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COLUMN ONE

Enlisting a Posse of Scientists

■ A Mammoth officer goes online for help solving a murder. His use of anthropologists and other academics is deemed 'cutting-edge.'

By SAM QUINONES
Times Staff Writer

Three years ago this month, a hiker noticed his dog rummaging in the brush on a hilltop trail overlooking the town of Mammoth Lakes.

Drawing closer, the hiker saw his dog had found a human skull.

Later, an officer found a shallow grave nearby, with human remains contained in tattered plastic bags.

The body had apparently spent a winter under the snow. Time, and the bears and coyotes, had taken most of the flesh.

Police surmised only a few things about the body that day. It was a woman's. She was short. And she wasn't dressed for camping.

Their clues were few: a pair of high heels, size 1 or 2 jeans, a size 32A bra, a frilly red blouse, a furry Cold Air Design jacket and a Kmart Jaclyn Smith watch — still running.

They would learn later from a pathologist's examination that she appeared never to have had dental care, and she'd given birth at least once in her life.

Murder is a rare occurrence in placid Mammoth Lakes — population 8,000 — best known for the ski slopes popular with Angelenos. The Police Department has only 20 sworn officers. The woman was its third homicide in a quarter century.

The case fell to Sgt. Paul Dostie, 52, a genial detective with 20 years on the force.

Aware that his years in Mammoth Lakes hadn't prepared him for the job ahead, Dostie reached out for help with the best tool he had: the Internet. Through e-mail, he slowly assembled an A-team of investigators, each with a different talent.

None worked in law enforcement. Instead, they were academics — scientists who study how ancient peoples lived and died.

They were two anthropologists, a stable-isotope geochemist from Canada, two DNA analysts and a pioneer in American forensic skull reconstruction.

"That's my claim to fame," Dostie said dryly. "I know a lot of people smarter than I am."

The case this small-town cop put together mined obscure scientific databases and analyses that have emerged only in the last decade with the mapping of the human genome and that still are the domain of a handful of anthropologists and geneticists. Some had never before been used in a U.S. criminal case, the researchers say.

"The stuff he's done is really cutting-edge," said Rich Longshore, a Los Angeles County sheriff's detective who teaches homicide investigation and is familiar with Dostie's case. "One [See Mammoth, Page A16]



JOHN RAOUX Associated Press

Going Forth in July

The space shuttle Discovery begins an eight-hour journey from the assembly building to the launch pad at Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla., for its next mission, planned for July. **A4**

L.A. Schools State Their Case

Board officials, after months of Villaraigosa's attacks, try to blunt his takeover plan by touting progress to lawmakers and the public.

By JOEL RUBIN
Times Staff Writer

After months of enduring attacks from Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, the Los Angeles Board of Education has launched a public relations offensive to highlight the district's accomplishments and slow momentum for a mayoral takeover of the schools.

In recent weeks, board members have gone to Sacramento to ply lawmakers with information about district gains in test scores, high-performing schools located in their legislative districts, and the new campuses that have been built as part of an ongoing construction project, as well as the district's solid finances.

State Sen. Sheila Kuehl (D-Santa Monica) said she was visited by board President Marlene Canter, who "wanted to make sure there was a reasonable and balanced discussion, that the accomplishments of the school district under the current board structure were not overlooked."

The board has also hired political strategist Darryl Sragow to help reshape its image and plans to expand its contract with a Sacramento lobbying firm in anticipation of legislation that would grant the mayor sweeping

authority over the school system.

Sragow is quick to acknowledge that the board and schools Supt. Roy Romer must strike a delicate balance between touting the gains the district has made and appearing complacent — a charge Villaraigosa has made frequently.

"The district has to be very candid," he said. "You cannot go out and say, 'Everything is great, everything is fine, go away and leave us alone.' It's not credible, it's not accurate. . . . They have to demonstrate that they are ir-

[See District, Page A12]

U.S. Seeks to Curb Iran With Neighbors' Help

The plan calls for missile defense systems and interceptions of nuclear technology. Gulf states are receptive but wary of angering Tehran.

By PAUL RICHTER
AND PETER SPIEGEL
Times Staff Writers

WASHINGTON — Opening a new front in its effort against Iran, the Bush administration has begun developing a containment strategy with the Islamic state's Persian Gulf neighbors that aims to spread sophisticated missile defense systems across the region and to interdict ships carrying nuclear technology to the country.

Although the primary goal is to keep Tehran from obtaining a nuclear bomb, the defense effort also reflects the administration's planning for a day when Iran becomes a nuclear state and, officials fear, more aggressive in a region that provides oil exports to the world.

"Iran without nuclear arms is a threat. . . . With nuclear weapons it would become even more emboldened, in terms of moving forward with its aggressive designs," Robert Joseph, undersecretary of State for arms control and international security, said in an interview. "And that includes in the gulf, and many countries in the gulf are concerned about that."

Although Tehran insists that its uranium-enrichment program is aimed only at creating fuel for civilian use, gulf leaders are anxious about Iran's rising influence in the region and the possibility that it will develop nuclear weapons.

But they are also unwilling to appear provocative to Tehran, which is a major trading partner and an intermittent military threat.

U.S. officials will have to overcome that nervousness before they can persuade the nations to sign on to their full package of proposals, gulf officials and experts on the region say.

"They don't want to antagonize, so there is a degree to which they are conflicted," said a senior State Department official who requested anonymity.

However, he added, the gulf countries "as a whole are very receptive to the message."

U.S. officials say they see the initiative as a way to put additional pressure on Tehran while

they press ahead with their primary diplomatic effort, which calls for the U.N. Security Council to take steps to halt Iran's enrichment program. The U.S. has so far failed to win enough support at the United Nations for sanctions.

Joseph rolled out the proposal during a trip last month to the gulf states of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman.

John Hillen, assistant secretary of State for political-military affairs, led a top-level U.S. delegation to the region last week for further discussions.

Hillen said the initiative was [See Iran, Page A24]

Vatican Sanctions Accused Priest

The aging founder of an influential order was the subject of sexual abuse allegations for decades but had the backing of Pope John Paul II.

By TRACY WILKINSON
Times Staff Writer

ROME — The Vatican announced Friday that it was disciplining the Mexican founder of an influential Roman Catholic order after an investigation into decades of allegations that the now elderly priest sexually abused seminarians and boys in his care.

Father Marcial Maciel appears to be the highest-ranking priest to be sanctioned in an abuse case. Maciel enjoyed protective support from the late Pope John Paul II for many years, but Pope Benedict XVI, in his first major decision in the church's sex abuse scandal, put aside his predecessor's wishes.

Maciel has denied the allegations, and his organization, the Legion of Christ, repeated that position Friday.

The Vatican said in a statement that Maciel, 86, had been instructed to refrain from all public ministries and to adopt a "life of prayer and penitence." The statement did not specify whether the charges were true, but experts said the Vatican's decision indicated that church investigators believed at least some of the accusations.

Given his age and frail health, the statement added, Maciel will not be prosecuted under canonical law.

The Vatican said Benedict, who has vowed to rid the church of the "filth" that sexual abuse represents, personally approved [See Priest, Page A20]

Scam Probe Tries to Link Women to More Deaths

Officers are looking at unsolved accidents for ties to the pair accused of insurance fraud and suspected in the hit-runs of two homeless men.

By RICHARD WINTON
AND CARA MIA DI MASSA
Times Staff Writers

Los Angeles police detectives investigating a pair of elderly women accused of taking out large life insurance policies on two homeless men later killed in suspicious hit-and-runs said Friday that they were reviewing scores of other unsolved acci-

dents to determine whether there are other victims.

Traffic division officers from around the city are poring over years of cases, looking for possible links to the women.

"I tend to believe there are other victims out there," said LAPD Det. Dennis Kilcoyne.

Authorities said they have evidence showing that the women purchased rubber stamps bearing the signatures of at least eight men, which could have been used to forge signatures on insurance forms.

The whereabouts of some of these men remain unknown, officials said.

Olga Rutterschmidt, 73, and Helen Golay, 75, were charged Thursday with mail fraud, but police consider them suspects in the deaths of the two homeless men.

Detectives believe that Rutterschmidt and Golay recruited [See Insurance, Page A14]



LEE CELANO For The Times

WHAT NEXT? Hurricane Katrina displaced George Courtney and Jessica Lessard, with their son, Ethan. They have little money and no place to go but might lose their FEMA trailer in D'Iberville, Miss.

30 Days' Notice at the FEMA Trailer

Eviction letters go out to about 3,000 Katrina victims, who are told they're ineligible.

By RICHARD FAUSSET
Times Staff Writer

D'IBERVILLE, Miss. — The mail carrier brought the registered letter to Jessica Lessard's tiny trailer, along with a sour and foreboding comment: "I hope you got better news than I got," she said.

RELATED STORY

Rebuilding: A New Orleans woman is showing the ropes. **A6**

Lessard, 24, tore open the envelope and felt like crying. The letter was from the Federal Emergency Management Agency. It said she and her family had 30 days to leave the flimsy, government-issued box that has been their home since Hurricane Katrina.

Three weeks later, Lessard; her fiancé, George Courtney;

and their 3-year-old son are still worried, though they have appealed their case. The house they once shared with Courtney's stepfather was ruined by the storm, and they can't afford the Gulf Coast's post-Katrina rents. Nearby relatives are also in trailers or in homes with no room for them.

Lessard's family is one of about 3,000 in Mississippi that have been deemed ineligible for a trailer as FEMA weeds out those Katrina victims who do not meet the qualifications for its emer- [See FEMA, Page A9]

INSIDE

House Inquiry Finds No Impropriety in VA Deal

Report says there was no conflict of interest in giving contracts to a firm run by an ex-chief of Veteran Affairs. **A10**

Head of State Mental Hospitals to Resign

John Rodriguez's decision comes amid efforts to comply with increasing federal pressure to reform patient care. **B1**

Dodgers Run Over Angels in 16-3 Victory

In Game 1 of the Freeway Series, the Dodgers send 15 batters to the plate and score nine runs in the 6th inning. **D1**

Weather

Partly cloudy after some fog and drizzle. Increasing clouds later. L.A. Downtown: 75/60. **B18**

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