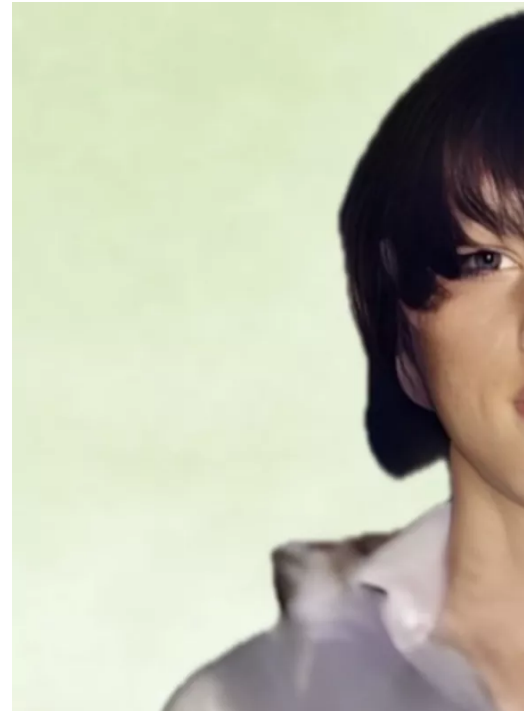


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A missing Idaho teen was identified 42 years after police thought he died in a crash. But he was shot twice

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Dewayne Surls, 17, was identified as the boy pulled from the Snake River in 1982. (Othram and DNASolves)

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Idaho investigators never connected the dots in 1982 that a body with two gunshot wounds pulled from the Snake River 24 miles south of Lewiston was that of missing Moscow teenager Dewayne Surls, who had disappeared two weeks earlier 105 miles upstream in the Salmon River near Riggins.

The flooding river had washed the 17-year-old's body down the lower Salmon and then into the Snake River where it was found near that river's convergence with the Grande Ronde River.

The body, which was unrecognizable, was buried in an unmarked grave. Fast forward 42 years with the advances in DNA technology and the resulting pursuit of new leads, and the body was able to be identified as Surls. Investigators have changed the status of Surls' case from missing person to homicide victim. Surls and his friend Michael Coffin were driving from Moscow to Boise on June 14, 1982, after finishing their semester at Moscow High School, newspaper archives show. They were near Riggins where their 1976 blue Datsun scraped the rocks on a roadway hillside. Paint

from the car left the only clue investigators had to conclude the car had plunged into the fast-moving waters of the Salmon River. At the time, the river was so high that divers were unable to enter the water and search.

Coffin, 18, was later recovered 25 miles downriver from where the two were believed to have crashed, according to archives from the Idaho Statesman. Surls' body was never reported found, and neither was the car.

Sixteen days after the crash, boaters found the decomposed body of what was believed to be an 18- to 22-year-old on a small island on the Snake River 25 miles south of Lewiston, according to archives from the Lewiston Tribune.

At the time, Nez Perce County Sheriff Ron Koeper told reporters an autopsy revealed one bullet hole in the man's neck and another in his shoulder, leading investigators to suspect homicide. But no one guessed the body pulled from the river could've been Surls' since the body would have had to travel more than 100 miles.

The unidentified man was eventually labeled the "Snake River John Doe" and promptly buried in an unmarked grave at Normal Hill Cemetery in Lewiston. A sketch of the John Doe and his case details were entered into the National Missing and Unidentified Persons system in 2008 in hopes it might generate new leads.

"And that's where it sat for 42 years," Nez Perce County Sheriff's Office Lt. Jason Leavitt said. "Until recently."

In 2023, Nez Perce County Coroner Joshua Hall said he shipped DNA to Othram DNA labs in Woodlands, Texas, from the case that the sheriff's office still had in evidence. But it wasn't enough material for a thorough sample, so the body was exhumed. Because the body was unidentified with no family permission required for exhumation, the process was relatively quick, Hall said.

The lab used genome sequencing, or a process to reveal the complete DNA sequence of someone, to build a genealogical profile, the post from DNASolves said.

Through research and new leads, investigators collected reference DNA samples from potential relatives and compared it to the DNA profile of the Snake River John Doe.

In the last 90 days, the unidentified body matched with 17-year-old Dewayne Surls, born in 1965. The family has told Nez Perce County that since the discovery and notification of their loved one, they would like privacy at this time, Leavitt said.

Investigators cited in previous news stories believed Surls was likely shot before going into the water, but Hall said it's still hard to determine if his cause of death was due to the gunshots or due to drowning.

After Surls' identification, the biggest question now remains: Why would anyone want to kill a 17-year-old student who just finished his junior year at Moscow High School?

"The best way I can answer is when we were able to identify our victim as Dewayne, this investigation really just started. It sat for so long with no information, and it's so brand new right now, we have a lot of questions," Leavitt said. "It's difficult because it happened so long ago. The records kept back then are not like it is today."

Leavitt said he was familiar with the Snake River John Doe, but because the body was found more than 100 miles downstream from the site of the car crash and didn't match the description of Surls, no one had made the connection.

"He was always an unidentified cold case. I didn't know it was who this was going to be," he said.

No one expected a body with two gunshot wounds to be that of a missing car crash victim. While Nez Perce County took the original "Snake River John Doe" report in 1982, the bulk of the investigation has since been handed over to the Idaho County Sheriff's Office because of the jurisdiction of the crash, which could also be where the shooting took place.

When the body was found at the mouth of the Grande Ronde, boaters towed it to the close-by Heller Bar boat ramp. The remains were later collected by Asotin County deputies. The body was wearing a pair of Britannia jeans, blue swim trunks with red and white stripes down the sides, white socks with blue and red stripes at the top and brief-style underwear, according to the post from DNASolves.

He had straight dark brown to black hair, 3-4 inches in length and a scar on his right ankle. Investigators also believed he had worked a manual labor job at some point due to the calluses on his palms.

Previous news reports from The Lewiston Tribune say the body that turned out to be Surls was shot with a Smith & Wesson .38 -caliber 36 Centennial Model. The gun was so rare, the last time one was manufactured was 1967, former Nez Perce County Sheriff Joe Rodriguez told reporters in 2014. Only 100 of them were made.

Leavitt said he has a box of reports he has been digging through, but most of them are difficult to read because of the age and condition of the writing. He's worked a number of cases before, he said, "but never a case like this."

"This is now a homicide investigation," Leavitt said. "... And we are literally just getting started."

The Idaho County Sheriff's Office did not respond for an interview by publication. Anyone with information regarding Dewayne Surls is encouraged to call the Idaho County Sheriff's Office at (208) 983-1100, the Nez Perce County Sheriff's Office at (208) 799-3132 or the Idaho State Police at (208) 750-9350.

Editor's note — this story was updated to clarify original investigators did not match Surls' description to the body pulled from the Snake River at the time.