

42-Year-Old Cold Case Solved with Advanced DNA Technology in Nez Perce County

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LEWISTON - In June 1982, the remains of an unidentified individual were discovered in the Snake River near the mouth of the Grand Ronde River in Nez Perce County, Idaho. Nez Perce County is located in northwest Idaho, bordering the southeast corner of Washington. The Nez Perce County Sheriff's Office responded to the scene where it was determined the remains were that of a white male.

The Nez Perce County Coroner estimated that the man was between the ages of 18 and 22 years old, stood 5'11" tall, and weighed between 145 and 160 pounds. It was also noted that he had straight dark brown to black hair, 3-4 inches in length, a 2-inch scar on his right ankle, and calluses on both palms, possibly suggesting he had engaged in manual labor.

At the time of the man's discovery, he was wearing Britannia jeans, blue California Sun swimming trunks with red and white stripes down the sides, white socks with blue and red stripes near the top, and blue brief-style underwear.

In December 2008, details of the case were entered into the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs) as UP3041 and the man became known as Snake River John Doe. A forensic sketch depicting the man's likeness was developed and released to the public in hopes of generating new leads in the case. Despite extensive efforts by law enforcement investigators to identify the man, no matches were found, and the case went cold due to a lack of investigative leads.

In 2023, the Nez Perce County Coroner's & Sheriff's Office and Idaho State Police Forensic Services submitted forensic evidence to Othram in The Woodlands, Texas to determine if advanced DNA testing could help identify the man. Othram scientists successfully developed a DNA extract from the forensic evidence, and then used Forensic-Grade Genome Sequencing® to build a comprehensive genealogical profile for the unknown man. Othram's in-house forensic genetic genealogy team then used this profile to conduct genetic genealogy research, ultimately providing new investigative leads to law enforcement.

Using this new information, a follow-up investigation was conducted leading investigators to potential relatives of the man. Reference DNA samples were collected from the potential relatives and compared to the DNA profile of the unknown man. This investigation led to the positive identification of the man, who is now known to be Dewayne Surls, born 1965.

The identification of Dewayne Surls represents the sixth case in the State of Idaho where officials have publicly identified an individual using technology developed by Othram. Most recently in Oneida County, Idaho, 15-year-old Patricia Campbell was identified after 37 years.