



Physical Anthropology Section – 2007

H7 Exhumation of an Historical Gravesite at Taos Cemetery

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The goal of this presentation is to identify the process of recovery and describe physical findings from skeletonized remains.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by identifying the process of recovering skeletal remains, agencies to notify and information which may be obtained from skeletal remains.

While preparing a grave in the Kit Carson family cemetery plot in Taos, New Mexico, workers uncovered the remains of an unknown individual. Cemetery records did not show a previous burial at that site. The remains were disinterred and transported to the Office of the Medical Investigator (OMI) in Albuquerque, New Mexico for examination and determination of their medical-legal significance. This poster presentation details who to contact if remains are found, the process of exhuming remains, and the evaluation of the remains conducted by individuals from OMI and the Laboratories of Physical Anthropology, Maxwell Museum of Anthropology, University of New Mexico.

When human remains are discovered, there are several agencies to notify. It is important to establish if the remains are of forensic or historical significance. In New Mexico, agencies to notify include the local police department, Office of the Medical Investigator, and the Historical Preservation Division, the Anthropology department, the Forest Service, cemetery records office, city archives, and the Office of Indian Affairs. When exhuming remains forensic anthropologists and most law enforcement personnel are aware that careful collection of everything (bones, teeth, hair, clothing, valuables, and samples of the casket and nails) and to utilize the correct tools, such as a camera, gloves, brush, sieve, trowel, and a shovel to record the grave site and preserve the remains without damaging them on recovery.

The remains were determined to be historic in nature and thought to represent a 5'5" Hispanic male who was in his mid-30s at the time of death. After evaluating the remains, several interesting anomalies and evidence of trauma were identified. This individual showed little osteoarthritic development in the lumbar vertebrae. The superior surface of the sacrum and the fifth, fourth, and second lumbar vertebra were seen to have slight lipping. On the right scapula, there was an isolated rounded osteophyte on the inferior margin of the posterior portion of the glenoid fossa. These observations were considered appropriate for the degree of arthritic change for the age of mid-30's. The thyroid and cricoid cartilages were ossified.

Prior to death, this individual had five teeth missing. There was an abscess formation in the upper jaw above the left lateral incisor suggesting possible tooth decay. On the sternum, there were two fusion anomalies that produced foramina including a 7x10mm defect centered in the fourth element of the corpus of the sternum and a second defect in the xiphoid process, which was fused to the corpus. The sternum foramen may be mistaken for a gunshot wound defect to the untrained observer.

This individual showed several interesting areas of antemortem trauma. The right nasal bone had been mildly fractured and healed without distortion. There were also fractures in the 7th and 10th left ribs. Fractures to the proximal left humerus and proximal left radius demonstrate a significant amount of damage, drastically altered appearance, and irregular bone formation. Radiographs revealed radiopaque particles at both fracture sites which are characteristic of lead fragments resulting from a gunshot wound. A persistent infection set in and a bony involucrum formed, which resulted in osteomyelitis and periostitis, most likely resulting in a draining fistula.

This exhumation stirred interest in the Taos area and a newspaper article described the findings of the UNM Anthropology Department and showed a clay facial reconstruction for view, in case someone recognized him as a distant relative from old photos. His remains were returned to the Taos area.

Forensic Anthropology, Antemortem Trauma, Exhumation