

Oregon State Medical Examiner's Office and Sherman County Sheriff's Office Partner with Othram to Identify a Man Found in 1989

Sherman County John Doe is now known to be David West Jr. from Gilliam County, Oregon.

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Summary

In March 1989, the remains of a skeletonized human body were discovered by a rafting group on the Sherman County side of the John Day River. Then-Sheriff Gerald Lohrey (featured in the article picture at the recovery site in 1989) and additional Sherman County Sheriff's Office deputies launched a jet boat at Cottonwood Bridge, approximately 13 miles east of Wasco, and recovered the incomplete skeletal remains. In addition to many long bones that had been half-buried in silt on the riverbank, a skull was collected with dental work. The discovery of the body made local headlines, but nothing was immediately known about the deceased. The remains were transported to the Oregon State Medical Examiner's Office (SMEO) for examination.

An examination of the body determined that the decedent was most likely a Caucasian male, between 40 and 50 years of age at the time of death, and around 5'6" to 5'9" in living stature. Evidence of compressed lumbar vertebrae by the forensic anthropologist indicated possible arthritic changes in the bone. It was noted that several teeth in the mandible exhibited restorations. Additional searches of the area were performed in March and April of 1989; both searches yielded additional small bones and several teeth.

Leads on the possible identification of this individual were received by the Sheriff's Office in the following days and weeks; numerous reporting parties indicated they believed the remains to be that of David West, Jr., a man who had disappeared from Sherman County trying to cross the John Day River during a large flooding event in 1964. Mr. West, Jr. had lived on a ranch near Bridge Creek and was known to cross the John Day often. He normally went back and forth across the river to feed cattle. He and a friend had even built a makeshift cable car across the river to assist in quickly navigating the waters back and forth over the John Day. The day the John Day River flooded in 1964, Mr. West was thought to be feeding cattle near Ashwood, Oregon. A friend went to check on him and saw that the cable car had been washed away, the large tree that had held the cable was uprooted, and Mr. West's dog was injured and agitated on the bank of the river. David West Jr. was never seen or heard from again. At the time of his disappearance he would have been 47-years old.

In 1989, Mr. West's dentist was consulted, but no conclusive identification was ever made.

The remains were retained by the SMEO. In 2010, the SMEO submitted a bone sample to the University of North Texas Center for Human Identification. The sample was processed and yielded a forensic DNA profile for comparison and upload into CODIS. Unfortunately, no genetic associations to missing persons or family reference standards in the CODIS database were established. The case was logged in NamUS as UP8128.

In April 2022, the SMEO recognized the effectiveness of investigative genetic genealogy on cold unidentified remains cases and submitted an additional bone sample to Othram, a private DNA lab that specializes in advanced forensic DNA testing. The skeletal remains were not productive in previous attempts when advanced DNA testing was attempted but using Forensic-Grade Genome Sequencing® and genetic genealogy, Othram was able to identify potential family members of the unidentified subject. The analysis revealed the name of two biological relatives of David West Jr. as being genetically associated with the remains.

Both the Gilliam County Sheriff Gary Bettencourt and the Sherman County Sheriff Brad Lohrey (the son of Sheriff Gerald Lohrey) worked to contact family members; Sheriff Bettencourt collected oral swab standards from one relative, and these were submitted and tested by Othram. The genetic association was confirmed through DNA comparison by Othram in September 2022, and the family was notified of the positive identification.

“We are very excited that such an old case was able to be solved. It is amazing what our forensic teams can accomplish with modern technology. This was a case that was a mystery for generations here at the Sherman County Sheriff’s Office. I’m happy that the family of the deceased finally has closure.” -Sheriff Brad Lohrey, Sherman County Sheriff’s Office.