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Unmasking the Past: Law Enforcement's Breakthrough in a 54-Year-Old Case using IDEMIA STORM ABIS

CASE STUDY

Background

On **February 19, 1971**, the decomposed body of an unidentified young woman was discovered floating in **Shady Brook Creek at Lake Panasoffkee**, Florida, beneath the Interstate 75 overpass. The victim, with a men's leather belt around her neck, was wrapped in carpet and clothed in green plaid pants, a matching shirt, and a shawl. She also wore distinctive jewelry: **a Baylor wristwatch, a gold ring with a clear stone, and a thin gold necklace**. Investigators believed she had been dumped from the overpass about a month earlier.

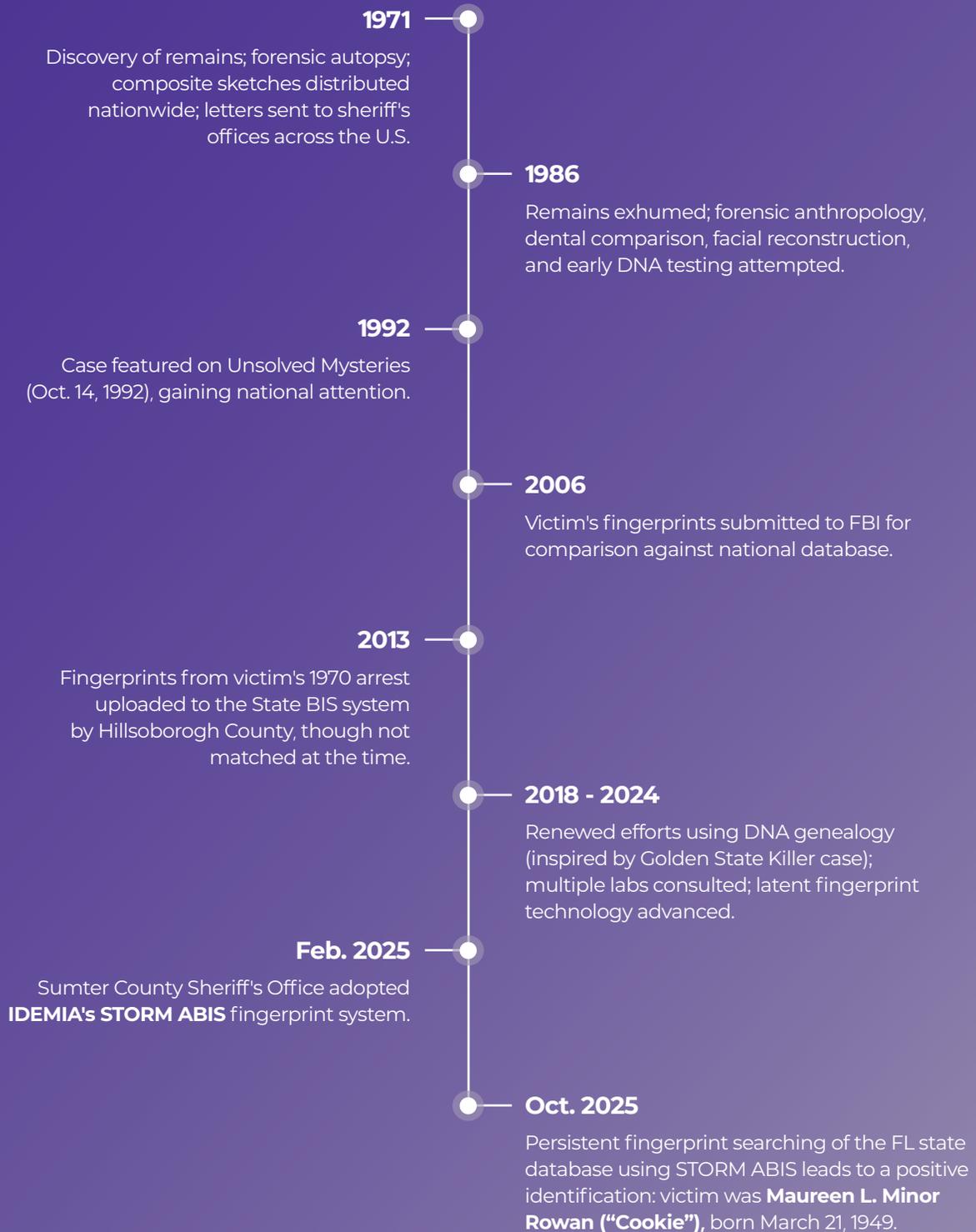
Initial Forensic Findings

- **Demographics:** White female, 5'2"–5'5", 110–120 lbs, dark hair, brown eyes
- **Age:** Estimated 17–24 years old
- **Medical history:** Evidence of childbirth (at least two children), dental crown on front tooth, Watson-Jones ankle surgery
- **Cause of death:** Homicide by strangulation (belt around neck)

Despite these findings, investigators were **unable to identify her** due to the limitations of forensic technology in 1971.



Investigative Timeline



Identification & Breakthrough

In early 2025, the Sumter County Sheriff's Office and the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE) significantly enhanced their fingerprint identification capabilities through advanced technology provided by IDEMIA. Sumter County implemented STORM ABIS (Automated Biometric Identification System) to search for latent prints recovered from crime scenes, while FDLE upgraded its fingerprint system with state-of-the-art matching algorithms and the latest biometric tools.

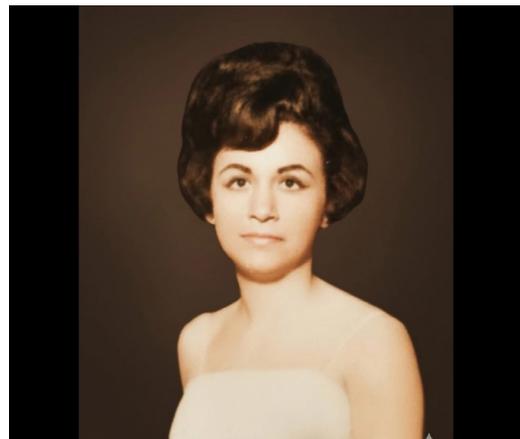
When the victim's body was discovered in 1971, investigators relied on ink-and-paper fingerprinting methods. Due to the condition of the remains, the prints captured were of very poor quality. For decades, this limitation hindered identification efforts. However, with the dedication and persistence of Certified

Latent Print Examiner, Candice Sieg, of the Sumter County Sheriff's Office (FL) and modern fingerprint technology, they ultimately were able to match the low-quality inked prints to an old arrest record in the FL database.

This breakthrough was the result of collaboration and persistence across multiple law enforcement agencies. In 2013, Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office digitized the victim's original fingerprint card and uploaded it into the state database as part of a statewide initiative to preserve historical records. Years later, Sumter County's Latent Print Unit utilized STORM ABIS to search the Jane Doe prints, and FDLE's enhanced algorithms identified the match among millions of records. The victim was identified as **Maureen L. Minor Rowan**, known to friends and family as "Cookie."

Key Revelations

- Cookie had been arrested in 1970, and her fingerprints were uploaded to FBI records by Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office.
- She was **never reported missing**, which explains why her case remained unsolved for decades.



Lessons Learned

- 1. Persistence in Cold Cases:**
Continuous efforts over decades, even when leads ran dry, ultimately led to resolution.
- 2. Attention to Detail:** When the victim's body was recovered, investigators diligently recorded prints from the partially decomposed fingers to preserve the evidence.
- 3. Advances in Forensic Technology:**
The evolution from early autopsy and dental comparison to modern latent fingerprint systems was pivotal.
- 4. Importance of Record Integration:** The victim's fingerprints existed in FBI records since 1970, but technological limitations delayed the match.
- 5. Public Engagement:** Media coverage (Unsolved Mysteries, social media campaigns) kept the case alive and relevant.



Conclusion

The case of **“Little Miss Lake Panasoffkee”** demonstrates the intersection of forensic science, investigative persistence, preservation of evidence, and technological innovation. After **55 years**, Maureen “Cookie” Rowan was finally given her name back, offering closure to her family and reigniting the pursuit of justice against her suspected killer.