

# The forensic trail that identified James Orin Johnson

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PORTLAND, Ore. (KOIN) — A family now has answers after their loved one disappeared 20 years ago. Clark County officials say they were finally able to identify the man's remains through DNA and genealogy.

More than 20 years ago after Candy Hallanger moved her children from Utah to California, they slowly stopped hearing from her former husband and the father of her children, James Johnson.

“He was a carny when I met him, so when he disappeared, we thought maybe he had gone back on the road with the carnival,” said Hallanger.

They last heard from him in 2001 and for years tried to think of every possible solution — from being murdered to starting a new family elsewhere. There were years of not knowing for sure what happened.

“My oldest son Jimmy did his DNA with Ancestry to see if maybe there were other siblings out there,” said Hallanger, recalling the last they knew of Johnson's whereabouts. “He did get a traffic ticket in Portland in May of 2001, so he was known to be up in that area.”



James Orin Johnson in an undated photo released September 27, 2022. His body was found in Ridgefield in 2002 (Clark County Medical Examiner)

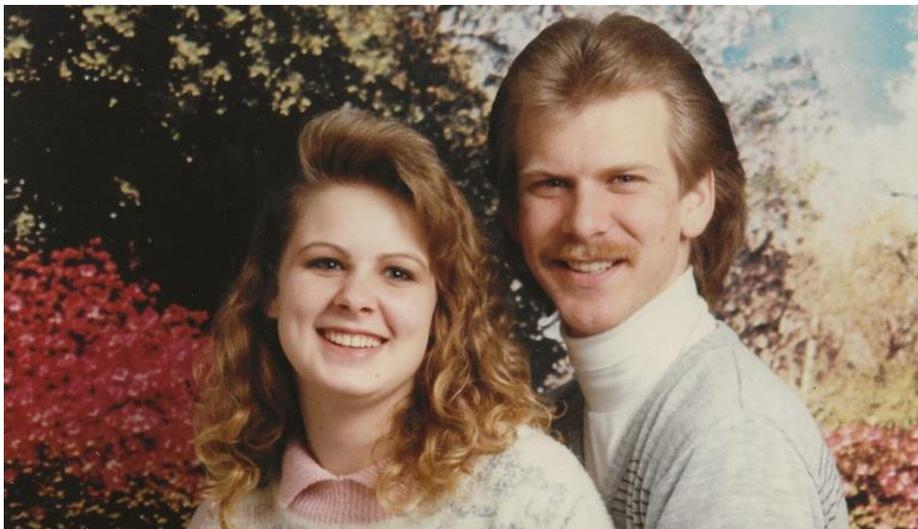
Meanwhile, hundreds of miles away, investigators in Clark County never gave up on a 2002 cold case after skeletal remains were found in a Ridgefield suicide, with no way to find out who they belonged to. Early on, they sent samples to the Center for Human Identification at the University of North Texas.

“They uploaded the DNA profile into CODIS, the FBI DNA database, hoping to find a match,” said Nikki Costa, operations manager for the Clark County Medical Examiner’s Office. “It languished from 2006 and on.”

After more than 10 years of no leads, they hired a forensic genealogist at BODE Technology, who linked the remains to two sisters born in Oregon in the 1800s. Through years of searching and testing lineage to determine what line of the family tree the remains descended from, they eventually got a DNA match, and a few weeks ago, identified the remains of 32-year-old James “Jimmy” Johnson Sr.

“It is an amazing step to be in this time, right?” said Costa. “If you think about in the ’70s when someone was found, if they were found in this condition, there was no hope.”

Johnson’s family believes he came to this area to track down his biological father. His brother, Rob, tells KOIN 6 he’s thankful the Clark Co. Medical Examiner’s Office could help bring closure to the family after a painful two decades of not knowing what happened. It’s a sentiment shared by Johnson’s daughter, Catreena, adding it’s also hard knowing how he died.



James Orin Johnson with his then-wife Candy in an undated photo released September 27, 2022. His body was found in Ridgefield in 2002 (Clark County Medical Examiner)

“It’s definitely a relief, actually knowing what happened, where he’s been all this time,” said Catreena Johnson. “But it’s definitely been really hard for me and my brothers, just knowing the way that he decided to go out.”

Later this week, members of Johnson’s family are coming together in northern Idaho to hold a funeral for him and give him a final resting place. They tell KOIN 6 they’re also thankful the DNA technology is bringing some closure.

“Just blew us away. We had no idea that it was going to come down to DNA,” said Hallanger, adding she kept up with Johnson’s family, including the deaths of his mom and stepdad. “We’re going to bury him, and that way, the kids will know where he is and they won’t have to wonder.”

The Clark County Medical Examiner’s Office is encouraging people to consider uploading their DNA from commercial companies like Ancestry to databases like Family Tree DNA and GEDmatch that medical examiners are able to access. They say in many cases when they have access to these records, they often help investigators solve unidentified remains or even track down those linked to violent crimes years later.