

Dem Bones: Forensic Resurrection of a Skeleton

by

Alease Bruce

Department of Health and Clinical Sciences
University of Massachusetts at Lowell



“Tom McCune speaking. Someone found what? Where? Yes, I know the area very well. Don’t touch anything. I’ll be right over.”

Professor Thomas McCune was a 40-year-old forensic anthropologist who specialized in skeletonized human remains. Before returning to his home state of Massachusetts he had worked on high profile cases in Washington, D.C. Now he taught osteology and anthropology at a small university and spent summers leading anthropological digs in Mexico.

Winters were usually long and quiet in his hometown with the ground frozen solid, but in the spring the thawing earth often revealed something interesting to study. Tom was excited that he had been called to examine an actual crime scene this time. Usually someone just gathered up the bones, placed them in a bag or box, and plunked them down on his desk at the university. He could now use his forensic training to help the police and medical examiner determine the identity of the individual from the very beginning of the case. Rule number one was to not move the body until the investigation was complete. Photograph the scene. Examine it for clues. Sift the soil. Then collect and label the bones. It had been a long time, but he remembered the protocol clearly.

With a surge of adrenaline pumping through his blood, Tom grabbed his camera, hopped into his aging Toyota, and headed toward the state forest. There were many nature trails through the forest. He had hiked them often, but the one off Route 125 was the one he sped toward today. The group of nondescript, monochromatic cars along the side of the road signaled that he was at the right location. Arnold Spector from the local police department met Tom and signaled him to follow. The two men walked along, cutting the brisk air with their quick strides, until they came upon an isolated trail about a mile from the road. An officer from homicide, the coroner’s office representative, and a tall slim man with a frisky dog were waiting for them.

“Hi, I’m Tom McCune. You’ve found something that you want me to look at?”

“Yes,” answered Officer Garrett from the Homicide Unit. “This is Rob Underwood, the man who put in the 911 call. His dog found this bone.” The officer held up a large, clear plastic bag containing what was obviously a human femur.

“Where is the rest of it?” Tom asked.

“Just behind those bushes.” Officer Garrett motioned. “We’ve secured the site. Nothing has been touched. We haven’t even notified the press yet. We were waiting for you.”

As Tom parted the bushes, he saw very clearly an area that appeared to be a partially uncovered grave. From a shallow depression in the soft earth protruded the entire half of a human pelvic bone, probably exposed by the dog. The acetabulum lay empty, missing its femur, which had been removed by the dog. The remains obviously had been there for some time.

Tom positioned his camera and began photographing the scene. A search of the area yielded no further clues--no remnants of clothing, no signs of a disturbance--just the bones.

“Without personal effects, this is going to be a tough case,” Tom thought.

The next task was to collect and label each bone. Afterward the grounds would be sifted for additional clues. It would be up to Tom, the forensic anthropologist, to determine the age and sex of the individual and to look for signs of trauma. What secrets would these bones reveal?



Credit: Photo © Picsfive | Dreamstime.com.

Case copyright held by the **National Center for Case Study Teaching in Science**, University at Buffalo, State University of New York. Originally published July 9, 2001. Please see our **usage guidelines**, which outline our policy concerning permissible reproduction of this work.