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By **Sarah Dahlberg**

Bone Lake Jane Doe identified 33 years after remains found

In June 1993, a woman's remains were found in two separate Minnesota lakes. On June 11, 2026, the Washington County Sheriff's Office announced that she had been identified as **Denise Elaine Sexton Hartley**.

Thirty-three years after her remains were found in Bone Lake in Scandia, Minnesota, she has been identified as Denise Elaine Sexton Hartley, a 27-year-old who was last known to be in St. Paul in 1993, according to a press release from the Washington County Sheriff's Office.

Dateline covered Bone Lake Jane Doe's case in its 'Cold Case Spotlight' series in June 2025. At the time, Detective Clayton Evens of the Washington County Sheriff's Office was hopeful that DNA testing would help identify her. "With new and ever-evolving technology with DNA, the hope is that something will match," Evens told Dateline at the time.

And that's exactly what happened. According to the press release, the nonprofit DNA Doe Project was able to identify Denise using genetic genealogy. Those genetic connections led investigators to Columbus, Ohio, where they interviewed members of Denise's family. Detectives obtained a DNA sample from Denise's daughter, and the MN Bureau of Criminal Apprehension (BCA) confirmed the identity.

On June 12, 1993, a local man walking on the shore of Bone Lake in Scandia, Minnesota, spotted a woman's head floating in the water. At the time, authorities estimated she had been dead for two to three days. The next day, a foot was discovered on the banks of the Mississippi River, just north of Pig's Eye Lake.

Authorities initially assumed the two remains were related because they were found within a day of each other. In 2007, the BCA confirmed the match through DNA testing.

When her remains were discovered, Denise's dark hair was cut short, in a spiky style. She had piercings, three on each ear. And she went completely unrecognized by the people of Scandia. "It's a pretty rural town up there. So there's probably not

a lot of short, spiky-haired women running around in Scandia, especially in 1993,” Det. Evens told Dateline in 2025. At the time of the initial investigation, authorities speculated she may be from a metropolitan area, according to Evens.

In the weeks following the discovery of the remains, authorities received an anonymous confession. “Somebody called in,” Evens said. “Somebody did confess to it. They didn’t know who it was.” While authorities can confirm it was a male voice on the call, the caller was never identified.

According to Evens, the caller claimed the rest of the Jane Doe’s remains were under the Mendota Bridge, which crosses the Minnesota River shortly before it meets the Mississippi, about 15 miles from where the foot was found. Authorities conducted a search of the area, but “nothing of significance was found from that search,” Evens said.

According to Evens, several attempts were made to identify Denise through DNA testing over the years, and each attempt proved unsuccessful due to the condition of the DNA. In 2022, the DNA Doe Project took on the case, first fundraising what was needed to pursue advanced testing. Once that fundraising was complete, the nonprofit partnered with a lab to create a DNA profile. According to Denise’s case on the DNA Doe Project’s website, Tetracore, Inc. created a DNA profile from the remains, and in February 2026, the DNA Doe Project team launched its search.

After five days of research, DNA Doe presented Denise as a candidate to the Washington County Sheriff’s Office and the Ramsey County Medical Examiner’s Office. Denise was officially identified a few months later, according to the site.

The Washington County Sheriff’s Office’s press release included a statement from Evens. ““Even after decades, there’s always hope that one day the science will catch up to the questions that couldn’t be answered at the time, and it finally did.””

A statement from Sheriff Dan Starry was included as well. ““To see this case come full circle more than 30 years later is a reminder that no matter how much time passes, we never stop looking for answers for victims and their families. While we cannot change what happened, we can honor Denise by restoring her identity and giving her family the answers they deserve.””

“Although Denise has been identified, the investigation into her death remains active and ongoing,” the press release continued. “The cause and manner of death remain undetermined, and no suspects have been arrested at this time.”

Anyone with information is encouraged to contact the Washington County Sheriff’s Office at 651-430-7850.