

Woman killed in Florida in 1986 is Iowan

The victim's sister went to police, who identified the missing Madrid woman.

By TOM ALEX
REGISTER STAFF WRITER
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A central Iowa missing-persons report filed this month has rekindled a Florida homicide case that was cold for 18 years.

Authorities say a body found floating in a drainage canal near a Florida highway on May 7, 1986, has been identified as Ronette Lynn Peterson, formerly of Madrid, who left home and lost touch with her family a few months earlier.

At a Friday press conference, investigators asked for the public's help to find out what Peterson, then 22, was doing in the spring of 1986, why she traveled to Florida, and with whom she might have been traveling.

The break in the case came earlier this month, when Peterson's younger sister went to police after a long, personal search for her sibling.

Danielle Buxbaum of Phoenix said she had not heard from Peterson since 1986.

"There have been a lot of dead ends," she said. "We even called Florida before. All of this has been kind of like a dream."

Buxbaum said relatives decided as a last resort to call Madrid police

and file a missing persons report.

She was rocked by Friday's news that the report had led to her sister, who Florida authorities said had been beaten to death.

The body was found in a long drainage canal between Tampa and Orlando, just off Interstate Highway 4, said Detective Sgt. Mike Reckart of the Polk County (Fla.) Sheriff's Office. Peterson had suffered multiple blows to the body and head.

"She was put in the water and left to drown," Reckart said.

Officials said the mystery of Peterson's disappearance was solved when Boone County sheriff's officials and Iowa Division of Criminal Investigation agents checked the missing persons information against cold cases in other states. The search included a Florida missing-persons Web site. Iowa investigators determined that their counterparts in Florida were attempting to identify the remains of a victim that matched Peterson's description. A fingerprint match ended speculation.

Peterson's relatives had held out hope she was still alive.

"Until now, we thought maybe she was in an accident. Maybe she didn't know who she was," Buxbaum said. "We didn't know. We just didn't know.

"But at least we found someone who did something."