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South Mississippi Cold Case: Nine years gone

LONG BEACH — A cab driver from Long Beach vanished nine years ago, leaving personal items in an abandoned taxi more than 400 miles from his home.

Daniel Murry Dutton was known to jokingly tell relatives his vision was so bad he needed to wear his eyeglasses to take a shower. Police discovered his glasses, checkbook and some receipts in his cab in July 2000 after the taxi was found in the parking lot of a hotel in Lake City, Fla. Dutton wasn't registered at the hotel. To his family's knowledge, he didn't know anyone in Florida, wasn't prone to travel great distances alone and had little or no money to make a trip.

Police found a bent golf club and half a roll of duct tape in the trunk.

"We found no traces of blood and no viable fingerprints," said Long Beach Police Chief Wayne McDowell. "He just vanished. A person doesn't go missing for nine years without popping up somewhere."

Records generated by routine transactions, such as a new driver's license, can help investigators locate or track the movement of persons of interest. McDowell has reopened the cold-case file of Dutton's disappearance but has found no trace of him since July 9, 2000.

"I do not believe he is alive," McDowell said. "There's just too many strange things about this case."

Dutton, a Long Beach High School graduate, was 28 when he went missing. He lived with his parents on Buena Vista Drive and worked for Yellow Cab, then based on Motsie Road in Biloxi.

Family and others have described Dutton as a loner who was quiet and spent his time off watching movies in his bedroom. His parents have since died. His father, Donald Dutton, was a retired oceanographer at Stennis. His mother, Midori Koike Dutton, worked at Treasure Bay. His younger brother, Dennis Dutton, had left to join the Army. His older sister, Yoko Demmons, had married and moved away.

McDowell was the detective who took the missing-person report and handled the investigation.

"It's stuck in my mind," McDowell said. "I've always wondered what happened to him."

Dutton had been gone nine days when his father filed a missing-person report on July 17, 2000. Dutton's last fare was logged July 8, 2000, to a Gulfport address at 8:50 p.m. His father said he last saw him at home around 11 p.m. The father said he found a note the next morning. It said, "Dad, I'll be away from the house for a few days. Dan."

Dutton's mother immediately feared her son was dead, McDowell recalled.

Hotel releases cab to owner

Dutton's cab turned up in Florida at a Days Inn parking lot on July 13, 2000. The hotel called the cab company instead of calling Lake City police, McDowell said. The cab company called Dutton's house to check on him and arranged to have the car towed to Biloxi.

Long Beach police checked the cab for evidence. Items found in the car raised suspicions but don't indicate he was hurt in the car.

McDowell learned Dutton hadn't accessed his checking account or credit cards. His checking account had been overdrawn for two weeks before his disappearance. His three credit cards couldn't be used. They had been maxed out for a total of \$10,000 before he went missing.

Receipts recovered from the cab indicate a route to Gainesville, Fla. Some of the receipts are for a backpack, toothpaste and toothbrush bought in Mississippi on July 8.

A receipt dated July 9 is from an Econolodge in Gainesville, 51 miles from the Lake City hotel. Police believe Dutton is the one who rented the room in Gainesville. A hotel employee confirmed the bill was paid as "a cash walk-in" but didn't remember the guest.

McDowell called the Alachua County Sheriff's Department in Gainesville.

"They checked all the calls dispatched since July 9 and nothing was linked to Mr. Dutton," McDowell said.

Yellow Cab was in the process of installing surveillance cameras in its vehicles as a security measure. Dutton hadn't taken his cab in for the installation, McDowell said.

One missing belonging could provide a clue. Dutton's father had given him a .22-caliber gun. The gun hasn't been found.

Dutton didn't have a cell phone and he hadn't e-mailed anyone since two days before he left. Police said the only place he was known to frequent was an adult bookstore on U.S. 90 in Biloxi. McDowell said it's not clear if it's a connection to his departure.

McDowell entered information about Dutton on NCIC — a national crime database — and a regional database. He wrote a detailed scenario for the Florida Criminal Activity Bulletin. Dutton had a penguin tattoo on a shoulder. He was 5-feet-9 and 195 pounds with long black hair, brown eyes and a beard.

"If he had contact with law enforcement anywhere, for a traffic ticket maybe, his name would pop up," McDowell said.

A body turned up in New York in 2000. It wasn't a match. Bones found at a missile site in 2001 and a skull found elsewhere didn't match, either.

Calls to parents distressing

Long Beach Police dispatcher Kevin Smyth called Dutton's parents several times a year for five years. His position at the time required him to follow up on NCIC listings annually to see if a missing or wanted person had turned up.

"Sometimes I called them just to check on them," Smyth said, "I guess because I'm a dad and I had two sons who would have been about the same age. I talked to the dad more often than the mother. They sounded distressed whenever I talked to them.

"It's very distressing to call a mom or dad about a missing child, but my heart went out to them. In my line of work, people reported missing usually turn up, most in a few days. Most people reported missing are missing because they want to be. A few never return home."

Yoko Demmons said she wants to believe her brother simply left home to start a new life. He had attended a Florida college some 10 years earlier. Their father wasn't able to keep up with costs, said Demmons, a chef in Lacombe, La.

"He was very intelligent, but he related to books better than people," said Demmons. "I think he had a low self-esteem because he had jobs that didn't require a higher education and he probably found it disappointing.

"I thought after Hurricane Katrina that he would have come home or called. My father theorized that maybe he had driven a fare to Florida because Daniel would sometimes drive a fare to New Orleans."

Demmons' fondest memories of her brother come from frequent family outings to the beach. They lived within walking distance. Another family now lives in the two-story home where Dutton's upstairs bedroom overlooked the street. His father died in March 2008. His mother died in April.

McDowell said he regrets Dutton's parents died without answers. His next step is getting a court order for financial records to see if the way Dutton spent his money led to his possible demise.