



Will Death Valley reveal more Manson victims?

In 1971, Charles Manson and his followers were found guilty of murdering seven people in a case that shocked the world. Now, with the help of a Labrador called Buster, one officer believes the remains of more victims could be found. Peter Riley reports.

Charles Manson was head of the self-styled 'Manson Family', a bunch of reprobates who were linked together through rock music, drugs, violence and eventually murder. He was sentenced to death (later commuted to life imprisonment) after he and his followers were found guilty of the 1969 murders of actress Sharon Tate and six other people in an orgy of macabre violence in Los Angeles.

Now, nearly 40 years later, investigators are considering whether to dig up a part of the infamous Death Valley to determine whether any more Manson victims are buried deep in the desert sand.

The site being considered is at the Barker Ranch, 10 miles from the tiny ghost town of Ballarat, a notoriously isolated spot where it is alleged that more victims lie buried. The sweeping sand, the desolation and the difficulty of bringing in equipment each provide a screen to the unceremonious dumping of hobos, hippies and Manson followers who dared to disagree with their leader. It was here that Manson was finally arrested while hiding in a pantry, alongside some of his fellow killers.

Modern technology will ultimately determine whether there are remains scattered in different burial sites at the now deserted ranch, but it is the incredible talents of one English Labrador dog and his handler that have been responsible for trying to persuade Inyo County Sheriff Bill Lutze to authorise the dig. For the dog, a black Labrador named Buster, has been sniffing out likely spots in the confines of the ranch following 12 months of intensive training by his owner, Detective Sergeant Paul Dostie of Mammoth Lakes Police Department. Sergeant Dostie has, in his own time, trained Buster to sniff out human remains, and possible remains, and so far the dog has indicated five locations within the desert where Dostie believes there are hidden bodies.

“My training methods are based on the same principle as dogs used to sniff out explosives or drugs, it just happens that Buster sniffs out cadavers. He is able to sniff them out at incredible distances and depths and that is the reason I believe there are victims of the Manson gang whose remains lie buried at the Barker Ranch,” Sgt Dostie said.

He first became interested in the case a decade ago when he was discussing it with a Deputy from the Inyo County Sheriff’s Department. It had been suggested even then that the Sheriff was going to dig at the Barker Ranch after he had been contacted by an author named Bill Nelson. Nelson claimed to have been told by a former Manson follower Larry Melton, nicknamed ‘White Rabbit’, that bodies lay beneath the stifling desert sands. However, despite going to the ranch and digging, nothing was found, and it looked like Nelson had been duped. But for Paul Dostie it was the start of a thought process that has led him to look into the case in his own time, and he visited the ranch dozens of times allowing him to follow his detective’s nose by weighing up the possibilities, the evidence and the allegations that have been mooted over the years.

The very isolation of the ranch has been an asset to Manson and his group in the past and it continues to be an asset in covering up alleged crimes. That is unless Buster’s highly sensitive nose can be put to a practical test by Sheriff Lutze authorising the expensive dig. A decision on whether to excavate was expected to be made in March and then at the beginning of May, but a breakdown of vital equipment has deferred the decision. A team of forensic experts and county investigators have recently carried out a search on the property, which is owned by the National Park Service, with underground detection instruments, including portable ground penetrating radar, magnetometers, lasers and an Advanced Light Source (ALS), which is a facility that generates intense light for scientific and technological research. As one of the world’s brightest sources of ultraviolet and soft x-ray beams, and the world’s first third-generation synchrotron light source in its energy range, the ALS makes previously impossible studies possible.

The scientists also took along a portable gas chromatograph mass spectrometer to test soil samples at the ranch but it malfunctioned after the rough trip causing a delay in soil sample testing.

Sheriff Lutze said: “It’s unfortunate that such a sensitive, valuable piece of equipment had to be subjected to the wear and tear of the trip to Barker Ranch. But we are talking about the very best in forensic technology, and the information it would have provided is crucial to our ability to assess what we have on this site.”

Despite the technology it is Buster’s nose that has seen the experts and law-enforcement agencies take the case seriously once again. For years there was speculation about further Manson victims, but the technology wasn’t sophisticated enough and nobody would have given serious consideration to a dog being able

Photography: Paul Dostie



On location: Buster, the Labrador, has identified possible human burial sites

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to detect human remains. However, Paul Dostie has proved by his experimentation that Buster is more than capable of locating body parts.

“I don’t know what the situation is like in England but here in California it isn’t illegal to own human remains,” explained Sgt Dostie, who trains Buster at his own 100-acre ranch. “I get samples from a variety of sources, including placentas from the local hospital which I then bury in various locations on my own property and Buster

Captured: Manson and his followers were eventually caught at the Barker ranch



is taught how to locate them. I also get bones from a place in Berkeley, California, called The Bone Room which sells all kinds of bones including human ones, and for \$50 dollars I can buy a great group of human bones that I use to help train Buster.

“Another source is provided by my wife who is a surgical nurse and manages to get me femoral heads from patients who have had hip replacements. They are happy for me to have them for my research, so you can see that the source of human tissue and bones is quite widespread in the United States.”

The sensitivity of Buster’s nose (only superceded by the nose of a Bloodhound) also means that the dog can pick up the scent of a human body which has been buried and then covered with a bush or a tree, even when it has been there for many years. This, says Sgt Dostie, is also invaluable in cases where bodies have been lost for decades and the criminal believes there will be no trace because of shrubbery growth.

“The bush in fact acts in a natural way in that its roots grow into the body which then acts as a form of fertilizer for it, and the human tissue is absorbed into the plant and exudes through its leaves. It’s a natural process and Buster can easily pick up the scent of a cadaver buried in this way. “I firmly believe in the US we need a national certification class to help train more dogs for cadaver tracing. To date, so far as I know, there are only about eight dogs in the country doing the same type of work as Buster and about a dozen dogs are trained in the USA for Historic Grave Detection. This is because old graves exude bone decomposition odours, not soft tissue decomposition odours, that the average cadaver dog is trained to find. I think it would be a great idea if British law enforcement agencies also trained dogs in this way as they would prove very useful in such cases as the one currently being conducted in Jersey, where the police are looking at the possibility of human remains at the former children’s home,” he added.

Although not very familiar with the Moors Murders of the 1960s the similarity in trying to track missing bodies from that era with the Manson case did not escape Sgt

Burial site: More bodies are thought to have been buried at the ranch



Dostie’s attention, and he is convinced that a trained cadaver dog would also be useful for Greater Manchester Police in trying to trace possible further victims of Ian Brady and Myra Hindley, who killed and buried a number of children on notorious Saddleworth Moor in the 1960s. Although most of the known victims have been found, the body of Keith Bennett has still not been recovered, and it has been speculated upon that other victims lie beneath the wet peat bogs of Lancashire.

Sgt Dostie added: “Moisture content and humidity can also make a big difference in searching for traces of human remains and in the case of searching moorland a dog such as a Labrador would be ideal. It is a known fact with search dogs that a big nose is best, but a big wet nose is better! Since humidity is going to be higher on moorland than in Death Valley, there is a good chance that a dog of Buster’s ability would be a great asset to British police.”

Charles Manson’s followers, mainly females who came under the killer’s hypnotic personality to such an extent that they killed upon his orders, received a variety of sentences for their crimes. Several – including Manson – were only spared execution because the death penalty had been declared unconstitutional in California at the time of their conviction (though this decision was later reversed). Some members of the Manson Family who were jailed have since been paroled, and Manson still has a clique of followers around the world who followed his sick reasoning that a revolution was coming to America and a new civil war was brewing between America’s black and white community.

Manson himself, now aged 73, is eligible for a parole hearing in 2011 but there is determination in the US from at least one source that he will never be released. The most prominent among those opposing any suggestion that Manson and his devotees be released is Deborah Tate, youngest sister of the murdered actress. Despite receiving regular threats (the latest only recently when the controversy of digging the Barker Ranch arose), she has fought at every parole hearing to oppose any release of those still in prison for the dreadful crimes.

She is a firm advocate of the need to locate possible bodies at the ranch and dig the selected sites, for she said: “I think that there are kids at the Barker Ranch that need to go home.”

It is somehow ironic that despite the isolation of the Barker Ranch and the fact that Manson was arrested there with many of his followers, no serious attempt was made in 1969 to investigate whether there were any likely victims beneath the sage bush and sand. Only now, all these years later, thanks to a persistent detective and his remarkable dog, could the truth eventually come to light. If bodies are found on the ranch there is no doubt that despite the scientific knowledge now available, the real hero will be a black Labrador called Buster.