

FINNEGAN

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UF lab tries to answer who, how in mummified baby case

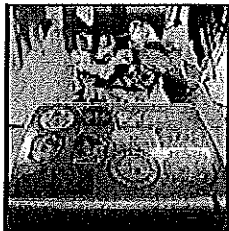
By [Tim O'Meilia](#)

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The mystery of the mummified baby in the suitcase is in the carefully gloved hands of scientific sleuths called forensic anthropologists.

When the remains are too old, the pathologists call in the anthropologists.



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"Their expertise is soft tissue. Ours is hard tissue," said University of Florida forensic anthropologist Anthony Falsetti, head of the renowned C.A. Pound Human Identification Laboratory in Gainesville, which has been asked to examine the remains of the infant found this week in a Delray Beach storage unit. "We often work hand in hand."

Practically speaking, when a body is too decomposed or mummified, there's no soft tissue left for pathologists to examine for bullet holes or knife wounds. Anthropologists read the bones.

"No matter what the case is or what the circumstances are, the basic questions are: Who is it and what happened to them?"

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Falsetti said Friday. Add a third in this case, he said: How old was he?

If they hit two out of three, count it a success. This isn't, after all, one of those ever-proliferating forensic mystery TV shows where everything is solved in an hour.

The Pound lab will try to answer two of the questions: the baby's age and manner of death. Give them a

couple of weeks.

Scientists at the Center for Human Identification at the University of North Texas will attempt to extract DNA that may lead to an identification. Give them three to six months.

"It will take more than an hour," joked Michael Finnegan, a forensic anthropologist at Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kan.

The case is the stuff of television ratings: A 46-year-old New Jersey woman arrives at a Delray Beach storage facility to check over the items left there by her late parents.

Inside a suitcase, she finds another suitcase and inside that, a gruesome discovery: the mummified body of an infant boy, umbilical cord still attached, wrapped in the Jan. 9, 1957 edition of the *New York Daily News* and adult-sized women's pants. Cue the opening credits.

The woman is left wondering if the baby was her older brother, born or stillborn before the parents were married in a Catholic church. There are clues: the newspaper, the photo of a 5- or 6-year-old girl, rosary beads, a religious prayer card and a birthday prayer card. One of the suitcases is plastered with travel stickers from New Jersey to Georgia.

Don't jump to conclusions, warns Finnegan. The newspaper could have been around for years before it was used. There are lots of Catholics in New Jersey. And South Florida. Wait for the science.

Because of the condition of the body - shrunken to 13 ounces from dehydration - an autopsy was not done by Palm Beach County Medical Examiner Michael Bell. But X-rays showed no broken bones or apparent trauma.

Leave it to the anthropologists and the DNA experts. The CSI's CSI.

The Pound lab comes with impressive credentials. These are the guys, under the leadership of the late Dr. William R. Maples, who confirmed that remains found in a crypt in Lima, Peru, were those of Spanish conquistador Francisco Pizarro.

Falsetti and Maples separately authenticated the bones of Russian Czar Nicholas II and Czarina Alexandra. Maples oversaw the exhumation of President Zachary Taylor. Decades after his death, another autopsy on slain civil rights activist Medgar Evers led to the conviction of his killer in a retrial.

Nowadays, the lab mostly deals with law enforcement cases. "I don't know if the popularity of digging up historical figures has waned," he said.

All 24 of the state's medical examiners depend on the lab to examine skeletal remains. The case load has risen from 71 in 1991 to more than 180 last year.

Falsetti and colleague Michael Warren are among 74 board-certified forensic anthropologists in the country, a number that is rising.

Falsetti calls himself the next generation of forensic anthropologists, following Maples, a pioneer in the field, and others. He helped identify victims at the World Trade Center.

If today's 100-plus students in his undergraduate Introduction to Forensic Anthropology class were drawn there by *CSI*-like television shows, "*Quincy* was the show I watched growing up," he said.

The Pound lab will begin examining the mummified baby as soon as the eight cases they have now are finished. Two were completed Friday.

"We'll rehydrate the body using a saline solution. Then we'll carefully remove all the bones," he said, by slicing the body from the back. The saline is used so the body won't be contaminated. Outside the warm, dry suitcase, the remains will begin to decompose rapidly.

Falsetti will personally examine all 11,000 "skeletal elements" for injury and to estimate the baby's age. He'll also use an extra-sensitive x-ray machine.

Each bone and the skull will be measured. The measurements give clues to the age. Of special interest is the lower jaw. The stage of development of the infant's tooth buds hidden in the jaw also help determine the age.

Each step will be meticulously recorded and photographed. In the end, Falsetti may be able to pinpoint the age of the infant and have a strong opinion on how he died.

Meanwhile, the North Texas lab will try to examine the baby's mitochondrial DNA from a sample of bone sent there. It is one of the few with software from the FBI capable of matching remains with samples in the database.

Last year, the lab matched a DNA sample from bones of victims of a serial killer in Missoula, Mont., with a runaway teenage girl from Washington state.

"It very much depends on the quality of the sample," said Stephen Gammon, director of the Center for Human Identification. "We'll spend weeks trying to nurse a sample out of a bone."


To avoid contamination by other DNA, the bone is sanded and softened. Numerous samples are taken and replicated. Each step is carefully recorded to preserve the chain of custody in the event the tests are needed for court cases.

The sample will be compared with one given by the New Jersey woman whose parents rented the storage unit. That should tell whether the woman and the baby have the same mother.

Even if science answers all three questions months from now, it can't answer why.

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