

Examiner

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"There are tables to estimate how tall someone is and how tall they will be, depending on the amount of fusion."

And there is more — but that depends on how many bones are found, and how they look when they are found. And that was the problem here.

Dr. Saleh Zaki, one of three criminal pathologists in Stivers' office, was annoyed. He had arrived at Redwine Road late Friday to find that one of the skeletons had been boxed by policemen and a representative of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. They would have boxed the other one, too, if Sgt. Jerry Hendricks, an investigator with the examiner's office, had not pitched a fit and prevented them from further disturbing the scene.

"First of all," Zaki said, "when we go to a crime scene, we try to see if a murder was committed, and then how it was done. We want to know what happened and did it occur at the scene, or was the person dropped there."

"We don't just collect bodies. If I go to a death scene, I try to plan what I will take first. I have to note where everything is and what may have fallen nearby. The crime scene is part of the laboratory."

By Saturday, Zaki knew he would have to return to the crime scene, when it was light and there would be no pandemonium created by scores of policemen and droves of reporters. There was too much missing.

"If you went out into the woods and saw some bones," said Stivers, "you would probably just pick them up, and not even notice if something rolls out, like a bullet."

"We tend to start with the smallest piece and work our way up to the larger ones."

And knowing exactly where the bones were lying when found is important, he added. "We had a Cobb County case about 10 years ago where we found some bones in the woods," said Stivers, who at the time had just become the chief examiner for Cobb, Fulton and DeKalb counties (since then, Fulton has established a separate medical examiner's office).

Right underneath where that guy's stomach had been, we examined the dirt and found a high level of arsenic in it.

"That was where those organs fell and dissolved, and it proved we had a case of arsenic poisoning. To us, it is never just a pile of bones, but a puzzle."

In the case of the two children's skeletons found Friday, the puzzle was incomplete. There was a large portion of one body — apparently a child lying on his right side, his head resting on his right arm. The skull had most of its teeth. Then there was the other skeleton — the boxed one. Most of the teeth were missing, and there were few bones. The skeleton could have been any black child's.

"Your options are limited when you just have bones," said Stivers. "Where we can, we use dental records and chest X-ray records for identification. But those are not always available, especially on children. And we have to have enough bones to work with."

Which is where Dr. Peter Mills comes in. Mills, a former motorcycle racer, runs a bustling orthodontic practice in Atlanta's Northlake section and, for the past decade, has taught a course in forensic dentistry at Emory University's School of Medicine. Mills is the forensic dentistry consultant to the state crime lab as well as the Fulton medical examiner's office. On Saturday, he called Dr. Zaki and

asked if the pathologist needed help. Mills and Zaki had worked together before — identifying the bodies of 39 victims of the 1977 Southern Airways crash in New Hope, Ga., in 30 hours, using dental records and other bone traces.

"I went to the Medical Examiner's Office to look at the remains" of the children found last Friday, said Dr. Mills, "and there was a problem. One skull had only five or six teeth in it — not enough to get a profile — and there were incomplete records of the four missing children (not including 14-year-old Lubie "Chuck" Geter, who had been missing only a week at that point). There were dental records on one or two, a picture on one — nothing was complete. It was amazing. Considering how long this has gone on, you would have thought the police would have had complete files on each of them."

He took a piece of black X-ray film and cut a hole in it in the shape of a mouth. He surrounded it with red paper, simulating lips, put the impromptu mask over the skull which had most of its teeth, and photographed it. The eerie grin would be shown to the parents of four of the missing children: Christopher Richardson, 11, missing since June 9, 1980; Darron Glass, 10, missing since Sept. 14, 1980; Jeffery Lamar Mathis, 10, missing since March 11, 1980; and Earl Terrell, 10, missing since last July 30.

The smile resembled two — Glass and Terrell.

It was a start, but they needed much more to begin working on the skull which had no teeth. An expedition was organized.

It was a cold Sunday morning when Drs. Zaki and Mills arrived at the wooded area of East Point where the skeletal remains had been found. They were surprised to find that the police had lifted security at the scene. Anyone, including the killer, could have traipsed through there in the last few hours.

"We went to where the original skeleton was discovered," recalled Mills. "There had been a small, free-floating bone which was kind of sitting there in a clump of leaves. Its position made no sense. Either the police dropped it in their haste to bag everything, or there was another explanation."

"That's when we hypothesized that the place where the bones were found was not where they had been dumped. They could have washed downhill."

"So we went about three feet above the spot where the partial skeleton was found and a few paces over — following the likely water line — and began to dig. And sure enough, about an inch or two in the dirt we found our first bone, a large vertebra. When we saw that, we knew the scene had not been properly examined, and knew we were right."

"We celebrated. We said 'I told you so' to the police who had disturbed the evidence in the first place. And in an hour, we found 10 bones of varying sizes and 11 teeth. If we went out there again, we could probably find the rest."

They returned to the crime lab on Coca-Cola Place, an aseptic, yellow-and-white room in the basement, with three alternating sinks and blood-drainage bins; four chalkboards, three green and one black; three sets of surgical trays; a drum of odor-eater; a freezer to store blood and organ samples; and a wandering roach.

Zaki dealt with the skeletons, while Mills placed the teeth in the empty skull, secured

them with wax, and wired the jaw shut. Initially, there had been but one front tooth. Now there were four on top and bottom, and a smattering of others. The orthodontist could reconstruct a smile.

He repeated the mask procedure, and had his second eerie death-grin. But there was a distinction. One of the teeth was chipped, clearly, and another had a bad cavity. According to the dental records, one missing child had a tooth scheduled for extraction about the time he disappeared, and a chipped left lateral

incisor.

The investigators went separate ways at this point: Zaki working in the downtown lab with the skeleton, and Mills taking the head and jaw to his own office.

Zaki's measurements of the rest of the skeleton provided a physical portrait of a child which resembled the one with the cavity, and the bone structure and age all pointed to the same boy.

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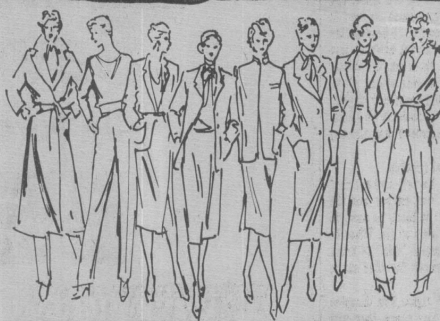
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