

Will the Real Joseph Newton Chandler III Please Stand Up? Genetic Genealogy Succeeds When All Else Fails

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Joseph Newton Chandler III was a quiet man who worked as an engineering draftsman in the greater Cleveland area. He had very few friends and left home only to go to work and to go out to eat. His suicide in July 2002 was destined to become a footnote in history until a search for his next-of kin revealed that Joseph Newton Chandler III was an 8-year-old boy who had died in a car accident in 1945 outside of Dallas.

What began as a routine suicide investigation turned into one of the oldest unsolved case in the State of Ohio.

Mr. X left few clues behind about his real identity. His remains had been cremated; no fingerprints were available. DNA was extracted from a tissue biopsy from 2000 but produced no CODIS hits. On a 1985 rental agreement, he listed a sister named Mary Wilson whose address was found to be a vacant lot in Columbus, OH. Further investigation revealed that Mr. X stole the real Chandler's identity in 1978 in Rapid City, South Dakota, by obtaining a social security number in his name. He quickly moved to Cleveland, OH, where he lived an unremarkable life until his suicide, possibly due to a diagnosis of colon cancer. It was if Mr. X had never existed prior to 1978.

Forensic genealogy to the rescue. A single match between Mr. X's Y-DNA profile and the public online genetic genealogy Y-STR databases indicated Nicholas as his possible last name; even so, the lead went nowhere. As a last resort, whole genome sequencing was performed from which an autosomal SNP dataset was derived to compare to genealogical data on Gedmatch, similar to what was later used to identify the Golden State Killer. This proved challenging. Two 30x rounds of sequencing exhausted the small amount of DNA remaining from the biopsy tissue. It had been embedded in paraffin for nearly 15 years; about 80% of his genome had been destroyed by chemical degradation, with less than 20 ng available for testing.

Individually the 30x sequences revealed only 3d cousins and beyond, making genealogical analysis difficult. To generate data with increased confidence levels, the two 30x datasets were combined into the equivalent of a 60x sequence. This produced a new 3d cousin that directed attention to a Robert Ivan Nichols from New Albany, IN. Robert's 1926 birth certificate indicated his parents' street address in New Albany as 1823 Center St. Coincidentally, this was the same street address in Columbus that Chandler gave for his "sister" on his 1985 rental agreement.

Talk about a dead giveaway.