

A behind the scenes look into the DMPD evidence room | The Des Moines Register | desmoinesregister.com

Tucked away in a box in the Des Moines Police Department's evidence room is a manila envelope containing a lighter, a pocketbook, four 25-cent taxi tickets for Ruan Cab and \$6.91.

Detectives took the items out of the pockets of Leon Groves, whose body was found on the floor of his taxicab on Dec. 22, 1951. The 40-year-old had been shot three times.

The items are among the only remnants left from the murder investigation, Des Moines' oldest cold case. And they are among the hundreds of thousands of pieces of evidence that fill countless boxes and envelopes in multiple property rooms at the police station and in storage rooms around the city.

"Car parts, a dishwasher back there, mattresses," said Des Moines police property room supervisor Sharon Schinkel as she walked through one of the property rooms, listing off some of its contents. "Here's a snowblower."

Included among the items is evidence from the city's 91 unsolved homicides. Department policy dictates that homicide evidence is never thrown away, which means items from past investigations stick around long after officers and detectives who worked a case have moved on.

Near the envelope containing Groves' effects is a brown purse from a 1973 stabbing. Inside it is \$17.49. In another room, items from a 1986 homicide investigation — furniture, clothing and bedding — fill shelves.

Officials can't say how many pieces of evidence currently are stored by the department because each case or property report may contain several items. However, Schinkel estimates the number in the hundreds of thousands.

The property section of the Des Moines Police Department generated 6,005 property reports in 2012, with many reports containing multiple items, officials said.

Schinkel estimated property section employees take in about 20 cases each day. "So we

have a lot of stuff," she said.

In a property room on the first floor of the police station, shelves are filled with items of varying size. Some hold boxes that contain dozens of envelopes, each envelope its own case. Other cases take up multiple shelves. Weapons are separated by type, with long guns on one set of shelves and handguns stored in a nearby room. Drugs, stored in a separate vault, make up about 80 percent of all items collected.

"And it's not necessarily all evidence," police Sgt. Jason Halifax said. "Some is property, some is confiscated items, some is evidence."

The property section takes care of bigger items, too. The items aren't organized by type of crime or date, but rather by wherever there is room on the shelves for that case, officials said.

On one set of shelves: a chain saw, an arcade game and a car bumper. Flat-screen TVs, many seized as part of narcotics investigations, are scattered around the room.

At an off-site facility, the department is storing an entire porch from a 1999 murder scene. That year, a video production coordinator with Iowa Public Television was found stabbed to death on his porch in Des Moines.

Detectives decided to take the entire blood-covered porch to the department as evidence.

Six years later, a DNA match led police to Andrea Morris, now 37. She pleaded guilty of second-degree murder in April 2013 in the death of Patrick McRae.

For Schinkel though, the items that have affected her most in her 20 years of working with property haven't been the major cases or the valuables. They are the items she has returned to a grieving parent after a child's death, or property that someone thought was lost forever.

"Those are the good times," Schinkel said. "Like if someone comes in for a keepsake stolen from them, they're so happy."

Schinkel's job also involves getting rid of evidence.

Sexual assault kits are kept 10 years, then tossed. Vehicles are auctioned, firearms are sent to state authorities or broken down, and drugs are burned.

Every month, detectives review each item they have in evidence storage and determine what to keep and what to toss.

But there are exceptions.

Detectives try to track down the items' owners to return things but can't always find them or persuade them to take the property.

"Value to me is sentimental, like if we have a photo album," Schinkel said. "We know it belongs to someone. I think about all those memories we're destroying. That's what's sad."