

DNA Tests Cast Doubt In Boston Strangler Case

Evidence Could Exonerate Longtime Suspect

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A team of specialists using modern DNA analysis said yesterday it has found new evidence that could exonerate Albert H. DeSalvo, long believed to have been the notorious "Boston Strangler," in the murder of the strangler's 11th and last victim.

The team said two DNA samples taken from the exhumed remains of Mary Sullivan were not DeSalvo's, and it called on Massachusetts authorities to check the samples against semen taken from the crime scene years ago.

"This evidence quite clearly indicates that Albert DeSalvo was not the murderer," said team leader James E. Starrs, a lawyer and forensic scientist from George Washington University. "The ball is in the bailiwick of Massachusetts and Boston authorities."

The findings of the Starrs team raise new doubts in the long-running controversy over 11 grisly, Jack the Ripper-like murders committed by a serial killer who terrorized Boston between June 1962 and Jan. 4, 1964, the date of Sullivan's death.

DeSalvo, a Boston handyman under indictment for rape, confessed to the crimes in horrible detail, but physical evidence never connected him to the crimes. He was sent to prison on unrelated charges and was killed by a fellow inmate in 1973. The murder cases have remained open.

Sullivan's nephew Casey Sherman said at a news conference to announce the team's findings that the family believes Sullivan's murderer "is still out there." The findings "make me feel vindicated," he added.

Sherman said mismatched evidence in other cases suggests "if Albert DeSalvo didn't kill Mary Sullivan, then Albert DeSalvo didn't kill any of these women."

The Massachusetts attorney general's office said investigators working on the Sullivan case have been stymied because the DeSalvo family will not provide a blood sample for DNA analysis.

"There was semen recovered at the crime scene and we possess a quantity of it," said Kurt Schwartz, chief of the criminal bureau at the attorney general's office. "If we could compare the semen to DeSalvo, it might tell us a lot."

Sullivan, 19, was assaulted in her Boston apartment and strangled with a stocking and two scarves. She was the youngest and last victim ascribed to the killer branded by Boston newspapers as "the phantom fiend" and "the strangler."

Police arrested DeSalvo in November 1964 and indicted him on 10 counts of sexual assault unrelated to the murders.

Before trial, however, he told his attorney, R. Lee Bailey, that he had killed the 11 strangler victims and two others. He was sentenced to life imprisonment on the rape charges.

Sherman, a producer for the CBS-TV affiliate in Boston, said he became interested in the case because of his family's doubts about DeSalvo's guilt. He contacted Starrs, who assembled a team of specialists to conduct a DNA investigation with the cooperation of the Sullivan and DeSalvo families.

The team exhumed Sullivan's body from the St. Francis Xavier Cemetery in Hyannis, Mass., in October 2000, and DeSalvo's body in October of this year.



BY BILL DAVENPORT—ASSOCIATED PRESS

Casey Sherman, nephew of strangler victim Mary Sullivan, said yesterday that his family believes the murderer is "still out there."

Starrs said that the team requested a copy of the original 1964 autopsy but that Massachusetts authorities, "who have stonewalled us from the start," would not give it to them. Starrs said the team eventually obtained a copy from a journalist.

Schwartz said his office refused the request because the Sullivan case is an open investigation: "We have a single interest—in solving a crime," Schwartz said. "They have been more interested in doing their own investigation."

Team member Michael M. Baden, a New York-based pathologist, explained that information from the 1964 autopsy clashed with DeSalvo's confession in several important details.

DeSalvo said he killed Sullivan in the late afternoon, but the corpse was in full rigor mortis when the medical examiner got to it, indicating death before noon.

DeSalvo said he strangled Sullivan with his bare hands, but the 1964 autopsy showed the strangler used clothing.

Baden said the Starrs team found intact a small horseshoe-shaped bone from above



AP/WIDE WORLD

New evidence could exonerate Albert H. DeSalvo, pictured here minutes after his capture Feb. 25, 1967, in Sullivan's slaying.

Sullivan's Adam's apple. Strangling by hand usually damages or crushes the bone.

Remains were sent to George Washington for DNA analysis by geneticist David Foran, who examined samples taken from Sullivan's hair, fingernails, pubic hair and a pair of black panties she wore when she was buried.

Foran said he compared DNA from the four sites to specimens taken from Sullivan and DeSalvo, and found two suspicious samples—from the panties and from a semen-like film in the pubic hair.

Neither matched DeSalvo, he said, but the team concluded that one of two suspicious samples may have belonged to the real murderer: "Intuitively it seems consistent that [the evidence] was coming from her killer."

Starrs said "where the samples come from we cannot tell," but he called on the attorney general's office to turn over its semen samples for comparison. The Sullivan and DeSalvo families have a lawsuit pending against Massachusetts investigators to gain access to the evidence.