

Running Cold Case.

Elements of the case are accurate as of July 6th 2020

Most cold cases become that way over time, after leads have been explored and cast aside and the burden of proof failed to be satisfied. Bizarrely, this particular double homicide was cold from the moment of discovery....

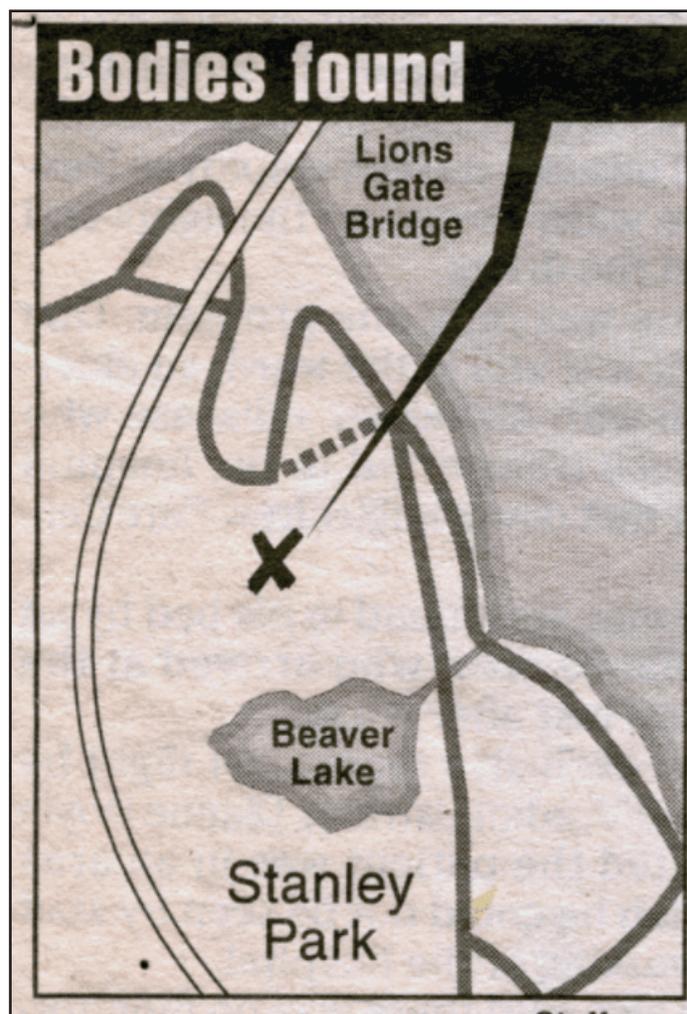
While the whole case is maddeningly befuddling; the loose ends, weird details, the decent amount of physical evidence that was handled poorly and disjointedly are the key elements that kept the investigation at a standstill. The case details float all over Canada, painting an incomplete picture that as of yet cannot provide sufficient illumination to flush the perpetrator out of the dark. The tiny victims were discovered by Albert Amos Tong, an 11 year veteran of the Vancouver Parks Board Crew while he was clearing dense brush to make room for new trees in a remote part of Stanley Park near Beaver lake and Prospect Point on January 14 1953. Tong stepped on a lump under a blanket of leaves and heard a crack. Upon clearing the layers of

foliage and after removing an old and decaying coat, he found that the crack had come from a skull. He observed the remains of two small children neatly placed underneath an adult sized jacket. Tong proceeded to replace what he had disturbed and finished his work shift. Afterwards, he went home for the evening and called police in the morning. When asked about his delay in reporting, he answered that he had to think about what he had found before he did anything - and that he had been very busy that day. As hindsight observers, we only imagine what Tong felt when the tiny bones gave way under his foot. Vancouver Police Sgt. Bud Errington and Const. Bill Lindsay were the first responders on the scene. With their hands they scraped away at least a few years worth of deciduous leaf layers to unearth the grisly crime scene. Roots from the many vine maple trees in the area had grown in and around the bodies and skeletal remains were all that were left. The scene

consisted of one smaller skeleton placed face down beside a decayed log, and a larger skeleton lying across the small one's feet. A plate bracelet depicting two dogs and a rabbit or perhaps a third dog, encircled the larger child's wrist and black leather belts were on what would have been each child's waist. Each child wore brown Oxford shoes with white soles. An aviator's cap popular amongst young boys pretending to be WW2 pilots was on the skull of one child. A zipper and cloth remnants were also amongst the bones. Found nearby were the remains of plastic child sized goggles and another cap, a blue and white two handled metal lunch box - containing only wet, fibrous tissue - the very old remnants of a packed meal, a hatchet of the type used by campers and roofers with a broken handle and a woman's size seven and a half brown penny loafer.

Dr. T.R. Harmon, pathologist, and coroner John Whitbread determined that the children were between the ages of seven and twelve and that the hatchet was the murder weapon based on its exact fit to the head wounds - the sharpened blade matched one and the back of the blade matched the other. Detectives looked at the layers of the brush and came to the conclusion that the bodies had been in the woods for approximately six years, dating the murders to 1947. The rubber soled shoes that the children wore helped settle the murder year as 1947 also because the shoes were thought to be unavailable during the war years.

Stanley park is a 1,000 acre marvel surrounded almost totally by water. It hosts eight million visitors a year. At the time of the crime it was full of trails, a sea wall, swimming pools, and a zoo. Not many of the park's patronage, however, went into the dense forest area, and much of it has remained untouched for centuries. The park is to Canada what Central Park is to NYC - though the park is in fact ten percent larger than Central Park. The lush, evergreen sanctuary is the third largest urban park in North America. However, in all honesty there are two sides to the park. There is the public touristy side that revels in the beauty of being completely immersed in nature in the middle of a city and then there is the darker side that comes out later in the day. Homeless people head to the park to find a place to rest their heads while criminals look to the various shadowy corners of the park to carry out their illicit deeds. The two children were found by the entrance to the old Orville Fish Hatchery near



Beaver Lake. They were found on a trail less than 164 yards - 150 meters - from the main park drive. Though close to the Lions Gate Bridge with cars zooming past, the crime scene still feels remote and concealed. For comparison, a Canadian football field has 110 yards between the goal lines and 150 yards encompasses the entire turf - just fourteen yards less than the trail to the crime scene.

At start of the investigation, Detective Don MacKay had been assigned to head up the 'Babes in the Woods' investigation as the media gleefully dubbed the case. MacKay became self-admittedly obsessed with and worked on it continually until his death. He had two small children of his own at the time of the chilling discovery and that seemed to spur him on even when the case ran into dead ends.

At this time experts stated that the children were probably a boy aged 5-7 and a girl aged 7-9 though to be sure that hesitantly reassuring word 'probably' would come back to haunt the case with a vengeance. Vancouver police brought in Erna Engel-Baiersdorf, a forensic anthropologist who after surviving the atrocities of Auschwitz and Buchenwald came to Canada to practice her craft. Based on the details given by the coroner's office she reconstructed the faces of the two victims. From the skulls, she determined that the children were Nordic - Swedish or Norwegian - and that the smaller child had brown hair, a prominent lower jaw, a slender build and cavities in their teeth. The larger child was quite sturdy and had dark brown hair. She warned that the replicas were approximate as the soft tissue of the face (lips, eyes, ears, tip of the nose) took on most of the detailed facial features. After painstaking analysis and research of the crime scene's fabric scraps, a child sized mannequin was outfitted with the clothing both the children were thought to be wearing: A Canadian made red Fraser Tartan style jacket (possibly homemade from a tartan cloth), beige corduroy pants, and brown Oxford shoes. These things were borrowed from a local department store along with two wartime aviator headpieces that went for \$1.59 each. An image of this mannequin along with the skull reconstructions were disseminated to the public in a plea for assistance.



While the public weighed in on possible suspects, it was time to begin constructing a theory as to what happened that gruesome day. First on the scene theory was that the children were killed by a stranger after being dropped off or dumped or that it was in fact their own mother had killed them. The first solid theory fixed the murder date at October 5th 1947. This was due to the vivid recollection of a woman from one particular day. She kept diaries detailing her life and also did remember that day in particular as the day she ended her engagement to her then fiancé. She saw a woman with a girl and boy and thought that the mother called the boy 'Ronnie or Rodney'. She claimed that the children looked either Swedish or Norwegian and when the woman spotted her, she started using the hatchet she was carrying to cut branches from trees.

The year 1947 was not a particularly kind year for women. They were often out of jobs as soldiers returned home to take them back and women who had been making decent wages were now reduced to domestic or retail jobs with long hours and low pay. Not only that, but women were grieving the loss of husbands and other male family members and suddenly smaller family units made for a financial struggle as well. The war was brutal to men as well - leaving some permanently injured or so battered by PTSD that their working life was all but finished. It is not hard to imagine a desperate woman existing in Vancouver at such a time.

The ladies coat that covered the children was the cause of great consternation. Why was this coat so carefully laid over the bodies? Remorse? Inability to bury the bodies quickly enough? The coat was a size 16 (modern day equivalent being size 8) oilskin

rain coat with 'leg of mutton sleeves' (sleeves that had fullness around the shoulder and bicep but were fitted around the forearm and wrist) and a dyed muskrat fur collar. It was a cheap style that was made in 1943 - setting in stone that the murders could not have been committed prior to then if it was assumed the coat belonged to this particular crime. Based on that and on the size seven and a half penny loafer, the woman on the scene that day, was thought to be short and stocky. Around 5'3 and 125-135 lbs.

The next suspect lead seriously considered by investigators was a woman named Madeline Fortier who hailed from Levis, Quebec but was in the Vancouver area near the date of the murder. She was the mother of a boy and girl of the rough ages of the victims and when contacted she said she had adopted the children out years ago. MacKay wished to follow this up, but his supervisors denied him permission to travel to Quebec. Feeling certain of this lead, however, MacKay died believing that he had likely solved the case and that Fortier was the killer.

After MacKay had worked the case for some time, the picture of the crime that he ultimately settled on was that a woman was the murderer. He reasoned that given that the blows delivered were relatively light, though deadly enough to kill, he felt a man would have struck harder. MacKay surmised that the children were struck from behind and the younger child was rolled between the rotten log and a vine maple whilst the older child was dragged across his legs. The coat - though still a general head-scratcher - was accepted as either tender remorse or quick concealment. The woman's shoe likely had gotten wedged between the older child and a log and she jerked her foot free to escape, leaving it behind. MacKay thought the likeliest scenario was a murder suicide with the body of the mother as of yet undiscovered. He thought it was likely she had jumped into the water under the Lions Gate Bridge to drown.

Detectives began to use missing persons reports, school and church records, and records kept on case files by social agencies; anything they could get their hands on to try to discover the identities of the murdered children and what led them to that spot by Beaver Lake that day. MacKay traced seventy-six pairs of kids thoroughly, having someone lay eyes on each of them to determine that they were alive and well. Tips came in from all over the world, from as far as Scot-



land, Austria and Venezuela, from people who had the distinct feeling that they had seen the trio or who knew who the children were. For three years he worked this case almost exclusively, processing over a hundred tips. Through the ensuing years, more tips were logged, though the number had quieted and by then even twelve psychics had offered to assist police with the case. One being a Buddhist monk who told the police that the boy and girl were originally buried in the walls of his house before being moved to Stanley Park. By 1960, the city had yet made no plans to bury the children's remains, as they might be needed for future investigations. They were stored in three file



boxes in the basement of Vancouver's Coroner's Court on East Cordova Street. Case File Number 53-636 sat untouched for another twenty four years.

Until 1984 the case was quiet as a church mouse, no new leads of any substance were on the table. Then in 1984, an anthropologist named Mark Skinner worked on the bones with his forensic anthropology class at Simon Fraser University. He theorized, based on the jawbones of the kids, that they were in fact the exact same age since they were in the precisely same stage of tooth development. Their size difference was due to biological or nutritional factors. Furthermore, Skinner claimed that the two were fraternal twins. Ultimately this made little difference and was more of a curiosity than a credible clue, and ultimately proved to be a red herring in a case full of them.

To date the Babes in the Woods case had been consternated by dead end leads, a dearth of evidence and too many barely worthwhile tips to sort through. It wasn't until the nineties, almost fifty years after the murder supposedly took place, that Vancouver police truly realized how far they always had been from solving the mysterious child murder case that had been cold by its very nature from the day the bodies were found. The 1990s came and with them, a new task force. In 1996 RCMP joined with municipal police forces to form the Provincial Unsolved Homicide Unit. Detective Sgt. Brian Honeybourn, a veteran cop with 28 years on the force, was in charge of the five man detective unit and he was told that he had the freedom to investigate cold cases at his discretion. The first case he eagerly reopened was one that had fascinated him as a child and that had cried out to him for justice. The case was that of the notorious Babes in the Woods.

At first Honeybourn found himself quite discouraged and frustrated. He thought the first investigation very lacking. The original police report was a mere two pages long and said file looked like it had been gotten to by mice over the years. He has always maintained that he cannot be sure the file was complete by the time he got to it. There seemed to be so much unknown. In 1998, Honeybourn packed up the evidence that was on display in the Vancouver Police museum (skulls with aviator hats and lunch box), located the rest in a police warehouse and immediately consulted Dr. David Sweet at the University of British Columbia for a modern evidence analysis. Sweet employed a new technique that could extract DNA from teeth. He took two teeth from the skulls, decontaminated them from any other trace DNA left



behind over the course of the investigation, froze them and then pulverized them into a powder that exposed the cells. He sliced the cell membranes to release the children's DNA into a solution that enabled him to analyze it. Much to everyone's shock, a long buried secret finally came to light. It turned out that the perhaps twin male and female pair of children were actually two different aged boys, brothers but with different fathers.

This discovery angered Honeybourn as much as it gave him hope. He lamented the waste that was half a century of police work and was certain that Det. MacKay would have caught the killer had he been furnished with accurate forensic information. "I wonder how many people called up the Vancouver Police Department in those days and said, 'We know where there are two boys that are missing,' and some policeman on the other end of the line said, 'Well, we're looking for a boy and girl, thank you very much.' I can guarantee this went on." Honeybourn said this with marked frustration.

The next big disappointment came quickly after. It turned out that the woman whose story had helped fix the date of the murder had lied. She had not been there that day nor seen anything helpful - it has never been determined what the motive was for her falsehood. Honeybourn now had the unenviable task of going back to the drawing board and reevaluating what he described as the 'completely haphazard and unqualified examination of the original crime scene.'

Honeybourn commented that if this murder had happened in modern day, police would have locked the scene down for days, meticulously finding and preserving every bit of evidence and photographing every inch of the scene. In 1953, the first officers

on the scene wrapped it in a day. There were a few black and white photos, a couple of cardboard boxes full of the bones and other evidence and some of the surrounding fallen leaves and other foliage. It was likely as well, that Tong destroyed some important evidence by stepping on the skull and then partially digging up the remains. It is also likely that he and the other Parks board staff trampled on it and the area around it as they cleared the brush that day and in previous efforts. Honeybourn also believes that due to the physical deterioration of the original two page report, some of the facts and even the date of discovery may be inaccurate. He regretted that so much of his current investigative work amounted to the blind leading the blind.

Resultantly, because portentous or wearisome things often happen in threes - Honeybourn then found that not only was the murder date wrong, but possibly the murder year as well. He determined that the shoes worn by the victims were indeed available in Vancouver prior to the war so the murders could have occurred several years earlier than the previously accepted 1947. In fact, the range could be pin-pointed only to 1943 at the earliest since the coat atop the scene was made in 1943 (so long as we assume the coat belonged to the killer and was not put there some time later - though its decomposition was in line with the other artifacts).

With these three surprises behind him, and armed with new insights, Honeybourn began to go back in time and revisit recorded tips that at the time were dismissed as they mentioned two boys rather than a boy and girl.

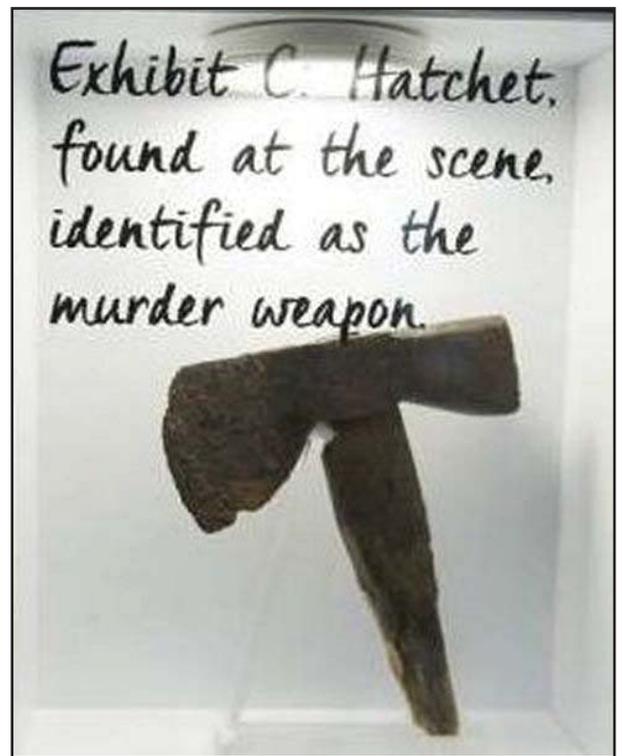
Honeybourn's new version of events was that the mother or caregiver was still the killer and that the murder was planned but frenzied. Perhaps she had lured the children to that part of the park on the pretense of a picnic and then bludgeoned them - death would have been quick from blood loss. The hatchet could have been packed as part of the plan or not - turns out that it could have been improvised as at the time people often brought these kind of hatchets to the park to cut up kindling for their wood stoves. The hatchet was a shingler's hatchet and was used to install cedar shake roofs. As luck would have it, buildings with these roofs were being constructed in the area at the time of the murder, thus the origin of the hatchet would remain a mystery.

The next lead appeared to be more solid and it came in the form of a tip from a logger in 1953 who, with a friend had picked up a hitchhiking red headed woman with two small boys in flying helmets. They were picked up near Mission, B.C in 1947 and were dropped off in Stanley Park. Honeybourn managed to contact the logger who was seventy five by now. He did recall that the redhead had a record for prostitution and she was very concerned that social services would



take her children away as a result. After Honeybourn appeared on a radio show to speak about this theory, a local did remember someone vaguely matching her description in Mission at the time but police found said woman dead and her two boys very much alive. This lead has not completely been discounted, however, as the woman may have been misidentified in the present. The family name 'Grant' was at one discovered point but that small lead exhausted itself.

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Another interesting tip came from high school teacher Lawrence Samuel Smith who reported that while collecting specimens for his biology class in the park, he saw a woman walking with two boys along the sea wall towards Brockton Point in January of 1947. He made note of the group because one of the boys was banging a hatchet along the path railing. Some time later, Smith walked to the benches overlooking Beaver Lake and found an 'hysterical woman' sitting on a bench while a man paced back and forth near her. She had blood on her leg, one shoe and no coat - notable because of the temperature. She told Smith that she had fallen. It ended up, however, that this memory was not as clear as Smith first believed as upon further investigation it turned out that Smith was in fact in the park in 1951, not 1947. It is quite unlikely that the boys were killed just two years before they were discovered.

Arguably the most promising theory that may yet bear fruit was a report from a young sailor visiting from Esquamalt, Vancouver Island. He was on the park sea wall with his fiancée in May of 1944 when a woman jumped in front of him from the nearby woods wearing one shoe and no coat. She made an animalistic guttural sound (one publication had described it as a 'wail' and as 'deranged') and fled upon seeing the couple. The couple in question have not been tracked down but the lead remains the most solid of all.

The final theory of any substance had been offered by Vancouver Police Officer Ron Amiel who grew up in the area and knew the family of the signal man at the park's Prospect Point. Most of the family left the lighthouse in 1935 but one female member of the family who lived with Amiel's grandmother for a time was a prostitute with two young sons that Amiel was told went missing around the time of the murders. This lead has borne no fruit as of yet but is an ongoing consideration.

After so many years investigating and at this point in his life, Honeybourn simply wants closure for the children. He would like to give the boys their names back though he has no illusions for a court case- the killer being likely long dead. Respect for the children's remains was very important to Honeybourn and he felt the right thing to do was give the boys a proper funeral and resting place. He set aside some of the remains for future analysis and cremated the rest. On his own, he arranged a simple service for them in May 1997. Afterwards he and a police chaplain took the ashes by boat out to English Bay at



the entrance to False Creek during the Vancouver annual children's festival. It seemed fitting. Honeybourn left the force in 2001 but he took the case with him. He firmly believes the children were slaughtered by their mother, but we may never know for sure. He says "If the police had apprehended a distraught woman at that time in Vancouver, undoubtedly they would have sent her to St. Paul's Hospital or Vancouver General Hospital to get a psych assessment before she would be shipped off to Riverview Essondale {a mental health addiction Centre in Coquitlam which operated until 2012} - if a surname is ever discovered, perhaps hospital records could tie someone to the children as their mother.

On that note, could current technology further help? Isotope testing would help determine the geographic origin of the children to see if they were local or not and it could shed some light on the nature of their dietary intake. It is also possible to use DNA technology in the vein of 23andme and ancestry.com. As of 2018 Staff Sgt. Dale Weidman of the Vancouver Police Department planned to put the children's DNA into the public ancestry websites so a relative can perhaps be located and the children's origins be traced through a surname.

In the years after the 1996 twist in the case, Honeybourn wasn't the only one wracking his brain trying to shake loose some sort of insight into the tantalizingly bizarre case.



One local crime buff who was especially fascinated by the murders said that she visited Stanley Park to sit on the benches by Beaver Lake to reflect, see what the killer saw, maybe trying to imagine what the killer felt, and what caused them to commit such an act. Perhaps through this process, she could find some sort of clue. This woman is a member of one of the many true crime online communities that are eager to discuss, trade information and compare stories from their favorite cases. This collection of mystery lovers is quite abuzz in chatrooms, forums and subreddits dedicated to amateur sleuthing on this case alone. Sometimes interesting and impressively reasoned theories come out of the myriad of conversations. One of the 'out of the box' ideas is that it wasn't the mother of the children who killed them at all, citing the shed women's clothing at the scene as likely the result of an altercation between a woman and an unknown assailant. Perhaps this individual killed the children but she got away. Reasons she didn't go to the police could be many as the post war years were not particularly kind to women especially. It was possible that if a third party killed the children, the mother hesitated to report it because she was an immigrant living illegally and feared deportation, or she could have had a criminal record and feared implication. Perhaps if she was a prostitute as it has been surmised, she felt that her profession would undermine her case. In the 1950s women's voices were not exactly powerful. Or, sadly, it is very possible that Stanley Park could simply be hiding another body somewhere. The most popular reason to guess that there were two adults on scene is as such: It appears very odd that the killer calmly and orderly placed the bodies in a single line, covered them neatly with the coat and then hurriedly walked away without a shoe- as it is an item that is quite obvious if lost. Why would an organized murder have such a disorganized crime scene? As one online commenter put it "why perform two methodological acts and then perform an illogical action". Another theory is that the murderous mother was not caught because she and her children were merely visiting the area and were from the USA. The shoes the children were wearing were discovered to have been available in Port Colbourn, Ontario in 1947 which is very close to Buffalo New York. Had the mother and children come up on a little tour of Canada and had the mother fled back to America through BC after the murder? Perhaps saddest explanation mirrors several other crimes of the time in its hopeless nature. It was known to happen that during a custody dispute one parent would



kidnap or even kill their children rather than running the chance of them being taken away. Suicide was often the follow up to such deeds. To entertain crime buffs and keep the public's attention on cold cases, the Vancouver Police Museum hosts a 'Murder Mystery and Intrigue' series of lectures by Vancouver historians, authors and police. March 2014 saw host to many gleefully grisly details of salacious crimes. Vancouver has a history of being a rough and violent place in the depression through the post war years. Scheduled for the conclusion of the year's series, a sold out audience was treated to none other than Unsolved Homicide Unit Detective Brian Honeybourn himself speaking about the murder case that has haunted him since the birth of the UH unit. After all the Babes in the Woods murders garnered significant fame at the time of its discovery and have remained an appealing puzzle. Because Honeybourn has worked the case since its last major break, he is the recognized authority on it and all its mystery. Since leaving the police force, Honeybourn has committed himself to regularly speaking about this case, updating and reminding the public that those two small boys have still, not received justice.

Today, replicas of the children's skulls along with their helmets, shoes and the hatchet sit in the Vancouver Police Museum next to the black and white crime scene photos - a heartbreaking reminder of the mystery still clinging to the Babes' identities. Hopefully, someday, with the help of new technology and eager minds, the boys' names will be able to join their mementos in the display.

Resources:

Cold Case Vancouver by Eve Lazarus. 2015

'Murder, Mystery and Intrigue in Review: Babes in the Woods' by Sheena Koo (2014), last updated July 6th 2020. www.vancouverpolicemuseum.ca

https://unidentified.wikia.org/wiki/Babes_in_the_Wood

'The Babes in the Woods' by Emily Thompson, November 21st 2018, www.morbidology.com

'How DNA techniques could identify the young victims in Vancouver's longest-running cold case' by Alan Regan, October 30, 2018. www.globalnews.ca

*Special thanks to the users on the Reddit community [r/UnresolvedMysteries](https://www.reddit.com/r/UnresolvedMysteries)

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About the author:

Erin Shaw is a Library Assistant turned crime journalist. She has a background in Sociology, Criminology and Crisis Counseling. She is also a horror fiction writer, most recently as a contributor to Lycan Valley Press' anthology *Morbid Metamorphoses* and the upcoming anthology *Not Just A Pretty Face* from Dead Light Publishing. She is also an occasional content writer for www.horrornovel-reviews.com. Erin has cats and very strange Google searches. For info on resources please e-mail erinsxc@hotmail.com



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or call Vancouver Police at 604-717-3321

no case number given mention babes in the woods twin murders