

THE INDIVIDUAL IN (CONTEMPORARY PRE)HISTORY

More on what we leave behind in Wired magazine's August issue – and [how tracks through cyberspace can be crucial clues to who we are and were](#) – Raising the dead

A water-well digger found the body. It was 1968, and Wilbur Riddle was tromping around Eagle Creek, off Route 25 in backwoods Kentucky, scavenging for bell-shaped glass insulators fallen from overhead power lines. A buddy of his could resell them as paperweights, \$5 a pop.

As Riddle kicked through the leaves and brush, his foot caught on something solid. It was a green burlap sack, the kind carnies use for carrying big-top tents, tied with a tan cord. Inside was a woman's body. She was naked except for a shred of cloth diaper draped over her shoulder. Her eyes had rotted away. She had three broken fingernails – part of a futile attempt, apparently, to claw out of her shroud.

A state cop told reporters, "We think the girl was rendered unconscious by a blow to the head, then tied up in the bag to die a slow death by asphyxiation."

Local sheriffs deputies tried for more than six months to figure out who she was. Her epitaph was merely approximate: Tent girl. Died about April 26 – May 3, 1968. Age about 16 – 19 years.

Over time, her death became less of a tragedy and more of a mystery. Riddle told everyone he encountered how he found her. Everyone. Waitresses asking what he wanted for breakfast heard about the Tent Girl instead. Riddle would show a yellowing copy of Master Detective magazine, with a cover story on his gruesome discovery, to kids who came to play with his 16 children. Those same kids rubbed the Tent Girl's rose-colored headstone as they ran through the town cemetery in joy and terror every Halloween.

The Tent Girl could have been like so many of the 5,400 John and Jane Does taking up space in morgue freezers and potter's fields around the US – nameless forever. Attaching identities to those bodies from the pool of 100,000 known missing persons would be an overwhelming task, even if it were a priority for every cop in every city and town. Without families, without live leads, the Does often end up in the arctic interiors of the cold case files.

Twenty years after he found the Tent Girl, Riddle told his story to a teenager named Todd Matthews. And Matthews, driven by tragedies of his own, would become compelled to connect a life to her death. By figuring out who she was – and it's not giving the end away to say that he did – Matthews sparked a movement that is redefining how Does are identified. The methods are painstaking but simple: By trawling idiosyncratic combinations of Google, Yahoo! Groups, and personal as well as official Web sites, online sleuths have helped crack more than 20 long-unsolved cases. Their success has changed the way law enforcement and desperate families come to grips with these mysteries.