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RECORD

The Search for Tom Brown

*Private investigative team uses cadaver search dog
around city and Lake Marvin recreation area*

DOG HANDLER TRACE SARGENT AND CHANGE CLEARING AN AREA NEAR LAKE MARVIN SUNDAY / PHOTO BY LAURIE EZZELL BROWN / PAGES 10-11

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HEMPHILL COUNTY DEPUTY CHIEF BRENT CLAPP JOINS K9 SPECIALIST TRACE SARGENT AND HER DOG, CHANCE, IN A SEARCH FOR CLUES TO BROWN'S DISAPPEARANCE

MISSING: Private investigators employ cadaver dog in search for Tom Brown

Private investigators hired to find missing teenager Thomas Brown were in Canadian last week, conducting interviews and using a cadaver dog to perform an extensive search in and around the city. While the mystery of Brown's disappearance five months ago still remains unresolved, lead investigator Phillip Klein said that the trip was a productive one, and reiterated his belief that Brown is most likely dead—the victim of accidental death or homicide.

"Is this a whodunit?" Klein said, when we met with him at a Lake Marvin campground Sunday afternoon. "Yeah, most probably. Unless I'm just totally, absolutely wrong. And let me tell you, I'm not perfect. But out of a thousand some-odd cases, I've been wrong... maybe 10 times."

Klein's team was concluding its eighteenth search in five days, led by K9 search specialist Trace Sargent and her specially-trained cadaver dog, Chance.

"We think this trip...closed a lot of doors for us, which is good," Klein said. "We feel like we can now concentrate on certain suspects, certain individuals."

Phillip Klein Investigations (PKI) was hired by Brown's family to investigate his disappearance. Last month, the agency announced that it was shifting its focus in the search from a potential runaway case to a criminal investigation—an announcement which elicited a statement from Hemphill County Sheriff Nathan Lewis assuring the community that his office had always considered Brown's disappearance a criminal investigation.

This month, PKI enlisted the services of Sargent and her cadaver dog to search in and around Canadian and in the Lake Marvin area. Sargent has over 25 years of dog training experience, and has assisted in over 900 searches with K9 partners in this and other countries, including attempts to locate fugitives, runaways and victims of airplane crashes and terrorist attacks.

Cadaver dogs—also known as human remains detection dogs—have been trained to smell death. Specifically, they can detect decomposition and residue scents, enabling them to know if a body has been in a location, even if it's not there still. These specially trained dogs have been able to locate the grave sites of Civil War dead in Georgia, and are trained to detect evidence of human remains which may persist for hundreds of years.

“The dog can cover 30 acres in the time that a group of people can cover maybe half an acre,” Klein said.

During the search, Chance hit on human remains scents in Brown's red Dodge Durango. After Brown disappeared, that vehicle was found by searchers early Thanksgiving morning near the municipal wastewater facility where it had been abandoned. Klein said this weekend that, in the original investigation, traces of blood had been found inside the vehicle on the driver's side door, and that forensic lab tests confirmed the blood was Brown's.

The dog also hit on scents at a location on Lake Marvin Road, which the investigators learned from local law enforcement officials was the spot where the body of suicide victim had been discovered in 1998.

Other members of the PKI team assisting Klein here were interviewer Jane Holmes and psychologist Caroline Gear. During their five-day visit, the team spoke with several local residents, bringing to about 150 the number of interviews and follow-up interviews they have conducted in the Brown case.

Since their initial involvement in this investigation, Klein said, they have ruled out earlier theories that Brown may have committed suicide or that he simply ran away from home.

PKI has developed a timeline of the hours after Brown left his friends, and mapped the locations in which he was last known to have been seen, as well as those in which his vehicle was positively identified in various parts of town before it was driven to its final destination at the municipal wastewater treatment facility.

“We started to tell the story, to do the timeline,” Klein said. “That's the first thing you do in these cases, is who knows what, when and where.”

In that study, Klein determined that the Dodge Durango was completely fueled at 11:40 pm and that 4.5 gallons of gas had been used when it was found, which indicated the vehicle was driven roughly 40 to 45 miles before it was parked.

“Then we do the time/distance studies of where he could go in 40-45 miles,” Klein said.

“That’s what brings us out here today.”

There is a three-hour gap from 1:30 am to 4:35 am during which the Durango was not positively identified on video surveillance cameras around town. During that period, Brown’s family and friends were out looking for him. In interviews, PKI investigators found that most of them had returned home by 4 am—some time after the Sheriff’s Office was alerted and took over the search.

Based on tips received and information culled from their interviews—and on other evidence found at the scene where the vehicle was left—the investigators now believe the Durango was planted at the wastewater treatment facility, and that whoever put it there, walked up the hill and into the adjoining neighborhood.

“Where the car was found? Very bothersome for me. So close to a neighborhood. Right up the hill. That would indicate to me there’s a possibility that something happened to Tom, they dumped the body, dumped the backpack, and parked the car close to the subdivision, so it’s somebody in that subdivision.”

While Klein first agreed with the conclusion local law enforcement drew from tracking dogs that were brought in to help with the search, that Brown walked away from the vehicle, he now questions it. “The significance, as Trace has taught me,” he said, “is the possibility that maybe somebody grabbed that backpack, was bringing that backpack along that had Tom’s scent, blood on it, and that’s what the bloodhounds were tracing.”

“It’s not an exact science with dogs,” Klein said. “It’s a good science, but it’s not an exact one.”

Finally, Klein explained his theory that someone else drove the Durango early that morning, and left it where it was found. That Tom Brown was already dead. That sometime in that three-hour gap, the vehicle was driven to the Lake Marvin area to dispose of Brown’s body.

The backpack holding Brown’s school-issued computer was found just over two months after his disappearance at the intersection of a well-used field road and Lake Marvin Road near the Gene Howe WMA. It was spotted by an as-yet unidentified person in a small grove of trees behind a barbed wire fence. Sheriff Lewis believed its discovery and the resulting forensic examination would provide a break in the Brown case, but to

date, no details of that examination have been revealed.

“I’ll be honest,” said Klein. “I’ve not seen the backpack. They have it locked up in evidence.”

But he disputes the theory that Brown left it there and caught a ride from someone.

“Where the backpack was found and when it was found? That’s bothersome for me,” he said, explaining that after his team performed some tests with a similar backpack, he believes it was disposed of on the return trip from the lake. “We believe somebody pulled up, opened the door, got out. We think they got right up to the fence and tossed it out.”

Klein also said they don’t believe Brown walked the 3.8 miles from where his vehicle was parked, still carrying the backpack, in cold, damp weather and in partial darkness, crossing the river, the Gene Howe WMA and Lake Marvin Road, only to drop the backpack at the end of his trek.

Last week’s canine search of that area revealed nothing, he said, adding that his team believes the Lake Marvin area holds the key to finding Brown. “Using the ratios we have, this area is definitely in play. There’s no doubt it’s in play. We’ve cleared the city.”

“We concentrate in what we call high-probable areas first,” Sargent said, adding that Lake Marvin is what they consider a high-probable area.

Before coming to Canadian on Thursday, Klein believed there was a 70/30 percent chance that Brown is dead, as opposed to having walked away voluntarily, and that they were investigating either an accidental death or a homicide. After filling in some timeline gaps this weekend, Klein said, “I may even increase it to 90/10.”

Klein and his team still believe that someone has information that will help solve this case—and who may not even realize how important what they know, is. They hope someone will come forward and help provide the missing piece to the puzzle.

But they are more confident than ever that the answers to Brown’s disappearance will be found. “Do I think we’re better off today?” said Klein. “Yeah. Do I think the case is solvable? Oh, yeah. I think the case is really solvable. All we need is a little piece, then another, and we’ve got the whole picture. Do I think we’re getting there? I do.”