



## Skullduggery

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By John Ostrich, MD

**To create problems for the medical society, just leave us a bequest of a few skeletal parts.**

*"Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio, a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy."*

*- Hamlet, Act V, Scene 1*

HAMLET HAD IT EASY. The gravedigger tossed him a skull and told him it was Yorick's. All Hamlet had to do was utter a few memorable lines.

We here at SSVMS used to have three skulls now we have two. None was Yorick's, as far as we know. No one uttered any memorable lines about them, although there were some colorful mutterings. I can tell you that from personal observation.

Now here is the story, much condensed, of our three skulls.

~\*~\*~\*~

Many years ago, on dates and at places known only to God, three people died. Their skulls came to belong to a former member of this Society, probably picked up during his medical school days back in the 1930s, who later willed the whole lot to the medical society.

The skulls were now ours, and the chairperson of the Society's Historical Committee, Dr. Bob LaPerriere, informally asked an archeologist to look at them. She (the archeologist) opined that at least one skull was that of a Native American. Because it is a crime to possess unauthorized Native American artifacts or body parts, the skulls were turned over to the coroner for evaluation.

It is apparently possible to determine the general ethnicity of a skull. That is, one can say it is of Northern European or Asiatic origin, for example. The expert at the coroner's office pronounced one to be that of a Native American. None appeared to be the victim of foul play - or at least there was no cranial evidence of such.

So the skull labeled Native American was turned over to the Native American Heritage Commission and the other two were - WRONG! No, they were not returned to the medical society. They were confiscated.

The coroner decided the skulls were "unclaimed dead" as defined by state Health and Safety Code Section 7200. (You can look it up.) He was about to give them a funeral, or whatever the state provides for unclaimed skulls. When the medical society heard about the coroner's plans, we enlisted the help of our man at the Department of Health Services,

Dr. Don Lyman. Don, thereby, became the negotiator and facilitator between us and the local and state bureaucracies over ownership of the two remaining skulls. He kept assiduous records and provided me with 30 pages of e-mail between him and various state and county officials. Excerpts follow.

July 16, 1999. From Dr. Lyman. *"When you delivered the skulls to the coroner he received them as unclaimed dead property. Then when you called the State Registrar, she understood it to be a request for a permit to bury the skulls. Such a permit is issued by the county, not the state. So she said, 'No.' Clearly the matter is not the interment of the skulls but their return to the medical society..."*

(For the record, Dr. LaPerriere says it was made clear from the outset that we wanted to get the skulls back - not bury them.)

July 16, 1999. From the State. *"Our interpretation is that only scientific or educational institutions can keep body parts and it's unlawful to get body parts unless they are used for educational, scientific or transplant purposes..."*

July 21, 1999. From Dr. Lyman. *"Hmmm. How do we get ourselves into such situations? As I recall, we were originally the Sacramento Society for Medical Improvement. Would that imply an educational institution? Maybe I could acquire them as a state official and 'lend' them to the society for educational purposes?"*

July 22, 1999. From the State. *"If the...group to which the skulls were bequeathed will use them for 'instruction and study in the promotion of medical, chiropractic and embalming education and science' and the coroner is willing...we can instruct the coroner to release them to that group."*

July 28, 1999. From Dr. Lyman. *"I suspect we need some sort of statement...on Medical Society stationery telling a brief history of the skulls and what we intend to do with them (using the key words 'scientific' and 'instructional')."*

Now, if this were a 30's or 40's era movie, the screen would show a rapid succession of calendar month sheets being torn off one at a time and receding into the background.

In other words, several months passed. The skulls remained with the coroner's office.

November 9, 1999. From Dr. Lyman. *"...the coroner feels that the medical society is not...an educational place so does not qualify to receive the skulls...He is about to bury all the bones in his office (too much clutter?) including the two skulls in question here...So it's time to move on this."*

Dr. Lyman's e-mail on Nov. 9, 1999 certainly has an ironic ring to it as we read now. Over the next several months (here goes that movie calendar again!) calls, and mail messages went back and forth from the medical society, the state, the county and Dr. Lyman.

The county felt it could only release the skulls to a certified, bona fide educational and scientific organization. The state could not force the county to hand the skulls over to us, but was willing to attest that we fulfilled its definition of an educational and scientific organization and would so inform the coroner if we wished. Then perhaps the coroner, having received the imprimatur of the state, would feel less nervous about releasing the skulls to us.

On January 11, 2000, then SSVMS President Dr. Earl Washburn wrote a letter to the State Registrar: *"This is a formal request to your office to assist in the return of two human skulls held by the Sacramento County Coroner's office. These skulls have been part (of our) collection for a number of years. They are used periodically by our physicians for teaching purposes..."*

That was over a year ago. Lots of calendar sheets have receded into the movie screen background since then. We do have our skulls back. The state convinced the county that we are a museum, and that we would not use the skulls for some sophomoric Halloween stunt. The county finally got all the paperwork done, and Dr. LaPerriere retrieved the skulls. They are now available for study and for educational purposes.

### **Postscript**

I FedExed the skulls to my old friend, Dr. Detlef von Schadel, Professor of Craniology and Phrenology at the University of Potsdorf. I asked that he study them and let me know what he could discern. His reply:

*"I believe the larger of the two skulls belonged to a brown-eyed, left-handed man who was a skilled archer and good card player and who loved to dance. The smaller skull belonged to a woman who was a poet and bird watcher. She never bore children and rarely bathed."*

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