

Doug Owsley

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junior year and introduced me to Dr. Bass," Owsley says. "He opened the door. It's amazing how one individual can do that for you."

Once Owsley graduated from UW in 1973, he went the following fall to start working on his master's degree at Tennessee, working at an assistantship with Bass. "Training in this field is really mentoring," Owsley says. Tennessee had a strong faculty and a good skeletal collection. So, though he could have gone elsewhere for his Ph.D., he decided to stay. Then he taught for several years, first at Tennessee, then at Louisiana State University.

Owsley, who married a woman he'd met as a child on the playground in Lusk, received an invitation in 1987 to apply for a curator position in the Museum of Natural History at the Smithsonian Institute. He never thought he would get the job. He did. Today Owsley is the curator and division head for physical anthropology at the Smithsonian.

Anthropology is a broad discipline, he explains; there is both a cultural side and a biological side. "I am far over to the biological side," Owsley says. "I suspect it's probably coming from some of my experiences with my father, doing things like rescuing baby animals. The field took me more into the human side of it."

In fact, he has spent his career looking at humans - and their skeletons. His basic research is looking at those bones in relation to past populations. Currently, for example, he is preparing for an exhibition called "Written in Bone: Stories of Life and Death in Colonial Chesapeake."

"Many of these people lived their entire lives without anybody writing a single word about them," Owsley says. "Their remains are the only story that is left to us about the kinds of lives they led. We look at them with the eyes of a scientist, but we also recognize that they were once people that someone cared about, so we handle them with care and respect." Their bones are their entire legacy.

Owsley also works on forensic cases as a public service, taking on as many of them as time permits. On his desk right now are the bones of a young man who was killed and burned in what may have been a drug deal. Owsley's job is to identify

him. The police have provided him with x-rays - they think they know who he is based on missing persons in that area - and he will provide a description of the remains. Because these bones are so badly burned, it is not possible to rely on DNA.

His other forensic cases have included the identification of Jeffrey Dahmer's first victim, Waco Branch Davidian compound members and the Pentagon Plane crash victims. He traveled to Croatia at the request of the State Department, to help train people there to recover, excavate and identify bodies from mass graves.

His historical cases include the ongoing process of identifying the Civil War soldiers aboard the HL Hunley, the first submarine to successfully sink an enemy warship in battle in 1864. He has enlisted the help of a forensic genealogist, who gathers background information on the individuals on board; part of the detective work is to find living relatives who have DNA that the men on the vessel had. So far, four of the eight men have been identified.

There are a number of steps in trying to identify a specific individual, starting with a very careful examination of the skeleton. "You learn what the bones can tell you and obtain a profile on that individ-

ual," Owsley says. "But it's not like an identification you can make in a missing persons case, where you might have x-rays or dental records of the person you are attempting to identify. It's not that cut and dried. But it doesn't mean it's impossible." Several different kinds of information need to come together to solve the puzzle: historians to look at historical records and determine what is known about the individuals and the time period they lived in, archeologists to recover the remains and examine the coffin and objects inside the coffin and forensic experts to look at the remains.

Owsley has also been involved in the case of Kennewick Man, the remains dated to 9,000 years ago, which ended up in court. The federal government wanted to give the remains to the local tribe under the Repatriation Act. "But you can't just assume that old bones are Indian bones," Owsley says. "They need to be properly identified - tribes don't want to bury other people's relatives. We didn't go to court willingly. We tried to talk to the Department of the Interior and the Army Corps of Engineers. We talked to the tribe. That didn't work." Eight scientists sued for custody, and nine years later, they have won and are engaged in studying the skeleton at the

University of Washington. "Nothing in the law prohibits the study of the remains. You could count on your fingers the number of skeletons from that time period that were well preserved. The problem is that when a skeleton is 1,000 years old, or 5,000 or 9,000, the story really belongs to all Americans."

Kennewick Man's value for science is hard to overestimate. While it has been generally accepted that the first humans migrated to this continent from Asia across a land bridge over the Bering Strait, many now think that people came by boat from other continents. Kennewick Man may support that theory.

Owsley's work on such groundbreaking cases earned him a place in the November 2005 issue of Smithsonian magazine as one of the "35 Who Made a Difference." Bill Gates, Steven Spielberg and Yo-Yo Ma were some of the other names on the list.

While Owsley is passionate about his work, he allows that his field is not for everybody. "You have to be very cautious, very meticulous," he says. "But it's rewarding. You're not going to bring someone back, but you will help a family know what happened. You are an advocate for the person who is dead - and you just do your job."

Doug Owsley

by Suzanne B. Bopp
Alumnews editor

What Doug Owsley turned out to be - a physical anthropologist - he had never even heard of

when he was growing up.

The son of a game warden, Owsley did his growing up in Sheridan, Lusk and Laramie, and he came to UW to do an undergraduate degree in zoology, headed toward premed or predentistry. "When you come from Lusk, you don't necessarily have a full perspective on the choices out there in terms of role models," Owsley says.

But he knew he liked natural history. He took an introduction to physical anthropology class with Professor George Gill, got very interested, and took another class. He went out in the field with Gill and took part in different investigations



Doug Owsley (BS '73)

in Wyoming and in Mexico. He showed a tremendous aptitude for the subject, and Gill recommended Owsley continue his studies under his own major professor at the University of Tennessee, William Bass, the chair of the department. "George took me to a meeting in my

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