

Lewisville Lake remains identified as missing man: How a mother's love endured in a decades-old mystery

- [By Brooke Colombo Staff Writer](#)
- Sep 12, 2026 Updated Sep 15, 2026

Over 40 years after Gary Wayne Dover went missing from Denton under suspicious circumstances, a DNA match finally linked him to remains found at Hickory Creek Park on Lewisville Lake in 1990.

Gary's mother never knew what happened to her beloved son before she died, but relatives said it was her steadfast hope for answers that led to his positive identification.

That identification was a big break in once-separate cold cases at the Denton and Hickory Creek police departments.

Detectives had no idea there was a connection between Dover's 1981 disappearance and the 1990 unearthing of a lakeside grave.

"We knew there were remains found in Hickory Creek, and we would follow up with the [medical examiner's] office," said Hickory Creek Detective Jim Zehetner, who took on the case last fall. "But that's all we really knew about it until September of last year."

The revelation that Dover's remains were found just 10 miles south from where he likely vanished answers one gnawing question.

Still, more questions remain: How did Dover end up buried by the lake? And who is responsible?

Solving this decades-old case has its challenges, but Detective Zehetner said he is determined to find an ending to Dover's life story.

"Our responsibility as law enforcement is to never give up on these cases," Zehetner said. "We might not get to work them every day in hot pursuit. But Gary's up on my wall, and when I talked to Denton PD, they said, 'Gary Wayne Dover's still on the top of our board.'"

Gary Wayne Dover's life and disappearance

Johnnie Dover and Vonnice "Vonnice" Trull Dover left their East Texas hometown of Mabank in the 1940s for Pilot Point so Johnnie could pursue his career as an electrician.

The couple raised two sons, Douglas Dover, born in 1946, and Gary Wayne Dover, born Jan. 10, 1950.

After Gary graduated from Pilot Point Gee High School in 1968, his parents returned to Mabank and built a home on Vonnie's family land.



Gary Wayne Dover, left, pictured at age 16 with his grandfather Oscar Trull and brother, Douglas, in November 1966.

Courtesy photo/Pam Lawson

Gary remained in the Denton area and worked as a mechanic. He eventually married but later divorced without having children.

Gary had some younger cousins on his mother's side who were in junior high and high school when he disappeared at 31 years old.

One cousin, Pam Lawson, told the *Denton Record-Chronicle* she remembers that he was "a super sweet guy."

Her older sister, Amy Trull, said Gary, who was over 10 years older than her, "wasn't a close cousin to me in the sense that he was an adult out living his life."

"He had freckles and reddish hair, and he had a really big smile. His smile reminded me of my dad," Amy said. "He talked cars with my dad. He really enjoyed cars."

What Amy remembers most about her cousin is how devoted he was to his parents.

"Especially his mom," Amy Trull said. "He would check on her, call her, and he would come down and see her, a lot of times, on a motorcycle. ... He was a good son. He cared about her, checked on her and helped her."

With how dedicated her son was, it immediately struck Vonnie as very odd when Gary did not show up for a Sunday dinner in 1981 as planned.

“She went up to Denton — my recollection is the next day — and went to where he lived to figure it out,” Amy said. “She went to his job, and she went to his home. Things felt that she wasn’t getting the full story about where Gary was.”

From what his mother could gather, Amy said, no one had seen or heard from Gary since the Friday before.

Gary was not someone with a history of illegal activity or drug activity, Amy said.

“He wasn’t an unsavory character,” Amy said. “He was just a working guy.”

The potential timing of Gary’s disappearance, as Amy recalled, led his mother to develop a theory as to motive.

“The last she could ascertain was he was seen on a Friday, a payday,” Amy said. “Back then, you didn’t have ATM cards. So, you went to the bank and you cashed your check, and you’d have money for the weekend. A lot of people would rob people on Fridays because they had their paycheck in their pocket.”

But police records indicate Dover was last seen on Aug. 29, 1981, which was a Saturday.

After having no luck finding Gary on her own, Vonnie went to the Denton Police Department to file a missing person report.

The Denton Police Department’s electronic case file states that the missing person report was taken on Monday, Sept. 7, 1981. However, the handwritten report states Tuesday, Sept. 8, 1981.

A supplemental police report filed on Sept. 21, 1981, stated that Denton officers located Dover’s vehicle in a Kroger parking lot.

The exact date of discovery and location were not notated, a Denton police spokesperson said, but in 1981, Kroger was located at 401 N. Elm St.

Detective Zehetner said Denton officers reported finding Dover’s vehicle with the keys in the ignition turned to the on position, and it had run out of gas.

Dover was considered an endangered missing person, according to the Texas Department of Public Safety, and police suspected foul play was possible.

Even with that suspicion, it does not appear that Dover’s missing person case made the local news at the time.

Dover’s family was not affluent, Amy Trull said, and they had no influence in the Denton community that would have made his vanishing newsworthy.

Neither the *Record-Chronicle* nor librarians at Denton Public Library were able to find any relevant reports about Dover or the discovery of his vehicle. It appears the only mention of him in the Denton paper was his senior class's graduation announcement.



A graduation announcement for Gary Wayne Dover's high school in Pilot Point was published in the Denton Record-Chronicle on May 19, 1968.

DRC archives

“I know it wouldn’t have made the Mabank paper either,” Amy said. “If you weren’t important, who is going to write an article about a 30-year-old long-haired hippie mechanic who nobody can find? People go missing everyday and you don’t hear about it.”

The local news might not have had interest in a missing person case, but Denton detectives stayed committed to finding Dover even after all leads ran out.

Amy said her aunt always felt the Denton detectives were doing their best even after the case went cold.

“Once every year or two, they would come down [to Mabank] and give her any updates,” Amy said.

On one of those occasions, detectives asked Vonnie to submit a DNA sample for future possible comparisons.

Vonnie also provided the detectives with Dover’s hairbrush, which still contained some of his long reddish locks that she had preserved all those years.

After the deaths of Douglas and his father, Johnnie, there were fewer loved ones to help Vonnie shoulder the burden of Gary's disappearance, which Amy said weighed on her heavily, always.



Gary Wayne Dover's parents, Johnnie Dover and Voncille "Vonnie" Trull Dover.

Courtesy photo/Pam Lawson

"She was pretty independent, but I know she missed having a son to check on her," Amy said. "I know she wanted to know what happened, and she would say, 'I guess I'll never know.'"

As Vonnie got older and the years dragged on with no sign of Gary, she eventually purchased a burial plot and headstone for Gary in Mabank.

Vonnie died in 2017 at 90 years old, still wanting answers. She was buried next to Gary's empty gravesite.

"I remember when she passed away, at her graveside, I just prayed for peace for her," Amy said. "I pray that she knows what happened to Gary, and I hope she's with him."

By the time Gary Dover's mother passed, Amy said, the family had given up hope they would find out what happened to him.

"I don't think any of us thought they would find him alive," Amy said. "It wasn't like we thought he had escaped. But what happened to him? It's not like he went away and started a new life. We just figured somebody killed him, and it was just weird."

Texas DPS Missing Persons Bulletin



Date Picture Updated: 6/16/2005

Gary Wayne Dover

AKA:

Case Number: M9305004

Height: 5' 10"

Date of Birth: 01/10/1950

Eye Color: Blue

Race: White

Last Seen in: Denton (Denton)

State Missing From: Texas

Case Type: Endangered - Foul Play Possible

Weight: 140 lbs.

Age Missing: 31

Hair Color: Brown

Sex: Male

Last Seen on: 08/29/1981

Country Missing From: USA

Miscellaneous Notes: Unknown



Anyone with additional information or questions regarding this case should contact

Texas Department of Public Safety, Missing Persons Clearinghouse

PO Box 4087, Austin, Texas 78773-0450; or by phone at 512-424-5074 or 1-800-346-3243

A missing persons bulletin for Gary Wayne Dover from the Texas Department of Public Safety.

Unearthing answers

Amy always wondered about her cousin's whereabouts, though. Particularly when she lived in Dallas in the 1990s.

"I remember when we had a bad drought up there, some of those lakes went dry," Amy said. "They did find cars with dead bodies. I remember seeing that on the news. I would always think, 'I wonder if that was Gary.'"

Amy's passing thought about the lakes ended up being not too far from the truth.

On the afternoon of Tuesday, July 31, 1990, nearly nine years after Dover disappeared, a subcontractor for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was working at a construction site for the upcoming lakeside Hickory Creek Park.

While digging a utility trench alongside Point Vista Road in the northwest shore of the Hickory Creek arm of Lewisville Lake, a worker turned up more than just dirt.

He unearthed a human skull.

Hickory Creek officers and Denton County sheriff's deputies sealed off the entire Army corps property for further investigation.

A group of archaeologists from the University of Texas worked day and night tediously sifting through dirt for any other bones and evidence.

Local news reports state that they uncovered a 3-by-6 foot grave containing a rug, other bones and clothing.

By 2 a.m. Thursday, the team had concluded the dig and determined all of the bones belonged to one individual.

"They found it fairly intact, allowing them to recover it and remove it more easily," then-Corps of Engineers representative Ron Ruffennach told the *Denton Record-Chronicle* in 1990.

The *Lewisville Leader* reported that then-Denton County Chief Deputy Al Lewis said ballistics evidence was located with the skeleton, but they had not been conclusively linked.

Then-Hickory Creek Police Chief Ronnie Pear later told the *Leader* there were two spent shell casings but no related bone fragments or damage to the skeleton.

The local papers reported that medical examiners believed the skeleton belonged to a Black male around age 24-27.

A full facial reconstruction would be impossible because of damage the construction equipment caused to the skull, Pear told the *Leader*.

Medical examiners noted unique characteristics about the left arm and the teeth, Pear told the *Leader*. However, Pear said, it appeared the person did not have dental work done. So, there would be no dental records to compare the teeth to.

Multiple law enforcement agencies in North Texas visited the gravesite and contacted Hickory Creek police and the sheriff's office to see if these newly discovered remains were connected to their unsolved cases.

Even the Denton Police Department reviewed the evidence in hopes that the remains might belong not to Dover but to a 1989 shooting victim whose body was unaccounted for. That case was quickly ruled out.

Unsubstantiated claims of a deathbed confession for 1986 murder in the Lake Dallas area that local news reported on shortly after the discovery were later ruled out, too.

The belief that the skeleton belonged to a 20-something Black man, Amy said, hindered any potential for investigators or loved ones to connect the dots to Dover.

Denton Record-Chronicle

Vol. 86, No. 311

32 pages in 4 sections

Denton, Texas

August 2, 1990 25 cents

Human remains found near lake

By Donna Fielder
Staff Writer

■ UNT experts join investigation/4A

Hickory Creek — Amid lurid rumors of multiple murders authorities here would confirm Wednesday only that remains of one body have been found in a shallow grave on U.S. Army Corps of Engineers property off Vista Point Road.

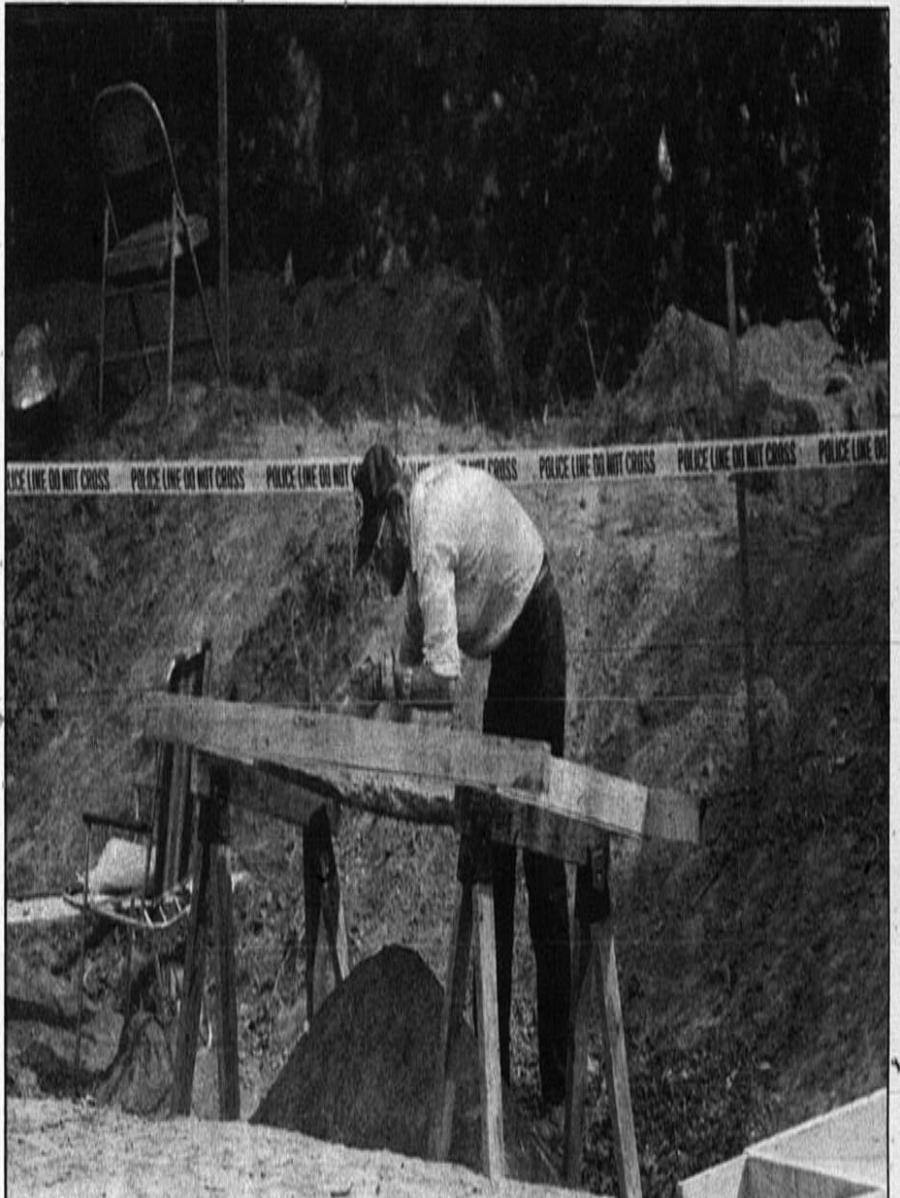
Workers with Corps subcontractor Texas Electric who were digging a trench in a corps construction area near Lewisville Lake uncovered a skull, other bone parts, clothing and a rug in a 3-by-6 foot grave, said Denton County Sheriff Kirby Robinson at a news conference. Investigators believe the body has been in the grave between 18 and 24 months, he said. His officers are assisting Hickory Creek's four-man department in its investigation.

A Dallas television station reported Wednesday that at least three bodies had been

recovered from the site. No official would confirm that report but an officer from another agency said he understood two bodies had been recovered. Robinson would say only that the site is being treated as a crime scene because human remains were unearthed. Authorities don't believe the site is an old graveyard, he said.

Corps Park Manager Rex Boyd said at the site Wednesday afternoon the work crew found the human remains about 3:30 p.m. Tuesday while digging a utility trench. The trench follows a road being constructed to a well at the lake park, he said. The bones remain at the site, he told reporters at 5 p.m. Wednesday. Dwight Crawford, Denton County investigator for the Tarrant County Medical Examiner's Office, is helping with the investigation, along with area law enforcement agencies, corps employees, an archaeologist and a physical anthropologist.

Tight security kept reporters



A compilation of all the 1990 news coverage the Denton Record-Chronicle could find from its archives and the Lewisville Leader of the discovery of Gary Wayne Dover's remains near Lewisville Lake in Hickory Creek. The Record-Chronicle and Leader first reported the discovery on Aug. 2 and Aug. 5, 1990, respectively. Further reports were published throughout the month. The last stories, about the demographic determination, was reported in the Record-Chronicle and Leader on Aug. 24 and Aug. 26, 1990, respectively. Brooke Colombo/DRC

All of these unknowingly erroneous details were input in law enforcement searchable databases.

“We’re looking for one thing, and they’re looking for another,” Detective Zehetner said. “We can be 15 minutes down the road, but if we’re not looking for the same thing, it’s not going to show us any matches.”

Over time, investigators in the Hickory Creek John Doe case ran out of leads. The remains sat in storage at the Tarrant County Medical Examiner’s Office, unclaimed, for decades.

“I think there was one investigator that looked at it years ago. But since the original investigators were here, no. There just wasn’t any development on it. So, there was nothing to work.”

A breakthrough at last

Every so often, the Hickory Creek Police Department would call over to the Tarrant County Medical Examiner’s Office to inquire about their John Doe.

There were never any updates until late 2025.

“You may have seen a story about a grant we’ve had the past couple of years to work on cold cases,” said TCME Chief Forensic Anthropologist Christian Crowder. “A lot of that is for forensic genetic genealogy, but it also includes locating evidence from older cases and having things retested.”

There have been a lot of improvements to DNA analysis over the years, Crowder said, which is reason TCME retests old samples.

“Previously, you might have a sample that you didn’t get any results from,” Crowder said. “With new amplification techniques or better understanding of how to extract DNA, you can now get a genetic profile from those specimens.”

Retesting is also a moral obligation, Crowder said.

“We become the curator of this unidentified individual,” Crowder said. “We have to keep working on it to try to make that identification to complete our job, but also because of the human aspect of it. This is a person, and someone somewhere is missing this person.”

Vonnie’s samples and the Hickory Creek John Doe’s remains were among the cases TCME has been able to retest.

In the meantime, there was some confusion over who had jurisdiction over the Hickory Creek John Doe case.

When local agencies began to adopt digital recordkeeping, some details between the handwritten notes and electronic reports started to diverge or become lost to the sands of time.

“You know, so much has changed,” Zehetner said. “When the remains were reported, Lake Dallas Police Department had a dispatch center, and [Hickory Creek Police] were dispatched through them. There was a number generated for that, and a number generated for Denton County because they had to call the county to get the ME’s office. So, all of these handwritten numbers were generated.”

With all the agencies involved and numbers generated for the discovery of the remains, the detective said, TCME was not sure who was the lead agency.

Local law enforcement agencies and the medical examiner’s office exchanged many, many emails trying to figure out who owned the case and who obtained DNA profiles for testing.

“This turned into a couple months,” Zehetner said. “Then, I was notified via email that when they were trying to change all the information of who owns the case, one of the [medical examiners] over there chimes in and says, ‘Hey, all of this needs to wait. I think we have an identification.’”

All email communication paused briefly, and then, in December 2025, the medical examiner’s office made two groundbreaking calls to the Denton and Hickory Creek police departments.

The remains from Hickory Creek were a match to samples Vonnie had provided.

“I was like, ‘You’ve got to be kidding me,’” Zehetner said. “Not only that day did I find out our unidentified remains had a name, I also found out he was reported missing.”

Now that his Hickory Creek John Doe had a name, the work to bring Dover justice could really begin.

“My victims are really who I advocate for,” Zehetner said. “Gary Wayne Dover was a Denton victim, but he ended up in my city. So, it’s my responsibility.”

A reunion decades in the making

Having given Dover back his name, the medical examiner’s office could finally release the remains from their custody.

Investigators knew Vonnie had prepared for Gary to be buried at Oaklawn Cemetery of Mabank.

All of his immediate family had died, though, and the Denton and Tarrant County medical examiner’s offices were not sure who his next of kin was to contact about funeral services.

“I guess when investigators found out his family was buried at this Mabank cemetery, they did a simple Google search,” funeral director William Beresford said. “Of course, a little tiny county cemetery like that is not going to have an internet presence, right? And it actually pulled out our website.”

The Beresford Funeral Service, based in Houston, has a database of every cemetery it has ever held a service at, Oaklawn Cemetery included.

The investigators asked Beresford if he would travel to Tarrant County to retrieve Dover’s remains and transport them to Mabank to facilitate burial.

Beresford, moved by this story of “a mother’s love,” said he readily agreed to help bring Dover’s story full circle.

“We were hoping Gary’s story could be told, and we were hoping to be a small part of that story,” Beresford said. “I just think how touching is it that his mother never gave up hope that he’d be found. So much so that she had a gravestone out there at the cemetery for him, right next to her.”

Beresford tried to get the word out to family by contacting dozens of news outlets in the region, including the *Record-Chronicle*.

“Ultimately, we didn’t have any luck, and so I did some investigating myself,” Beresford said. “I wanted to see if some sort of minister could at least say a prayer during the burial service. I ended up looking at Gary’s mother’s obituary. It said she was an active member of a church in Mabank.”

The funeral director called the Mabank church and let staff know they were interring the remains of a member’s long-lost son.

The church congregation started to spread the word in Mabank.

Just days before the service on June 30, news reached the Trull family.

This was the first Vonnie’s family had heard that Gary Dover’s remains had been found and identified.

“It just literally broke me when I got the call because I just felt everything for her,” Amy Trull said. “Aunt Vonnie wanted to know this all her life for 40-something years.”

The Trull family, including Amy, who lived hours away, dropped everything to attend.

“Lo and behold,” Beresford said, “the family showed up to the cemetery that afternoon. ... It was really cool to be a part of that. It’s one of those stories I’ll remember for the rest of my life.”



Gary Wayne Dover's cousins, from left, Tom, Pam and Amy Trull, and his aunt Dee Trull pose for a photo with the casket at his interment ceremony in Mabank. They are related to Gary through his mother Vonnie Dover's late brother, Don Trull.

Courtesy photo/William Beresford

Amy commended Beresford Funeral Services because even though it had no indication family would attend, the funeral home went "above and beyond" to provide a wonderful service.

"They were doing it without any expectation of family or payment," she said.

Amy said she didn't know her aunt Vonnie had provided not only a plot but also a headstone at the cemetery until she arrived at the interment.

"That's how much she wanted him taken care of in case this ever happened," Amy said. "That's a lot for a widow on a fixed income. She didn't have thousands of dollars to do it, and she did it. That's a mother's hope."

After all the years of grief Vonnie endured, Amy said, she was so grateful to know her aunt could rest easy now that her son was there.

"That was just so — I don't know — touching. Poignant. I don't know what to say," Amy recalled of the moment. "I'm just so glad it came to fruition. I knew how important that day was for her, and I was sad she didn't get to see it. But I believe she's in heaven, and I believe she knows."



Gary Wayne Dover is shown at left front in an undated photo with his brother, Douglas Dover, mother, Vonnice Dover, and father, Johnnie Dover.

Courtesy photo/Dignity Memorial

No longer a cold case

At the interment, Amy and other family members were able to meet with former law enforcement personnel who worked on Gary Dover's missing person case.

Detective Zehetner was not in attendance but has since been in touch with the family and hopes to meet with them soon.

"He wants to arrange it on a day where the retired detective who met Aunt Vonnice can come," Amy said. "Aunt Vonnice always spoke really highly of them."

All of the investigators who have worked on Gary's cases, Zehetner said, have been very enthusiastic about reviewing the evidence and trying to remember any extra details.

"Cases like this stick with these guys," the detective said.

To protect the integrity of this active investigation, Zehetner said he can't divulge too much besides what direction the case is headed.

"We have learned a lot about the case and have not come to a determination yet of suspects or no suspects," Zehetner said. "We've reviewed a lot of information, and we haven't developed anything new. We're still trying to find leads to take."

It is still an active case, though.

“You never know in an active case like this,” Zehetner said. “Somebody might make a deathbed confession, or there might be some new technology, or a case file will be found that might be related. That’s our hope.”

Solving how Gary Dover died is the main goal, the detective said, but Zehetner’s greatest victory in this case was learning how much Dover’s mom cared about her son.

“She never gave up hope he would be found,” Zehetner said.

“Even though we don’t have those answers,” Amy said, “just to know we could put him to rest next to her was huge.”

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