

RESOLUTION OF 80-YEAR-OLD COLD CASE BY DNA ANALYSIS AND DATABASE MINING

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We discuss the use of DNA in the resolution of an 80-year-old cold case involving the discovery of the original identity of an individual who had fled the United States for Australia in 1924 and who had lived there under several assumed names until he died in 1970. From the 1940s, he went by the name of John Henderson Gray.

Database mining was of initially useless in identifying him. The information that Gray provided about his origins was of uncertain reliability. Even with the advent of Internet-based public record and genealogical databases, it was not possible to identify him; the few facts that were assumed to be true about him were not in a combination that could be used by a typical search engine to reduce the number of possible candidates.

In 2008, nearly forty years after Gray died, a DNA match was discovered between his son and two individuals in the United States with the family name Smithers. With a likely surname as the focus of a public record search, Gray was soon identified as James William Smithers of Mount Pleasant, MI. Further research showed that Smithers-Gray had been married twice before his departure for Australia, and had had three children, two of whom were still alive and in their mid-80s. His family in the US knew he was probably living in Australia and had been actively searching for him in both countries for nearly 80 years, but had no success in discovering his whereabouts because he had been living under an assumed name.

This case study illustrates the synergism between DNA analysis and database mining. The identification of Smithers-Gray could not have been successful without both.