



Tribes seeking return of remains

Ancient bones found at UCSD

By Tanya Sierra, STAFF WRITER

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Locked away in a museum safe near Escondido are perhaps the oldest skeletal remains found in the Western Hemisphere.

More than 30 years after the relics were unearthed during a classroom archaeological dig at UC San Diego, the county's Kumeyaay tribes are fighting to reclaim the bones that anthropologists estimate are nearly 10,000 years old. "We think it's the oldest multiple burial in the New World," said UCLA anthropology professor Gail Kennedy, who participated in the 1976 dig with a University of California San Diego professor. "We don't know anything about these people other than they lived on the coast and they were fishermen." The remains, which a UC consultant says have been dated between 9,590 and 9,920 years old, make them older than Kennewick Man – skeletal remains found on the banks of the Columbia River in 1996. That collection, which is at the center of a years-long legal battle between American Indian tribes and archaeologists – dates back 9,300 years, scientists say.

Kennewick Man now rests in The Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture in Washington state while the case is being litigated.

The Kumeyaay don't care how old the remains are. They simply want to put what they say are their ancestors to rest.

Getting in the way, they say, are garrulous explanations and bureaucracy.

The Kumeyaay also are at odds with UCSD over its plan to tear down University House and replace it with a new one. Tribes say it would further disturb their ancestors' burial ground.

According to members of the Kumeyaay Cultural Repatriation Committee, which was created in 1998, about 29 remains were excavated in 1976 near University House, a home for the UCSD chancellor. Only three, in the safe near Escondido, are accounted for.

"We would like to bury those remains," said Steve Banegas, chairman of the Kumeyaay

Cultural Repatriation Committee. “We no longer want them disrespected.

The odyssey

Although the intact skeletons are being stored only 30 miles from where they were found, the bones have twice been shipped across the country – in the same kind of boxes that hold frozen chicken in a grocery store, an Indian lawyer says – and have been stored in two San Diego County museums.

In 1976, anthropologists took a class to University House to participate in a dig, knowing skeletons had been dug up from the area in the past.

They were amazed at what they found, Kennedy said.

A young man and an older woman were buried together. He was placed at her feet. Two of his fingers were severed and put in his mouth. Both of their skulls were cracked. The condition of the third skeleton was not as good.

Kennedy does not know what the severed fingers denoted but said some cultures amputate fingers as part of a ceremony.

Kennedy said she took the remains to UCLA, where she examined them for a year before giving them back to UCSD. Many details of where the bones have been for the past 32 years are missing.

In the past decade, they were sent to Balboa Park’s Museum of Man before going to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., from 2000 to 2007.

They were sent back to the Museum of Man last year, then to the San Diego Archaeological Center near the San Diego Wild Animal Park, said Courtney Coyle, an attorney who represents a member of the repatriation committee.

The archaeological center is a museum and repository that was founded to care for collections that have never been curated after excavation, said Cindy Stankowski, the center’s director.

The frequent moves have compromised the integrity of the remains, said Bernice Paipa, a delegate for the La Posta Band of Mission Indians.

“When we looked at the bones, they had some type of varnish on them,” she said. “They weren’t even in curation boxes. They were in bubble wrap, and when they were being unrolled,

one fell out and it hit the floor.”

Representatives from the Museum of Man and the Smithsonian did not return repeated phone calls.

Process of repatriation

About 20 delegates of various tribes from the Kumeyaay Nation, whose historical territory extended from San Diego and Imperial counties to 60 miles south of the U.S.-Mexico border, met Thursday with a university committee at the Barona Indian Reservation to reiterate their demands and learn why the parties responsible for the remains haven't turned them over yet.

It's not a simple process.

The federal Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act requires museums and federal agencies to return remains and artifacts to federally recognized tribes that request them.

Last April a UCSD committee was created to determine whether the remains are Kumeyaay. Margaret Schoeninger, a UCSD anthropology professor, is in charge of the group.

Bones can't be returned until Schoeninger's group tells a systemwide university repatriation committee whether it believes the remains are Kumeyaay. To do that, the university committee needs to meet certain standards of proof.

The Kumeyaay say they can prove their link to the remains but are insulted they are even being asked. The nation says it has been here since the beginning of time and the remains could not have belonged to any other people.

“I don't know what else we can prove short of someone rising from the ground or coming back from the dead and saying, ‘Yes, these are my relatives,’ ” Banegas told Schoeninger at the meeting.

The tribes gave a presentation outlining their centuries-long ties to the area, including maps and historic songs and poems referring to the La Jolla area.

“I know what you have here is what you firmly believe in,” Schoeninger said to Banegas, “but I need proof.”

The Kumeyaay committee has recovered 20 remains since it was formed. Dealing with UCSD has been the most difficult, Paipa said.

“We’ve never had this big of a problem,” she said. “We’ve even collected (remains) from the Smithsonian and it was not a big problem.”

The fight here is reminiscent of a battle in the Bay Area, where American Indians are trying to reclaim thousands of remains stored under the Hearst Gymnasium swimming pool at UC Berkeley. The remains are part of the University of California system’s Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology.

Schoeninger said she hopes to have a committee recommendation by March. The issue would then go before the UC system’s repatriation committee. That committee would forward the matter to university Provost Rory Hume, who has the ultimate say.

“I can understand why they’re frustrated,” Schoeninger said. “They just want their remains back.”

OVERVIEW Background: What may be the oldest skeletal remains found in the Western Hemisphere were discovered during a classroom archaeological dig on UCSD property in 1976. Kumeyaay Indians are trying to have the relics returned.**What’s changing:** The Kumeyaay and a UC San Diego committee met last week to discuss the issue and lay out benchmarks the tribes would have to meet to have the remains repatriated.**The future:** If the Kumeyaay can prove the remains belong to their ancestors, federal law says the bones must be returned.

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