



A66 Birkby, Bones, and Bodies: The Making of a Mentor

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After attending this presentation, attendees will better appreciate the special mentoring role that Dr. Walter Birkby played in the lives of many forensic anthropologists in practice today.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by reminding mentors of the key role they play in shaping their students and by urging students to learn as much as they can from their mentors.

Most people think of Walt Birkby as an exceptional forensic anthropologist, but his early career focused on archaeology and osteological analysis of the recovered human skeletal remains. Arriving at the University of Kansas in the late 1950s, by 1963 Walt had earned a BA and an MA under Bill Bass. During that time, he excavated sites in the Great Plains, worked his way up from crew member to crew chief to research assistant, and was Bill's Teaching Assistant (TA) for human osteology classes. Walt published on general skeletal identification, with forays into analysis of dentition, the suborbital fossa, non-metric traits, and craniometric assessment of race and sex.

Walt arrived at the University of Arizona (UA) in 1963 and completed his PhD in 1973. He rose from Instructor to Physical Anthropologist to Curator of Physical Anthropology at the Arizona State Museum. Just as Walt arrived in Tucson, AZ, the UA archaeological field school began work at Grasshopper Pueblo, a 500-room, 14th-century Mogollon pueblo located on the modern White Mountain Apache Indian reservation. Excavations continued there for 30 years and uncovered 672 burials (700 individuals). These remains were turned over to Walt at the Arizona State Museum for preservation, analysis, and curation.

That collection brought me to the UA in 1977 after I too had earned an MA at the University of Kansas. Because Walt curated that collection, I would be working with him. I became his first female graduate student, and for the next six years, my home was Birkby's Body Shoppe on the fourth floor of the Anthropology Building. My dissertation research focused on skeletal evidence of stress in subadults (a population of approximately 400) at Grasshopper. Walt helped me hone my osteological skills and taught me how to take and develop X-rays, since he was certificated in medical X-ray technology. I bought my first Single-Lens Reflex (SLR) camera, and he taught me how to take photos and the importance of documenting my work. He encouraged me to follow him into forensic anthropology, and I attended my first AAFS meeting in 1978.

During my time as his graduate student, Walt instilled many lessons in me and my colleagues, which have continued to influence our work today. He was always accessible and unselfish with his time. He taught us by example to take our work, but not ourselves, seriously; to take the time to do the job well (i.e., if forensic anthropology is the application of science to the law, you need to get the science right). Observing both his ease with law enforcement officers and his role as a forensic team member taught us how to conduct ourselves, too. His most important lesson: always take time for lunch.

Probably the best evidence of his influence on me begins with a 1980 incident in which 27 Salvadoran refugees fleeing a right-wing military regime decided to head north through the southwestern Arizona desert in July. After their smuggler abandoned them, only 14 were rescued. The other 13 were found dead — at that time, the deadliest incident involving migrants at the United States-Mexico border. Our team worked the case over the next few days. Just five-and-a-half years later, I was at Dover Air Force Base faced with a mass disaster of 248 fatalities from



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the crash of an airplane bringing the 101st Airborne Division back from the Persian Gulf. I was the only forensic anthropologist on the team with military pathologists and dentists, but I knew what to do and how to do it, thanks to Walt. Every one of the victims was identified.

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