

The Infamous Serial Killer John Wayne Gacy

Read the following crime case study & then answer the four related questions at the end.



Public domain image from www.crimelibrary.com

Forensic anthropology played a pivotal role in the investigation of one of America's most notorious serial killers – John Wayne Gacy. Forensic anthropology and other forensic methods helped to identify 22 of Gacy's 33 victims. Because skeletal remains were all that was left of many of Gacy's victims, forensic anthropology played a key role in determining how they had been murdered.

In 1978, a 15-year-old named Robert Piest disappeared after work one day. His mother, who had come to pick up Robert from the pharmacy where he worked part-time, had been waiting for Robert when he told her that he was just going outside to talk to a man who had offered him a part-time job. After three hours of waiting, Mrs. Piest contacted the local police.

The man who had offered Robert a part-time job was a local contractor named John Wayne Gacy. When police went to Gacy's house to ask about the whereabouts of Robert Piest, Gacy denied having seen Robert. He told them he was unable to talk to them, as he had funeral details to attend to since a death had recently occurred in his family. Police asked Gacy to come to the police station later that day. Gacy was questioned several hours later and continued to deny having seen Robert Piest. When a background check of Gacy was done, it was discovered he had a criminal record for sexually assaulting a teenager and that he was also awaiting trial on another charge of sexual assault. This led police to obtain a search warrant for Gacy's house.

When police initially conducted a search of Gacy's house they discovered a strong stench in the crawl space below his house. However, the ground in the crawl space looked untouched so it was assumed it was simply the smell of sewage. Police did find numerous suspicious items in Gacy's house, including two high school graduation rings, marijuana, handcuffs, two driver's licenses from two unknown males, police badges, and several articles of boy's clothing. Then - in the trunk of one of Gacy's vehicles - police found strands of hair matching that of Robert Piest.

Finally, after further intensive investigations, police discovered that one of the graduation rings found at Gacy's house belonged to a teenager who had disappeared a year earlier. They also discovered that three former employees of Gacy had mysteriously disappeared within the last 5 years.

All of this evidence led Gacy to finally confess to police that he had killed someone; however, he initially claimed it had been in self-defense. Gacy told police they could find the body under his garage. Police did find a body under the garage, but also found numerous remains under the crawl space of Gacy's house. Gacy then confessed to killing Robert Piest and over 30 other young men.

The search for bodies at Gacy's house was organized much like an archaeological site since the excavation had to be carefully conducted to preserve the decomposing remains and to keep them organized as some of the bodies were piled on top of each other. On the first day of the search, two bodies were found in the crawl space. As time passed, twenty-six more bodies were discovered beneath the crawl space. Some victims were buried so close together that it was hypothesized that they were probably killed or buried at the same time. Gacy told police that he had on several occasions killed more than one person at a time.

During the demolition of Gacy's property, the body of a young man preserved in the concrete of Gacy's patio was discovered. Another body was discovered under the recreation room of his house. By the end of December 1978, police removed a total of 29 bodies from Gacy's property. By the spring of 1979, police were able to connect four young male victims found in a local river to Gacy. Gacy confessed he disposed of the bodies in the river because he ran out of room in his crawl space and he had been experiencing back problems from digging the graves in the small crawl space. Robert Piest was one of the victims found in the local river. Like many of Gacy's victims, Robert had been sexually assaulted and suffocated after paper towels had been forced down his throat.

Dr. Clyde Snow, a well-known forensic anthropologist, was hired by police to help identify the victims that had been removed from Gacy's property. Dr. Snow used missing person reports to help him identify the unknown remains. For example, he identified one set of remains found at Gacy's property as belonging to David Talsma using information from his missing person report. In December 1977, 19-year-old David had been reported missing. Records showed that David had fractured his left arm as a child. One set of remains from Gacy's property showed evidence of a fractured left arm

that had healed. Also, the length of the remains matched David Talsma's height. The last observation that Dr. Snow used to identify these unknown remains was the fact that the left arm was several millimeters longer than the right arm and that the left scapula was beveled. Both of these observations enabled Dr. Snow to conclude that the remains belonged to a left-handed victim. David Talsma was left-handed.

In the end, investigators used forensic anthropology techniques and dental records to identify all but nine of Gacy's victims. Gacy was found guilty and convicted of 33 murders in 1980. After a long legal battle, John Wayne Gacy was executed by lethal injection in 1994.

Related Questions

1. Why was forensic anthropology used in the John Wayne Gacy criminal case?
2. What specific case brought John Wayne Gacy to the attention of police?
3. Why was the search for bodies at Gacy's house organized like an archaeological site?
4. In the end, how many of Gacy's victims were identified with the help of forensic anthropology?

"Forensic anthropologists do not have the luxury of debating the issue of race and ethnicity, rather they must arrive at an assessment of this demographic characteristic to aid the police in their identification process."

- Dr. Steven N. Byers, Introduction to Forensic Anthropology, Allyn and Bacon (2002), p.150.
