



Physical Anthropology Section – 2009

H8 Creating an Open-Air Forensic Anthropology Human Decomposition Research Facility

Jerry Melbye, PhD, and Michelle D. Hamilton, PhD, Texas State University-San Marcos, Department of Anthropology, 601 University Drive, San Marcos, TX 78666-4616*

After attending this presentation, attendees will have a better understanding of the problems and limitations associated with establishing an open-air human decomposition facility.

This presentation will impact the forensic community by explaining the need to establish more open-air human decomposition stations in North America. This presentation will demonstrate to the scientific community that through dogged determination and lessons learned, it can be done.

Over twenty-five years ago, Dr. William M. Bass created the first formal open-air decomposition facility at the University of Tennessee. He realized that more information about time since death estimations was needed. The Tennessee facility continues to serve as a major contributor to knowledge of human decomposition rates to this day. Many researchers, including Dr. Bass, have noted that more of these facilities are needed to help more accurately understand the postmortem interval in different environmental conditions. Many researchers have tried to start a facility of this kind, but nearly all have failed, most as a result of lack of administrative and/or community support. Two recent success stories include Western Carolina University and Texas State University-San Marcos. The San Marcos facility serves as the focus for this paper. It has taken four years of hard work and doggedness to establish the facility at Texas State University, where a number of lessons have been learned along the way, all of which will be outlined in this paper as encouragement and a path for others to follow.

Depending on the university viewpoint, this may be the first hurdle to overcome: enthusiasm must be shown for the end result to gain full support of the Chair, the Dean, the Provost, and others high-up in the administrative echelon. Without administration support, the project will be abandoned before it can even begin. Once one understands what administrators want to hear, the "soft sell" can begin.

Gaining support from the law enforcement community can be another difficulty. By offering workshops, it will establish to law enforcement that the university is a valuable place for training and to university administrators that the project is a source of revenue. Now the argument can be made that a facility would generate even more income for research!

Public reaction can be a major issue that must be overcome at the onset. By and large, the public will support the project as long as it is located far away from their home. Therefore, the facility location may have to be a compromise between where you want it and where you can build it. It is imperative that the facility be located in an isolated area with an unoccupied buffer zone between the facility and the public.

Individuals who are not familiar with research involving human decomposition will have to be educated on how to differentiate between fact and fiction. Most people are concerned about wafting odors, disease-carrying flies, birds dropping body parts on doorsteps, and decreased property values. Simple, straightforward, honest answers at public forums can be offered to satisfy all of these questions. A very large concern from the public in the case of Texas State was the idea that decomposing bodies would pollute the environment. The response to this issue has led Texas State University to offer a new perspective on this environmental issue by turning this specific area of concern into a center-piece of the program; environmentally sound research and laboratory practices, and an eco-friendly solution to traditional funeral burials.

There is a need to establish more open-air human decomposition stations in North America. This presentation will demonstrate to the scientific community that through dogged determination and lessons learned, it can be done.

Decomposition Facility, Time-Since-Death, Forensic Anthropology