

Missing Montana man's body identified after more than 50 years

by NBC Montana Staff

Tue, March 31, 2026 at 6:27 AM

Updated Tue, March 31, 2026 at 5:22 PM



Human remains discovered in southern Oregon nearly five decades ago have been identified as a Montana man who vanished in the 1970s. Photo: Oregon State Police

MISSOULA, Mont. — Human remains discovered in southern Oregon nearly five decades ago have been identified as a Montana man who vanished in the 1970s.

[The Oregon State Medical Examiner's Office and Oregon State Police](#) announced that remains found in 1978 in Josephine County belong to **Mark Smith**, who had been missing since 1974. Smith was 19 years old when he left his home in Billings and was not heard from again.

A final photograph was taken of Smith at his sister's wedding in September 1973. According to relatives, they thought of him every day during the more than 50 years he was missing.

The remains were originally discovered on May 9, 1978, by a logging crew near Williams, Oregon, in the Holcomb Peak area. Only partial skeletal remains — a skull and a fragment of a scapula — were recovered, along with pieces of clothing. Despite an investigation by the Josephine County Sheriff's Office, no identification was made at the time.

Early forensic analysis incorrectly suggested the remains may have belonged to a teenage female. However, advances in DNA technology decades later helped reinvigorate the case. In 2020, testing conducted with assistance from the University of North Texas determined the remains were male, though initial DNA comparisons yielded no matches.

The case progressed through forensic genetic genealogy work conducted by DNA Labs International, with additional support from the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. After years of analysis and stalled leads, a breakthrough came in 2025 when a newly uploaded DNA profile helped investigators identify a possible family connection.

Investigators later confirmed that Smith, born October 4, 1954, had disappeared in the mid-1970s. DNA samples from his siblings ultimately matched the remains, leading to a positive identification on February 25, 2026.

Authorities say there is no evidence of foul play, but the investigation into the circumstances of Smith's death remains open.

"We are grateful that Mark has finally been returned to his family,' state forensic anthropologist Hailey Collord-Stalder said in a press release. "This identification reflects years of persistence, scientific collaboration, and the evolving power of forensic genetic genealogy."