

Forensic science of the wayne williams murders



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Abstract

From July of 1971 until May of 1981, there was a string of murders that took place in the Atlanta area. Many people began to question who could possibly be committing all these murders and not have been caught and why nobody has seen any of the victims being taken away without a fight or struggle.

Wayne Williams believed to have been the man behind the string of murders in Atlanta after being found guilty of two murders whose body washed up on the Chattahoochee River just the same as the others. Wayne Williams can be classified as a "mission" serial killer since the majority of the victims that came up missing were young black male teens and adults. Williams was known for his intellect however it was said that he just couldn't grasp control of his life which lead to him becoming a killer. Williams maintained his innocence until investigators were able to locate trace evidence from him and his belongings on the two victims. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the importance of trace evidence and how fibers from clothing can be passed along without really knowing. This paper will discuss forensics as a whole and how it has changed throughout history as it continues to improve.

Keywords: Trace evidence, Wayne Williams, Atlanta Murders

The Wayne Williams Case

In the case of Wayne Williams, he did something uniquely odd when it came to being a serial killer, he took the just of not being able to control his life and achieving some of his goals and turned it into being a serial killer and killing people believing that it's a form of how he controls his life. From July 21, 1979, until May of 1981, there were 29 murders in the Atlanta area. Most

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of the victims were boys all of them were black. The majorities were young, teenaged and some were even children (DeLong, 2018). After learning about the mysterious strings of murder, the City of Atlanta grew restless and so did the local law enforcement departments. They wanted to link the suspect to the crime scene and catch whoever was committing these murders. However, the police had many attempts at capturing the suspect that were unsuccessful until they began to conduct stakeouts on several of the bridges that were along the Chattahoochee River.

After setting up their stakeout locations along the bridge that was over the Chattahoochee River police heard a loud splash into the water and then immediately they saw a car speeding by, of course, they pulled the car over for speeding and to their surprise, and they found Wayne Williams in the driver's seat. After the police questioned Williams and not having any real physical evidence it seemed that he had gotten away with yet another set of murders but, two days after the police after the police had their encounter with Williams they were arresting him for the murder of two young black men whose bodies washed up along the banks of the Chattahoochee River. Williams maintained his innocence throughout stating that he knew nothing about the murders or had nothing to do with it however; he was unaware that fibers from his clothing, car and pets were found on the two murder victims. According to DeLong (2019), " hairs and fibers from Williams, his family dog, and his care were found on the two victims in whom he was arrested. It seemed as if Williams thought that he was able to get away with the murders not thinking that he would leave any evidence behind".

Trace Fibers as Evidence

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According to the National Institute of Justice (2016), “ fibers, hair, soil, wood, gunshot residue and pollen are a few examples of trace evidence that may be transferred between people, objects or the environment during a crime. Investigators can potentially link a suspect and a victim to a mutual location through trace evidence”. During the string of Atlanta Murders, police were never able to link the suspect to the crime scene and could not understand why the person committing the crimes was throwing the bodies down in the Chattahoochee River. Williams was a very smart man and he figured that if he threw the bodies in the river it would cause contamination and investigators would never be able to find enough evidence on the body to link the crime back to him. Although Williams planned seemed as if it would work, the latter of the two bodies changed that theory he had.

According to Bay (2011), “ Locards exchange principle holds that the perpetrator of a crime will bring something into the crime scene and leave with something from it and that both can be used as forensic evidence”. Williams believes that since he was killing his victims by strangulation his fingerprints would not be found on the body after the washed up along the banks of the river. What Williams did not know was that trace evidence is left behind on every crime scene and on pretty much everything that we have contact with. To Williams’s surprise, the investigators were able to link him to the murders of the two men due to them finding trace evidence in the form of fibers from his clothing and car and hair from his pets.

How Valuable and Reliable is Trace Evidence?

Trace evidence can include a wide variety of materials, but the most commonly tested are hair, fibers, paint, and glass. People have often questioned how valuable is trace evidence during an investigation, well in the case of Wayne Williams the trace evidence that was found was able to link him to the death of the two young men and it could have possibly linked him to the Atlanta Murders had the police wanted to pursue the cases and reopen them. According to Clarkridge (2016), " Trace evidence can sometimes be minute and can be difficult to detect, which is why a crime scene is sealed off only to those people who are responsible for overseeing the collection of physical evidence in whatever form it takes".

During the case of Wayne Williams, trace evidence was the most important factor during the investigation. If the police department would have never located the fibers on the victims and traced them, back to Williams the string of murders could have continued to happen and the number of young black teens and adults could have grown larger. Although these key pieces of evidence were very small, the outcome it provided in the case was huge. Trace evidence, in any case, is important being that sometimes investigators may not be able to extract fingerprints well enough to use and find the suspect or the evidence on the crime scene could have possibly been contaminated and the small hairs and fibers were the only things left behind.

Conclusion

During the time of the Atlanta Murders, many people felt that something had to be done and someone needed to be caught for the string of murders, however investigators were never able to find enough evidence to link a

suspect to the crime. Wayne Williams appeared on the scene after he was arrested for the murders of two young men who washed up on the bank of the Chattahoochee River. Williams almost got away with the murders but, the important pieces of trace evidence that were found on the victims allowed investigators to link him to the murders. After the arrest of Williams, many people in the Atlanta area believed that he was responsible for the other murders that happened but due to the lack of evidence, police did not reopen any of the cases.

In today's forensic society and the way investigations have changed over time, I believe that the investigations of Wayne Williams would have been a bit different. I believe that after police heard the splash while on their stakeout would have arrested Williams then due to probable cause of them believe that the splash was a body. I also believe that the other murder cases would have been reopened to possibly test the trace evidence to see if Williams could have possibly killed any of those victims as well.

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