

Three skeletons uncovered in McGrath could be ancient Alaskans

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Photo by Kevin Whitworth / MTNT

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The human skull appeared, still partially buried, toward the end of the day as workers in McGrath finished scraping away a swath of dirt for a spot to store gravel. And the ancestral remains they uncovered weren't alone: The skeleton was huddled with the bones of two other people, where they'd been hidden for at least a hundred years.

An archaeologist who looked at the bones found earlier this month says they might turn out to be much older than that. It's possible that the three people -- believed to be ancestors of the Athabascan Natives in the area -- died as far back as a thousand years ago, covered by layers of river silt before the invention of the printing press or magnetic compass.

For now, a more precise date on the remains is a mystery. The skeletons will be will be stored in McGrath, awaiting their return to the earth, until bone samples sent away to a Lower 48 lab can better pinpoint their age.

The community wants an appropriate burial for the people, whoever they are, said Vicki Otte, chief executive officer of MTNT, the corporation that represents the Alaska Native people of McGrath, Takotna, Nikolai and Telida.

"We just all felt a sense of responsibility that, if these are our ancestors or someone's ancestors, they be put to rest properly," Otte said.

A mechanic made the initial discovery as he walked around a piece of heavy equipment his crew had just used to clear the corporation land, the intended storage spot for gravel that will help with erosion problems on the nearby Kuskokwim River. The mechanic quickly called over his boss, Jack Foster, owner of North Star Paving and Construction.

"As we peeled the moss off this parcel, it left this skull right there on the surface," Foster said. "At that point I went and got a trooper."

Foster alerted Alaska State Trooper Jack LeBlanc, and the two of them dug out a bit more soil to confirm what they already suspected: The skull and arm bone they uncovered were not those of a bear or other animal.

"I don't know what to think about it," Foster said. "It's kind of unusual to find something like that. (I) never have. I just think it's very interesting. ... It's an opportunity to see a little history."

Foster wasn't as surprised by finding the three skeletons as one might expect.

"It's written into the contract, so when we all go to bid, there's always this possibility, especially in the villages," Foster said. "This is nothing new, but it's a first for me."

In fact, the remains dug up in McGrath aren't even the only suspected ancestral remains found in Alaska this month. According to the Alaska Public Radio Network, a family fishing near Wrangell last weekend found a skull they turned over to the U.S. Forest Service, along with pictures and a precise location of its resting place on a map. Local tribes are waiting to hear how old the skull is and if it belonged to an ancient Alaska Native.

In McGrath, a photographer snapped two pictures of the skull found there and some bones uncovered in the initial look at the remains. The workers also put up yellow tape around the job site, closing it off, Foster said.

Trooper LeBlanc sent word to the state medical examiner's office in Anchorage, where officials ultimately make decisions on how to proceed with such discoveries. Someone at the troopers then called Joan Dale, an archaeologist with the Alaska Office of History and Archaeology, to see if she could take a closer look.

The pictures of the skull and some long bones landed on Dale's desk, but it was hard to tell much from the photos, she said. So Dale flew out to McGrath.

"Any inadvertent discovery is treated as a crime scene. That's step one," Dale said. "You start off thinking crime scene, and then you excavate to see what's there and the extent of the burial and that sort of stuff."

When she arrived, Dale could see the skull, a shoulder bone and some ribs. She and LeBlanc would later uncover the three nearly complete skeletons, which still had many of their teeth.

As Dale and LeBlanc "skim-shoveled" dirt away a couple centimeters at a time, she soon realized that the bodies had not been buried intentionally and were likely not the victims of foul play. A significant clue was the neat layers of sand surrounding and atop the remains, all clumped together, Dale said.

"If you dig a grave, then you go down through (the layers), and you mess them up," she said. "The stuff we saw, and this is only chunks of it left, was organic silt, like flood deposits. Like bank overflow deposits."

The three skeletons Dale and LeBlanc uncovered were those of a child, probably between the ages of 2 and 5, a male in his late teens or early 20s, and an older man, Dale said.

"They weren't laid out nice and flat. They were deposited in a compressed manner," Dale said. "This was not a grave. These guys were deposited there."

The position of individual bones -- appearing to have been pushed close together -- indicated some kind of water flow. As for how they died, Dale can only guess.

"I have my theories," she said. "I suspect they probably drowned. There's no evidence of damage to the remains."

A discovery of preserved ancestral human remains in Interior Alaska is rare, Dale said. For one thing, it had been common practice for Athabascans to cremate the dead, she said. And the soil in the area is so acidic, bones are generally broken down over great lengths of time.

Dale said she doesn't know exactly why the skeletons were preserved so well. But she found also evidence of fire pits in the dirt above them and suspects animal bones were burned and left in the soil, making it less acidic.

At the Native corporation's request, the skeletons were removed from the ground and placed into burial boxes constructed by some local men, said Otte, the corporation CEO. They'll stay there until more is known about the bones and the people to whom they once belonged. The soonest those results will return is about a week, Otte said.

"We just want to make sure we did the right thing for them," she said. "We're anxious to give them a proper burial."

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