



Physical Anthropology Section – 2006

H10 A Case of Historical Homicide in Northern Nevada

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The goal of this presentation is to provide the attendee with an introduction to aspects of cranial reconstruction, the difficulties of distinguishing traumatic from taphonomic effects on bone, and to provide a brief history of the Chinese population in northern Nevada in the latter part of the 19th century. In addition, this presentation will open a dialogue about the geo-political climate resonating among ethnic groups in the western United States at the turn of the 20th century, and the violence directed toward one of those groups, Chinese immigrants.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by demonstrating through its application of forensic techniques within a broader historical framework, by confirming attitudes of hostility directed against particular ethnic groups during the nation's diverse history.

On 10 April 2002, construction workers were operating a backhoe to expose an irrigation line on the east side of the events center in Winnemucca, Nevada and noticed several bones sticking out of the dirt that appeared to be human. The local police were notified and a case report issued (no. 02-0351). Photographs were taken of the immediate area and the exposed remains, which were then processed by the Washoe county crime lab. The bones appeared to have been deposited for some time and were determined to be of historic, rather than immediate forensic, relevance. They were then transported to the University of Nevada, Reno where Dr. S. Livingston verified the remains to be human, most likely male, and corroborated the historical nature of burial by identifying a porcelain button of a style manufactured between the years 1850 and 1880. Dr. Livingston also noted distinctive shoveling on the maxillary central incisors, a variable, yet quantifiable non-metric trait found among Sino-American populations (East and North Asia, Americas). The skeletal remains were transported to the Nevada State Museum, and then were subsequently turned over to the University of Nevada, Las Vegas for additional analyses.

Historical accounts of northern Nevada during the years 1860-1880 indicate a steady influx of Chinese immigrants to meet the labor-intensive needs of the trans-continental railroad (Chung *et al.* 1999). In the year 1868, the United States signed an agreement with China, called the Burlingame Treaty, to allow for free, unrestricted immigration and trade between the two nations. This brought numerous Chinese males seeking employment with the railroads or in various other occupations in many small towns across the west. This caused severe agitation among the local settlers who viewed the Chinese as competitors for jobs and as cheap laborers brought in purposefully by the railroad companies and politicians to undercut their wages. A number of anti-Chinese acts were passed by Congress in the late 1800's, with particular impact upon the remaining Chinese found in towns such as Winnemucca. Newspaper articles and death records document many incidents of violence directed toward the Chinese workers, often resulting in death. The human remains from Winnemucca attest to this turbulent time.

This study presents a biological profile of an unknown individual of Chinese origin. Restoration of the skull allowed metric traits to be measured and used, along with non-metric traits, to assess ancestry. Cranial reconstruction was achieved using a mix of polyvinyl acetate and acetone, common substances often used to aid restoration of fragmentary remains. Adequate cranial elements were preserved to allow comparable anatomical restitution. Importantly, the cranial vault exhibits radiating fractures emanating from the right parietal and occipital. Restoration allowed a more accurate assessment of whether these fractures were due to blunt-force trauma perimortem or to taphonomic factors that occurred after interment. The results indicate that the ectocranial beveling was the result of trauma. This work supports a case of historical homicide and substantiates accounts of violence directed toward the Chinese during the late 19th Century.

A case study where forensic techniques were applied to human remains buried in an historical context is presented. Using forensic methods in such cases can help to chronicle and substantiate a lamentable time in history that should, nonetheless, not be forgotten.

Biological Profile, Trauma, History