

New Skeletons In Closet Of Anthropology Expert

Bones Found In River Knoll Analyzed By Medical College's Student Of Mayans

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They gave Dr. Frank P. Saul a bag of bones the first day he arrived on the job at the Medical College of Ohio.

"That's all I need," the 38-year-old anthropologist thought as he looked toward his moving van. At that very moment movers were approaching, carefully carrying some of the hundreds of skeletons Dr. Saul had brought with him to his new job.

The medical college's new assistant professor in charge of physical anthropology possesses what is believed to be the largest collection of ancient Mayan Indian skeletons in the world, outside of Guatemala.

He has been studying these skeletons, tracing genetic origins and population movements, pathology, and disease problems of the Mayan Indians in an effort to find clues to the sudden collapse of the Mayan Indian empire in Central America after 800 A.D.

Five-Year Study

Dr. Saul's interest developed when he was consulting physical anthropologist for a five-year study which Harvard University made between 1959 and 1963 at the major Mayan ceremonial center of Altar de Sacrificios in southwestern Guatemala.

So it was appropriate that a colleague met him on the steps here to turn over bones from skeletons uncovered by excavators in Maumee this summer and believed to be those of Indians.

The bones were found about six inches under ground opposite the home of Dr. William A. Blank, 315 East Harrison St., while workmen were leveling a knoll which hid a view of the river. Dr. and Mrs. Blank, history buffs, turned to the medical college for help in identifying the find.

Dr. Saul, originator of the term "osteobiography" — determining the life history of individuals and populations from their bony remains — came up with this analysis of the Maumee skeletons:

► There were parts of four skeletons, rather than three as originally believed.

► Two were adult males, one in the 30s and one in the 40s. The men were "very rugged" individuals, as indicated by size and muscle markings.

► One skeleton was that of a teenager, possibly female.

► The fourth was an unborn child. These tiny bones were of particular interest to Dr.

Saul and Dr. L. J. A. DiDio, chairman of the department of anatomy at the medical college.

► The remains are presumed to be those of Indians on the basis of the type of erosion the teeth show.

Whether there was any relationship among the four could not be determined, as Dr. Saul had no information on how the bodies had been buried.

So Dr. Saul has started the next phase of his career of "putting people back on the bones."



—Blade Photo

DOCTORS STUDY RECENTLY DISCOVERED BONES

Dr. Saul, left, and Dr. DiDio examine Maumee find

A Great Deal Told

"We can do a great deal, even with the smallest of bone fragments," he said.

"The right bones can tell us about age at death, sex, body build, genetic affinities, activity patterns during life, social status, and many other things that leave traces on the skeleton."

Dr. Saul comes here from Pennsylvania State University, where he was an assistant professor of anthropology. Last summer he gave an appraisal of the collapse of the Mayan Indian empire in Central America at the 36th International Congress of Americanists in Stuttgart, Germany. He holds a PhD degree from Harvard.

"One wonders now not why they declined but rather how they managed to live as long as they did," Dr. Saul says.

While his most recent research centers on dead Mayan Indians and their ills, he has also studied physical variability in living populations, such as U.S. Air Force men (for the Aeromedical Laboratory near Dayton) and the Hutterite colonies of the Great Plains (for Harvard University).

In all these instances, he has been attempting to quantify physical variability and to unravel the relationship between its hereditary basis and its interaction with cultural and other aspects of the environment.

Dr. Saul's teaching responsibilities at the medical college are expected to provide an unusual opportunity to relate these interests to the complexities of modern medical practice and research.