time, neither body was found with items that might provide law enforcement clues to their identities, and authorities were left with only basic descriptions derived from medical examiner reports.



Jane Doe

The reports described Jane Doe as a 30-year-old white female, 5-5 tall, medium build with brown hair. At the time of her death, she was wearing Wrangler blue jeans, a blue quilted peasant jacket, a purple halter top blouse and two pieces of jewelry: a hollow gold heart necklace and a horn-shaped pendant.

Authorities found a sales slip in her pocket with the handwritten, almost illegible name of "Marilyn Cobraier" and a Farmington phone number. She also carried coins totaling \$1.36.



John Doe

Medical reports described John Doe as a powerfully built, 5-8 white male in his early 20s, with straight brownish-blond hair, a reddish beard and mustache. At the time of his death, John Doe wore Converse low-top tennis shoes, tan corduroy pants, and a T-shirt with “Lazy B Guest Ranch” printed on the front.

Medical examiners said both bodies were discovered about four to six weeks after the murders occurred.

According to Barter, law enforcement officers and investigators from Colorado and New Mexico worked the case for five years and what little evidence was found led officials to believe there was a link between the two murders. At the time, former Archuleta County Sheriff Neal Smith speculated that drugs or prostitution may have played a role in the victims’ demise.

Nevertheless, and despite numerous leads, interviews and five years of work, investigators came up empty-handed. Some close to the investigation say the operation faltered because of acrimony between district attorneys on either side of the state line.

Eventually, with no one actively working the case, files disappeared and key evidence became lost. To make matters worse, New Mexico had a 15-year statute of limitations on murder cases, giving New Mexico lawmen little incentive to pursue an investigation that could not lead to prosecution.

In Colorado, however, no such limitation exists, and a case that had gone cold for 27 years turned hot when Barter joined the Archuleta County Sheriff’s Department full time in February 2009.

Since then, and not hampered by Barter’s retirement from the ACSO, the search has continued.

In July 2013, Barter, with the help of the New Mexico FBI, exhumed John Doe’s body from an Albuquerque cemetery with hopes of finding additional DNA to help identify the victim, though the DNA proved to not be needed thanks to the availability of dental records for Simmons.

“I’m a stubborn guy with nothing else to do,” Barter said Tuesday of his continued work on the case, also thanking Archuleta County Sheriff Pete Gonzalez for the support in allowing him to work on the case. “Pete’s been a big part of allowing me to do this and continue on with it.”

## **An amateur and a lead**

The lead that ultimately led to the identification of both Simmons and Walden came to Barter through email from an amateur sleuth, Barter explained.

The unidentified sleuth, Barter explained in February, is part of a group of amateur sleuths who pore over websites filled with missing persons and cold cases, such as The Doe Network and NamUs (National Unidentified and Missing Persons System).

“I’ve spent literally hours and hours and hours in those databases,” Barter said after Simmons was identified in February, adding he believed the tip from the sleuth because other investigative work led him to believe the victim was in the Navy in California.

Simmons was identified through dental records on file with the Navy.

## **A second identification**

Simmons, who went AWOL (absent without leave) from the Navy, had mentioned to his parents that he had met a woman, a waitress known as Margo, shortly before leaving California.

The amateur sleuth also pointed Barter to Walden as a possible identification for the female victim and Barter was able to make contact with the missing woman's family and retrieve DNA samples from a missing persons file on her.

It was also revealed that Simmons and Walden, who often went by the name Margo, had gone missing from the same town in 1982 and, working with Walden's family, Barter was able to learn that Walden had left town with a younger sailor.

Walden's sister recalled that Walden was dating a younger sailor and the pair had gone on a camping trip together. Shortly before his disappearance, Simmons had rented camping equipment at the local Navy base.

Those stories also aligned with an old witness statement, Barter said.

Further adding to the idea that Walden was in fact Barter's Jane Doe, Barter showed items found on the body to Walden's sister — who identified both a coat she had seen Walden wear and jewelry the sister had given to Walden in 1973.

While Walden, who had been reported missing after she left California, was once married to a sailor, Barter said no dental records were found for her, either with the Navy or elsewhere, ruling out an identification via dental records.

What did exist, however, were DNA samples from Walden's mom and sister.

So, armed with the circumstantial evidence linking Jane Doe to Walden, the mitochondrial DNA (which narrows the field to females within a given family over every generation of the family) pulled from Jane Doe's skull and the DNA samples from Walden's family, Barter began "hounding" the New Mexico Office of the Medical Examiner (OMI) to test the DNA, despite that office not wanting to test mitochondrial DNA.

It wasn't until Barter began working with a new investigator at OMI that the agency agreed to test the DNA and the process was expedited.

That test returned a 98.27-percent probability of being a match and, when paired with the circumstances, led to a presumptive identification on Monday that Jane Doe is, in fact, Walden.

"It's better than nothing," Barter said in a phone interview Tuesday. "A lot better than nothing."

To better confirm that match, OMI agreed to attempt to extract better DNA from the teeth and skull, though work on the lab itself has slowed progress.

But, as it turns out, a better source of DNA is now in the hands of OMI — the rest of Jane Doe's remains.

Barter was in Espanola working to locate Jane Doe's remains one last time when he received the news of the presumptive identification Monday.

Upon arriving in Espanola this trip, Barter contacted the New Mexico State Police to inform them of his investigation, and they paired Barter with Detective Sgt. Chris Valdez, who happened to have an idea of where the body might have been buried.

In the process of digging a grave for a family member years earlier, Valdez recalled finding a body bag. Jane Doe was the only person known to have been buried in a body bag in the cemetery.

Several previous attempts to locate the body in the same cemetery were unsuccessful.

But, with Valdez's recollections, Barter, Valdez and additional NMSP personnel again broke ground Wednesday — this time with positive results in a matter of hours.

“It really is a small miracle to find her after all these years,” Barter said late Wednesday morning, adding that there was “not a better bunch of guys anywhere” than the NMSP who helped to dig with shovels to exhume the body.

The remains are now in the custody of OMI for additional DNA testing to confirm the identification.

## **Building a case**

While this week's breakthroughs are certainly a highlight in the 32-year unsolved case, Barter said he believes there is little more he can do on the case without additional leads.

Over the last five years, Barter has worked to get the momentum rolling on the case, building on each success to build a prosecutable case, but with not all of the evidence from the incident available, the detective hopes his work on the case is not coming to an end.

“I've done about what I can,” he said, adding the investigation is full of “highs and heartbreaks.”

As an example, Barter cited work to track down a former undercover deputy with the La Plata County Sheriff's Office who potentially had information about the case from working a separate incident, but when he was finally able to track her down after several years, she had recently passed away due to cancer.

After he completes a review of this case following this week's breakthroughs, Barter said he will take the case to the local district attorney, Todd Risberg, as well as the district attorney in Rio Arriba County, N.M. and discuss the options of either obtaining an arrest warrant or working through a grand jury.

In February, Barter said there is a likely suspect in the case, as well as one or two likely associates.

## **Not done yet**

But Barter isn't done yet.

The detective is still looking for information that could help lead to a prosecutable case.

“These people deserve to get identified and have people work on this,” he said.

Barter said it is believed that Walden may have worked as a waitress at the Iron Horse Inn in Durango for a time in 1982 while Simmons worked for a traveling carnival. Witness statements have placed Simmons and Walden at the Iron Horse together.

It is also believed that Walden drove a 1978 Ford Thunderbird that she may have sold to someone named Diamond Smith, Barter said.

Anyone with information on this case, or any other, is asked to contact the Archuleta County Sheriff's Office by calling 264-8430 or Archuleta County Crime Stoppers by calling 264-2133, visiting [www.pagosacrime.com](http://www.pagosacrime.com), or by texting "ACCST" plus your message to 274637 (CRIMES).