Local legends

Officials still track Bontjes' murderer

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*Sherburn*

*Editor's note: Last in a series of stories on local legends.*

In the cold case files of the Martin County Sheriff's office, few cases are as memorable as that of JoAnn Bontjes.

Bontjes, a 21-year-old hairdresser from Sherburn, was found dead in a ditch 25 years ago.

**She was reported missing on Oct. 2, 1975,** when she failed to return home after leaving the Trimont Legion Club early that morning.

In the Oct. 3, 1975, issue of the Sentinel, it was reported that Bontjes' car was found abandoned along Highway 4, about two miles south of Trimont.

Her shoes were found lying on the ground near the car, and her purse, jacket and keys were still in the car.

Friends who were with Bontjes at the Legion hadn't noticed anything suspicious, according to the article, but it was obvious Bontjes was missing when she failed to show up at her beauty salon in Sherburn that morning.

When her body was found later the next day in a ditch west...
of Highway 4, Bontjes had various bruises and abrasions on her body.

She was partially clothed, and there was a shotgun wound to the side of her head, according to an article that appeared in the Sentinel on Oct. 4, 1975.

A farmer who was operating a combine in a nearby field spotted the body and notified authorities, according to the article.

Tire tracks found in front of Bontjes' car indicated that a 1974 Vega had pulled in front of her vehicle, according to the article.

At the time of the murder, there was speculation that a law enforcement officer was involved in the murder because people did not think Bontjes would pull over unless told to do so by a uniformed officer, said Captain Ken Schwieger, an officer with the Martin County Sheriff's office.

While there was no indication that an officer of any kind was involved in the murder, Schwieger said many people were afraid to stop for officers after the rumors started circulating.

"There was a lot of fear -- just flat fear -- in the community," he said.

Martin County Sheriff Robert Meschke said that for a time after the murder, people would only stop for an officer in an area where there were other people.

People who remember the murder, and people who moved to the area years later, still whisper about what might have happened to Bontjes.

Following an intense investigation, however, there were no suspects to connect with the murder, and all possible suspects were cleared, Meschke said.

By talking about the murder, Meschke said he hopes new evidence comes to light or a witness who was afraid to come forward 25 years ago might now be willing to talk.

If the murder had occurred during a time when today's technology was available, Meschke said it would have been solved.
However, the sheriff's department is hoping that with new evidence and some new technology, the investigation into the murder can go forward.

Anyone with information regarding the murder of JoAnn Bontjes may contact the Martin County Sheriff's office at (507) 238-4481.