

# Murder charge is filed in 1994 slaying of Mason City child

DNA pulled from the pajama bottoms of a Mason City toddler slain in 1994 has led police to arrest and charge a suspect in the nearly 20-year-old cold case.

Mason City police have charged Michael Jason Cisneros, 37, with first-degree murder in the death of John Joseph Snyder Jr. DNA was obtained from Cisneros following an OWI conviction last month.

Snyder Jr. was 20 months old when he disappeared from his father's Mason City apartment on a summer night in 1994. His body was found a day later along the banks of a rain-swollen creek blocks from their home. Medical examiners said the boy drowned after suffering a head injury.

No arrests were made, and without the technology for DNA analysis the case went cold.

In 2000, investigators reopened the case, and by 2002 they had obtained a DNA sample from Snyder Jr.'s pajamas, which had been found a few blocks upstream from his body, Mason City police said.

A decade later on Dec. 19, a DNA sample was taken from Cisneros while he was incarcerated for his second OWI in less than a year. On Jan. 30, investigators matched Cisneros' DNA with that found on Snyder Jr.'s clothing using the FBI's Combined DNA Index System. The database is used to search the DNA profiles from convicted offenders, unsolved crime scene evidence and missing persons.

According to police reports, John Snyder Sr. woke up on the morning of July 20, 1994, and found his son's bed empty and two blankets lying in the hallway. A 26-year-old single father, Snyder Sr. told investigators he had tucked the toddler into bed about 11 p.m. after the boy fell asleep in Snyder Sr.'s bed.

"Why did I have to put him back in his bed? Why did I do that? I just didn't want him to get used to sleeping in my bed," the tearful father was quoted as saying in the days that followed, according to the Register's archives.

Snyder Sr., who was not able to be reached for comment for this story, was named as a suspect less than a month after the murder. He voluntarily took a lie detector test and was never charged.

He told investigators someone could have gained access to his apartment after finding a key in his car parked nearby.

Snyder Sr. told police he didn't hear anything that night. A neighbor reported hearing a child crying and a door shut at the apartment building in the night.

Snyder Sr. and the boy's mother, Lisa Sellman, never married. According to the Register's archives, they met in Waterloo where he was attending college and she was a waitress. The couple tried to raise the child together but eventually split up, and Snyder Sr. returned to Mason City, his hometown, to raise the boy alone.

Following his disappearance, Snyder Jr.'s diaper and blue pajama bottoms were found on the bank of Willow Creek, about two blocks from the apartment. His body was found about four blocks downstream in

the north-central Iowa town's business district. Investigators said his body had gone over a dam and become snagged in a tree under the Pennsylvania Avenue bridge.

The toddler was reportedly badly bruised, but there was no evidence he had been sexually assaulted, police said.

Even before the DNA samples were matched, Cisneros had been considered a person of interest in the killing, Mason City police said. Chief Mike Lashbrook, however, declined to say why investigators suspected him.

Cisneros has a history of arrests for alcohol-related offenses in Mason City and elsewhere in Iowa, court records show. He was cited for OWI in December 2011, June 2012 and in 1998. He has been convicted of public intoxication 10 times since 1994 and in 2002 was convicted of domestic assault without intent, causing serious injury.

Following the most recent OWI conviction, Cisneros was booked into the Oakdale Medical Classification Center in Coralville, where a DNA sample was obtained. Iowa law allows DNA to be collected from people convicted of a felony or a misdemeanor sex crime. (Under a law passed this year, DNA can be collected from those convicted of an aggravated misdemeanor starting next July.)

Officials were able to collect Cisneros' DNA because he had previously been convicted of a felony — a third OWI offense in 1998. His most recent OWI conviction was a misdemeanor, according to court records, but Iowa law allows corrections officials to collect DNA from inmates who have previously been convicted of a felony, said Fred Scaletta, a spokesman for the Iowa Department of Corrections.

"DNA does not have to be taken on the current offense," said Scaletta.

Cisneros was held in a state prison in Rockwell City until being transferred in April to a residential facility in Dubuque for those convicted of OWI, Scaletta said.

A warrant was issued for Cisneros' arrest Friday. He was arrested in Dubuque for Snyder Jr.'s slaying and transferred to the Cerro Gordo County Jail, where he was booked Monday afternoon. As of Monday evening, his bail had not been set.