

Modern Mummy: Law enforcement, examiners need public's help to ID Alton body

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Without public input, it may be impossible for law enforcement and medical examiners to identify the mummified body found on Powhatten Street in Alton in August of last year, the Madison County Coroner's Office said.

A 7-year-old playing by the shed discovered the body of the black male 25 to 35 years of age.

Madison County Coroner Steve Nonn said that because of the mummification process, his office and the other medical examiners are at a standstill to identify the body without public help.

Because of the body being mummified, there is no ability to compare fingerprints and without having a name, there is no way to pursue dental records. There is also no way presently to match the body to DNA without having family samples.

“It’s going to take somebody to step up and say my uncle or family member is missing and it could be him,” Nonn added. “It will take that kind of instance to break the case open. Otherwise, there is no other way to identify the person.”

Deputy Coroner Roger Smith said there is no central repository for dental records like there are for fingerprints. Unlike the past, without a national draft or Selective Service, a lot of people aren’t even fingerprinted today.

Nonn described a mummified appearance today as a human being in leathery form, rather than skeletal or flesh form. A modern day mummy is much different than the ancient idea of being wrapped in cloth.

“It is somewhere between flesh and skeletal, but stopped at the leather part of the process,” he said.

The two representatives of the coroner’s office said how long it takes a person to mummify depends on the health of the person, weather conditions present at the time and the environment. There is no real standard for mummification. During the winter and in cold conditions it obviously could help preserve and retard the decaying process. Mummification is not common today.

Often when one thinks of mummified bodies, it is back in Ancient Egypt where the process was used frequently. Today, a mummified body is much different and Madison County Coroner Steve Nonn and Deputy Coroner Roger Smith both said there is no definite answer on how long the process takes, that it is dependent on the different conditions.

“Obviously there are a number of factors that go into that and there is no set answer for that,” Smith said. “It depends on the condition of where the person is; obviously if it is a nice, clean environment in the desert, the body might be perfectly preserved. If the body

is inside a vehicle with the window rolled up it is very dry for the most part and not a humid atmosphere.”

So how did this happen? How can a body sit in a car for this long and not be found?

Nonn said people today live in a different, isolationist society where people aren’t aware of their surroundings.

“You don’t even see people walking anymore,” he said. “The possibility of a body being in an abandoned car today is easier to understand now than 30 years ago. Granite City Police had a homicide two weeks ago on a major thoroughfare, two blocks from the police station.”

Nonn said in his childhood, this type of thing would have never happened.

“In the old days, if a car was just driving through a neighborhood and somebody said they weren’t from the neighborhood, someone would have called the police and had it checked out,” he said. “People today keep to themselves. We live in a different society. When I grew up, if you didn’t see the other neighbor you would knock on the door.”

Alton Police has urged people come to forward if they know anything about the Powhatten case or any of the other missing persons cases in the region. Call Alton Police at 618-463-3505 with any information.