



Physical Anthropology Section – 2004

H53 Issues Concerning the Skeletal Identification of Deceased Illegal Aliens Recovered on the Texas Border

David M. Glassman, PhD, Texas State University-San Marcos, Department of Anthropology, San Marcos, Texas 78666*

After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the general taphonomic alteration of bones, patterns of death, sex and age profiles, and other issues associated with skeletal identification of illegal aliens along the South Texas border.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by demonstrating an appreciation for the difficulties in identifying human skeletal remains found along the South Texas border with Mexico.

Each year a number of unknown skeletal remains are recovered from the contiguous counties of Texas that border Mexico. Generally, if the remains belong to a U.S. citizen of any ancestry, including MexicanAmerican, a positive identification is likely to follow a routine investigation of missing person's reports and media coverage. However, if the deceased represents an illegal alien from Mexico, skeletal identification becomes hindered due to a number of constraints that affect the forensic anthropologist, medical examiner, and responsible law enforcement agency to resolve the identity and cause of death objectives mandated by the State of Texas.

Although illegal aliens enter Texas using a variety of means including hiding in automobiles, tractor-trailer trucks, and train cars, much more commonly they enter on foot, at night, and in groups. Getting lost without appropriate provisions such as water may be responsible for the death of some illegal aliens. To maximize their chance of a successful crossing, a group may hire a *coyote*, or guide, to assist them across the Rio Grande River and into the larger South Texas cities of El Paso, Del Rio, Eagle Pass, Laredo, McAllen, Harlingen, and Brownsville. The illegal aliens, as well as *coyotes*, know that crossing in the most rural, desolate portions of the Texas border counties decreases the likelihood of being caught. However, this means an extremely long arduous walk to reach the city destinations. Therefore, a compromise appears to be the more common pattern.

Illegal aliens who choose to cross the border in more rural areas place themselves at greater risk of death by natural causes or violence at the hands of a companion traveler or by the *coyote*, if one was used. Death in either case would likely not be reported due to fear of exportation or retribution. The vastness of the Texas terrain within the border counties is responsible for the typical long periods of postmortem interval between death and recovery of illegal aliens. Indeed, many of the human remains found in the border counties have been bleached white, weathered, and have sustained taphonomic destruction and loss of bone elements by animal activity prior to discovery. The accidental discovery of human remains near the border is primarily attributable to ranchers who oversee large South Texas ranches and by members of the U.S. Border Patrol while conducting their routine policing activities.

Sixteen skeletal identification cases involving suspected illegal aliens from Mexico were reviewed for identifying patterns of association. Variables examined included, sex, age, degree of completeness, taphonomic bone alteration, and cause of death. In addition, morphological comparisons were made to determine the frequency of certain non-metric traits thought to be common among Mexican cranial morphology such as shovel-shaped incisors, wormian bones, and palatine tori.

Forensic Anthropology, Skeletal Identification, Taphonomy