



## Physical Anthropology Section – 2004

### H81 Reassociating Commingled Remains Separated by Distance and Time: The Tale of Simon And Steven

*Debra A. Komar, PhD\*, Office of the Medical Investigator, University of New Mexico, MSC11 6030, Albuquerque, NM*

After attending this presentation, the attendees should understand the difficulty of reassociating human remains separated by great distances and time and crossing law enforcement jurisdiction boundaries. Also, the role seasonally controlled irrigation systems can play in the transport of human remains.

This case involves two men, three counties, five months, seven law enforcement jurisdictions and the reassociation of remains separated by over 60 miles.

On July 10, 2002, Steven, a 55-year-old Native American male, was released from the Santa Fe County Adult Detention Center in northern New Mexico. He is reported to have met with Simon, a 31-year-old Native American male. The two men were known associates and longtime drinking companions. Both men were residents of the San Felipe Pueblo in Sandoval County. Although family and friends reported phone calls or sightings of the men shortly thereafter, the whereabouts of the two men became unclear and they were subsequently reported missing to the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Their disappearances were believed linked.

On October 12, 2002, a decomposed human torso was discovered in an irrigation ditch in Bernalillo County in the town of Corralles. The remains had been reported to law enforcement 10 days prior but had been dismissed as animal remains despite the presence of clothing. Subsequent searches revealed isolated bones scattered over six miles of the irrigation system. Problems in communication among law enforcement jurisdictions excluded Steven and Simon from the missing persons list. The remains were retained, unidentified, for several months by the medical examiner.

On November 29, 2002, a maintenance man working at the Ranch Viejo subdivision sewage treatment plant in Santa Fe County noticed his dog playing with a round object and investigated. The object was a defleshed human skull. The field deputy medical investigator and law enforcement on scene initially determined the skull to be that of a female. A thorough anthropologic analysis correctly identified the sex and age of the individual and the skull was subsequently identified as belonging to Steven. The skull was recovered 25 miles from the Detention Center (the last confirmed sighting of Steven) and more than 47 miles from the San Felipe Pueblo (where the two men were reported missing).

On December 19, 2002, an employee of the Rio Grande Conservancy was monitoring the irrigation system in Bernalillo County when he discovered a human skull trapped below one of the control gates. Searches of the irrigation canals and surrounding area produced no additional remains. The skull was identified as belonging to Simon. Simon's skull was recovered 57 miles from Steven's skull and 12 miles from the Pueblo where he was last seen. A medical examiner's deputy investigator recalled the headless torso recovered from the same irrigation system two months prior and suggested the postcranial remains may also belong to Simon. Comparisons of antemortem x-rays excluded Simon but examination of multiple AM radiographs confirmed the remains as belonging to Steven. The distance between the recovery sites for Steven's skull and his postcranial remains was more than 66 miles. The cause and manner of death for both men remains undetermined.

This case addresses several important issues: 1) the recognition of irrigation systems as significant vectors of transport; 2) the need for an anthropological consult at the scene; 3) the value of retaining partial, unidentified remains; and 4) problems inherent in cases crossing law enforcement jurisdictions.

Most importantly, this case illustrates the need to reexamine current protocols regarding identifications generated by partial remains. Present standard operating procedures call for the removal of an identified individual from the missing persons list, even in cases where a significant portion of the remains are absent. Matching elements discovered prior or subsequent to the identification relies solely on the recall of investigators. Remains separated by unusual distances, large expanses of time or jurisdiction boundaries are unlikely to be reassociated.

**Physical Anthropology, Identification, Taphonomy**