

Douglas Owsley

Dead people tell no tales—but their bones do, when he examines them / **BY AARON ELKINS**

FOR A MAN who has toiled amid some of the most horrific circumstances imaginable, Douglas Owsley remains remarkably enthusiastic about his work. “I love the moments when you come up with something that you’re just totally in awe of,” he says. “Something that gives you an overwhelming sense of”—his mobile hands grope for the right word—“a sense of *wow!*”

He is talking about forensic anthropology: bones, human bones. We’re having a late breakfast at a café in Seattle overlooking Puget Sound, and Owsley’s *salade*

He holds up a femur. . . . “Look at how strong he was—you can see where the hamstrings were attached. . . . You can just imagine him throwing his wife out the window.” —SMITHSONIAN, MAY 1996

Norvégienne lies untouched as he speaks. “Finding a tiny piece of bone, and then another tiny piece of bone, and putting them together to make a piece no bigger than that”—he spaces his thumb and forefinger inches apart—“and from just that tiny piece, you’re able to make an ID of the person it came from. I love that feeling.”

Owsley, bespectacled and boyish at 54, has had that feeling a lot. He is the division head for physical anthropology at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History, and studying bones is what he does. From skeletal remains he’s identified Confederate sailors. He’s helped identify war victims in Croatia and U.S. servicemen from the Persian Gulf War. He has exhumed and identified the remains of kidnapped American journalists in Guatemala and identified mutilated homicide victims. By his count he has examined more than 10,000 skeletons, including those of Easter Islanders, Plains Indians and Jamestown Colonists.

It wasn’t the career he’d imagined for himself as a pre-med student at the University of Wyoming in the early 1970s.

AARON ELKINS is the author of 20 crime novels, including a dozen featuring the forensic anthropologist Gideon Oliver.

But it was there that he ran into an enthusiastic young anthropology professor named George Gill, who took him along on an archaeological dig in Mexico. The thrill of seeing ancient Aztec remains emerging from the ground convinced Owsley that he’d chosen the wrong field; he switched majors and placed himself under Gill’s tutelage. “Doug was naive and wide-eyed,” Gill recalls. “He didn’t even know where Kansas was, and it was two states over. But he was tremendously intelligent and inquisitive.”

Now Owsley not only knows where Kansas is, he knows as much about human bones as anyone alive. He was in Seattle recently to examine some of the more fascinating and controversial remains of our time: those of Kennewick Man, at more than 9,000 years

old one of the earliest skeletons ever found in the Americas.

Discovered along the Columbia River in eastern Washington in 1996, Kennewick Man became the focus of a long and contentious legal battle. Anthropologists quickly judged

Outside his lab, Owsley (in 1999) is surrounded by drawers housing about 30,000 partial or complete human skeletons.



that the figure's skeletal features bore little similarity to those of modern Native Americans. Nonetheless, several Northwest tribes claimed him as an ancestor. Under the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, they sought the right to rebury him immediately, without permitting scientific study of what they called "the Ancient One." The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which manages the land where the remains were found, moved quickly to comply, but a group of eight prominent scientists, including Owsley, sued for the right to study the skeleton.

In 2002, a federal court in Oregon ruled that the tribes had failed to establish the requisite links between themselves and the remains, meaning that the skeleton could indeed be studied; a panel of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit upheld the decision two years later. For Owsley and his colleagues, it was a victory not over Native American interests but for science and the study of America's early heritage—a precedent to ensure that ancient remains discovered in the future can also be studied, in much the way that the Iceman of Tirol (4,000 years "younger" than Kennewick Man) has been, yielding data to scores of scientific disciplines.

Kennewick Man is now housed at the Burke Museum at the University of Washington. Owsley is leading a team of 11 researchers in various fields—among them archaeology, anthropology and geochemistry—who are beginning to tease out knowledge about this very early American and his times. Owsley's lively, happy conversation over breakfast is all about soil sediments, silt deposits, bone-fracture lines and stone projectile points (one of which was found embedded in Kennewick Man's hip).

When the conversation shifts to other aspects of his work, his manner becomes markedly less animated. Owsley was called in after both the Branch Davidian disaster in Waco, Texas, in 1993, in which at least 82 people perished, and the 9/11 attack on the Pentagon, in which 125 died. His job was to piece together the identities of the dead, not from dry, clean bone fragments, but from the human detritus of fire, explosion and unimaginable force.

"I have an ability to numb things out," he says, pushing at a chunk of crab and staring out the window as a big white-and-green Washington State ferry slides prettily into view. He doesn't seem to see it. "You have a job to do," he says evenly. "You approach it objectively. But when you look at these smiling pictures of the people you're trying to identify, and then you look at the things you have in front of you. . . ." He shakes his head.

Appetite and animation both reappear when the subject turns to what seems to be his second-greatest enthusiasm after bones: the 30-acre farm in Virginia on which he lives with his wife, Susie. "We have tomatoes, and corn, and sweet potatoes, and cowpeas in our garden," he says, "and four kinds of raspberries, and blackberries, and marionberries. We've gotten a *great* crop of boysenberries this year!"

He sighs, apparently thinking about the berries. "I love digging," he says without a trace of irony. "I'm a great digger." ◉