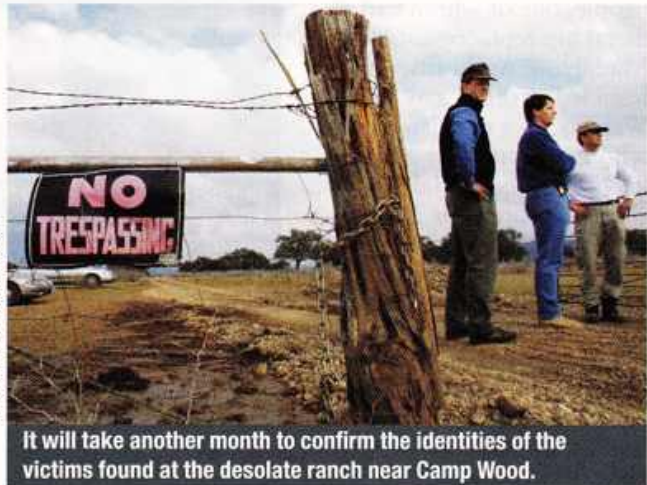


An Ungodly Ending

Police believe they have found the remains of murdered atheist Madalyn Murray O'Hair

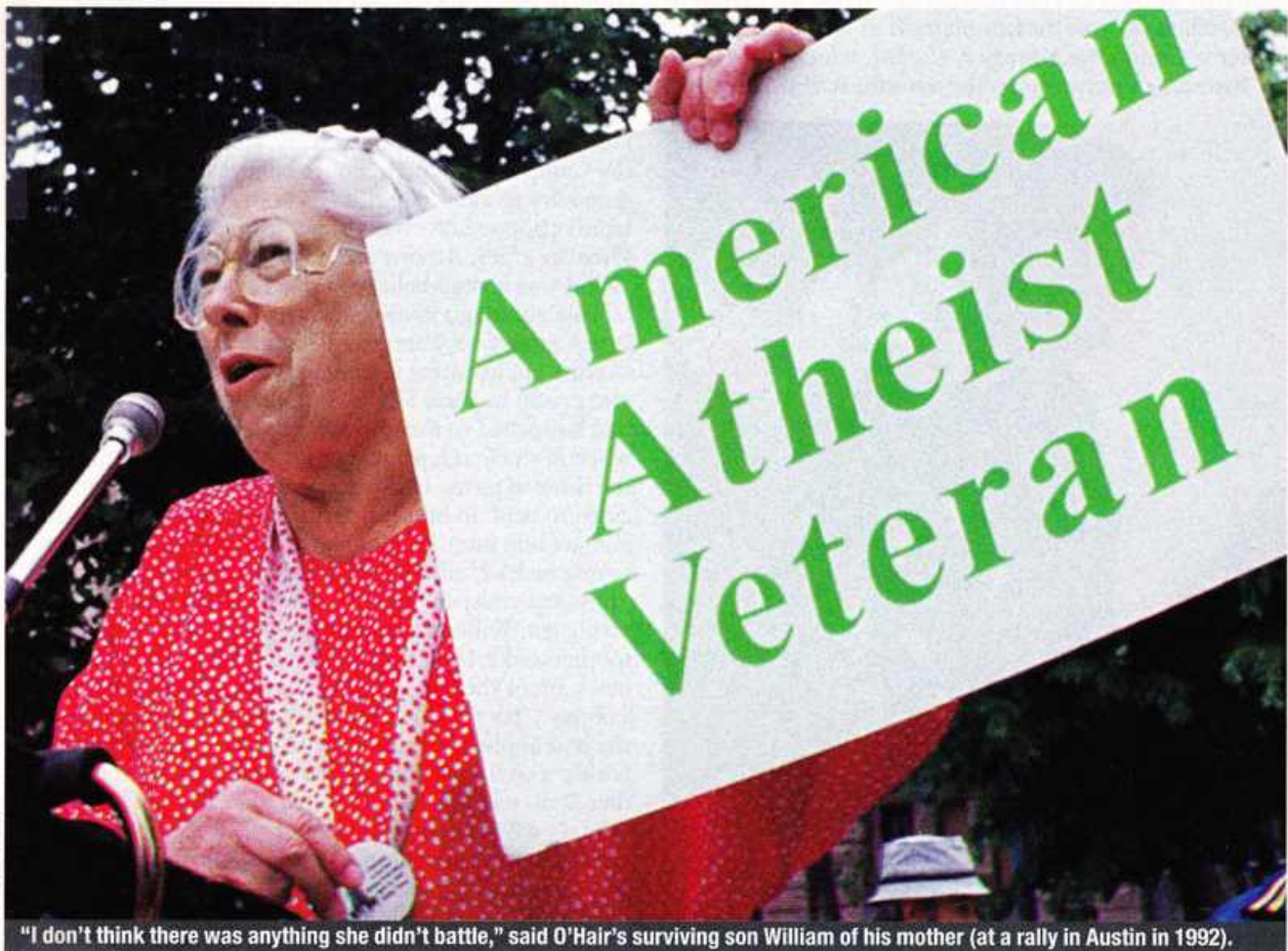
There was something strange about that day more than five years ago when Madalyn Murray O'Hair, then 76 and the nation's most famous atheist, dropped from sight. A scribbled note had been taped to the front door of the headquarters of her American Atheists Inc., in Austin, Texas. It stated that O'Hair and her two children, Jon, 40, who had succeeded his mother as the head of the organization, and daughter Robin, 30, who also worked there, had gone out of town on an emergency. Almost immediately suspicions arose about their hasty departure. The family's two cherished cocker spaniels and a terrier had been left unattended at their home, and Madalyn's diabetes medicine had been left behind.

As weeks and months went by with no confirmed contact with the O'Hairs, rumors swirled that Madalyn had absconded to New Zealand with a pile of money



JOE RAADLE/NEWSMAKERS/ANSON

It will take another month to confirm the identities of the victims found at the desolate ranch near Camp Wood.



PETER SILVAPRIYAN

"I don't think there was anything she didn't battle," said O'Hair's surviving son William of his mother (at a rally in Austin in 1992).

embezzled from her organization. On Jan. 26, though, police in Camp Wood, near San Antonio, began digging in a spot close to a grove of oak trees on a ranch. There they found the charred, dismembered remains of four people, one of whom had a metal hip replacement like Madalyn's. Authorities had been led to the site by David Waters, 53, a convicted felon who had worked as a bookkeeper for the O'Hairs shortly before their August 1995 disappearance and is serving a prison sentence of 60 years for breaking parole in a prior theft conviction. Though positive identification of the victims awaited further forensic tests, investigators believed the mystery of the missing atheists had been solved. "The odds would favor it," said FBI agent Roderick Beverly.

If so, it marked a gruesome end for a colorful, if controversial, character. A blustery, pugnacious woman, Madalyn Murray O'Hair first made a name for herself in 1963, when she was the key plaintiff in the landmark Supreme Court case *Murray v. Curlett*, which resulted in the banning of prayer in public schools. A year later, in



In 1988 O'Hair celebrated the 25th anniversary of the Supreme Court prayer decision with Jon and Robin.

LIFE magazine, she gleefully declared herself "the most hated woman in the U.S."

She went on to found American Atheists Inc., which published pamphlets and books railing against the evils of religion, and she helped set up a network of atheist groups around the world. She was even known to mark out the words In God We Trust on the paper money that passed through her hands.

As she got older and fell into poor health in the early

'90s, Madalyn saw her influence dwindle. In 1993 she hired David Waters to work in her organization's Austin office. Waters had a long record of convictions in other states, including time served for murder. Police now believe that Waters and two accomplices, Gary Karr, then 47, another career criminal, and Danny Fry, a small-time con artist, kidnapped the O'Hairs. They then held Madalyn and Robin hostage in a San Antonio motel room in September 1995, while they forced Jon to arrange for the transfer of \$600,000 in organization funds from New Zealand. Most of the money went into gold coins, which Jon dutifully turned over to the kidnapers. Rather than release their captives, however, the kidnapers evidently killed them and buried them on the Camp Wood ranch. Police believe they also murdered Fry to silence him. Fry's body, with the head and hands chopped off, was found near a river in Dallas in October 1995. Among the body parts found at Camp Wood was a skull believed to be Fry's.

Two years ago investigators managed to link the stolen money to Waters and Karr. Waters is in the Travis County jail awaiting sentencing; Karr got life at the federal prison in Terre Haute, Ind. But the mystery of what had happened to the O'Hairs persisted until last month when Waters, at last facing trial in the disappearance of the three in a case built on circumstantial evidence, decided to deal. In his plea bargain with authorities, which will get him another 20 years, Waters stopped short of saying he had killed them, admitting only to doing "physical violence" to the atheists. When O'Hair's surviving son William, 54, who was estranged from his mother and long ago converted to Christianity, got the news about the bones, he could only shake his head in sadness. "It's a shame, because with her intelligence—if she had applied herself in the mainstream and worked within a civil society toward some change for the good—there's no telling what she might have become," says O'Hair, who is now chairman of the Religious Freedom Coalition in Washington, D.C. "Perhaps someone of true historical significance."

- Bill Hewitt
- Bob Stewart in Camp Wood and Anne Lang in Austin



With the addition of another 20 years David Waters (in custody last month) is assured of spending the rest of his life behind bars.