

Mushroom expert called on to help in 40-year-old cold case

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Lakewood police Detective Bryan Feik, right, and Gilpin County Sheriff's Office senior investigator Bob Enney on Saturday discuss the logistics of the search for clues about the death of Dolores House. They were in an area northwest of Black Hawk.

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GILPIN COUNTY — Bill Windsor normally hunts *boletus edulis* for the sake of science.

But on Saturday, a coroner and detectives were hoping Windsor's expertise about that valuable wild mushroom, commonly known as porcini, could help them locate the skeletal remains of a woman and solve a 40-year-old murder mystery.

Windsor led 15 Metropolitan State University of Denver anthropology students and an instructor to a north-facing slope northwest of Black Hawk on Saturday.

"I'm basically here to point out mushroom environment," said Windsor, the former president of the Colorado Mycological Society.

Windsor's value to the search for bones stems from a discovery made 35 years earlier by a pair of mushroom hunters who have since died, Gilpin County Coroner Zane Laubhan said.

It started a long and unlikely chain of events that led to Saturday's search.

The two mushroom hunters found a woman's skull in 1977. Gilpin County authorities marked the location simply with a rock and described its location in handwritten notes on a Big Chief notepad, Laubhan said.

It was considered a missing-person case at the time, and Gilpin County fielded inquiries from around the country about missing women, Laubhan said.

Unanswered questions

The skull ended up in a box stored in a Colorado Bureau of Investigation building until last year, when it was rediscovered. The jawbone was in a separate box. The notebook described a cursory investigation, which left many unanswered questions, including the exact location where the skull was found.

That's when Laubhan obtained the skull. Laubhan embarked on an intensive search to identify whose skull he had. He searched old newspapers for stories about missing persons. He enlisted help from anthropologists.

"I looked at her and said, 'I wish you could talk and tell us who you were,'" Laubhan said. He knew that a family had been missing her for at least 35 years.

Laubhan sent the skull to a lab at a U.S. Justice Department agency called National Missing and Unidentified Persons System, or NamUs. Tests were performed on the skull, and analysts were able to obtain a DNA profile, which was fed into a national database. Finally, four weeks ago, there was a hit.

Years earlier, family members of [Dolores House](#), a 37-year-old woman who vanished from a Lakewood shopping center Aug. 16, 1972, had submitted DNA samples to NamUs.

House's 1967 Oldsmobile Vista Cruiser had broken down at the Westland Shopping Center, at 10403 W. Colfax Ave. The car was found — but not the married mother of three.

Witnesses had seen a man, who was driving a white-over-maroon Ford Bronco, tow House's Oldsmobile into the shopping center. He was 5 feet 11 inches to 6 feet tall and weighed about 160 pounds. He had dark-blond hair that was graying and thin on the top.

A dental comparison confirmed Dolores House's identity, said Lakewood police Detective Bryan Feik, who called her widower, Ronald House, the next day.

"We have a few persons of interest," Feik said.

Identifying the skull was a big step in the case. Dolores House is dead but no longer missing.

The question now is how she went from having car trouble to lying in a forest where wild mushrooms worth \$49 per pound blossom two weeks out of the year in August.

Finding the location could mean also finding other evidence linked to a person of interest, Feik said.

“We’ve been working on this for a while,” said Bob Enney, senior investigator for the Gilpin County Sheriff’s Office, which is assisting in the Lakewood case.

From Laubhan’s perspective, to find the skeleton could provide closure to her family.

“It’s an effort to find the rest of Dolores,” he said.

Hope at 10,000 feet

Laubhan solicited Windsor’s help because “we have to try to think like the people who found the skull.”

Windsor said the mushrooms bloom in the root systems of certain pine trees — including lodgepole pine but primarily blue spruce — at elevations around 10,000 feet. They grow best where there is a lot of moisture, which tends to be on land shelves where water can accumulate, rather than on a slope.

“I can focus the searchers to where the mushroom hunters most likely were looking,” he said before the search began.

A caravan of Jeeps, trucks and vans wound into the mountains Saturday. Windsor picked a spot, and then the students worked their way slowly down a slope, marking signs of human visitation such as rusty cans with yellow flags.

Ronald House visited the search area Saturday but didn’t participate. He declined to comment.

The college students often shouted out GPS coordinates to one another whenever they discovered evidence of humans. By the end of Saturday morning, no bones had been found, but the volunteer searchers planned to be there all day.

“She’s got to be there somewhere,” Laubhan said. “It’s just a matter of where.”

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