

Legends of Freeborn County
Is Our Examination of Burial Remains a Disrespectful Act?
by Bev Jackson

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I hung up the phone that day and thought "Oh my gosh, now what do I do?" Actually, I knew - we do what we have to do, and that's how we learn and grow.

The phone call was from Elizabeth Dahl of the State Archeologist's office in Duluth. She is currently working with the Indian Affairs Council in a program of repatriation of burial items. She would be in the area the following week, and would be stopping to pick up some pieces that we had on display in the museum.

The items on her list consisted of a bear's tooth with a hole drilled in it, three pottery shards, a scraper, a projectile point, a chopper, and a hoe.

These pieces had been discovered on the south shore of Albert Lea Lake in 1964 when the land was being cleared for construction. The University of Minnesota was notified and they sent anthropologists to do a scientific dig, the local science classes and historical society got involved, and the newspaper ran several articles with pictures. When the research was completed, everyone returned to their labs, classrooms, and museums with their "finds" for further study.

That's all well and good for 1964.

But the day of the phone call, my 1992 conscience went through a real struggle.

A native American burial mound had been desecrated. Today this is unthinkable. In 1964 and for hundreds of years prior, a "find" like this, dating back to approximately 400 B.C., meant the study of an earlier life style and a better understanding of another culture. I don't know if disrespect was ever considered.

Maybe the scientific community didn't know that these items were considered sacred by the Indians. That their belief in the circle of life and the value of mother earth needs the respect of other cultures. Maybe, too, I should not try to analyze the rationale of other people. In any case, when I said that we do what we must do, my struggle was between two worlds.

I had questions like: What is the significance of the bear tooth? Was it part of a necklace worn for a special ceremony? When did these peoples learn how to make pottery? How did an Indian youth learn to chip those points to that fine and delicate tip? How long did it take to scrape a buffalo hide with the sharpened edge of a stone? That ten-inch hoe was a beautiful piece of workmanship. How exactly was it used?

If we had never seen these items we wouldn't have even this rudimentary knowledge of the culture. We wouldn't be able to ask these questions.

I also wondered how I would feel if that grave site had been my ancestors. The reaction was instant and strong. "You'd (anyone - today or in a thousand years) better not even think of examining the contents!"

If I demand that respect for my family, why should we not all have the same right? At the risk of sounding rather casual and insensitive (and I do not mean it that way), some day will a scientist wonder if sauerkraut had an impact on the health of Germans, or chili peppers on the people from Mexico? Will that give them the right to investigate our remains and use this information for the education of others?

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I don't know.