

ANNUAL REPORT: UNIDENTIFIED PERSONS PROJECT – SAN BERNARDINO CA 2015 FIELD SCHOOL

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The students, directors, and staff of the Unidentified Persons Project

This forensics field school in San Bernardino, California, took place between Sunday June 28th and Sunday July 26th. A total of twenty-two students took part in the program, which was conducted on campus at the University of California, Riverside and at a cemetery located in San Bernardino County.

Prior to attending the program, students were given a reading list and self-directed learning modules in human osteology in order to prepare them for the class. For the first week of the program, intensive training took place in class on the UC Riverside campus. Students were taught the fundamentals of field archaeology, applications of anthropological and archaeological methods in forensic contexts, and basic osteological analysis. Students were also taught the role that law enforcement plays in forensic anthropology and archaeology. Guest lectures were given by Captain Kevin Lacy (San Bernardino County Sheriff-Coroner), Deputy Bob Hunter (Investigator, San Bernardino County Sheriff-Coroner), Deputy Robert 'Rocky' Shaw (Lead Supervising Deputy Coroner, San Bernardino County Sheriff-Coroner), Deputy Edward 'Bud' Harter (Deputy Director, San Bernardino County Sheriff-Coroner) and Dr. Frank Sheridan (Chief Medical Examiner, San Bernardino County).

The field excavation portion of the class began on the second week of the program. Students worked daily at a cemetery in San Bernardino County, where over 7,000 individuals are buried. Among this large group are approximately 700 who were buried as John Does, Jane Does or Unidentified Does because forensic science at the time of their burial was unable to identify them. Working from a list of burials provided by the San Bernardino County Sheriff-Coroner, students began exhuming some of these individuals.

Our goals were to first find the specific grave from the 'target list' in the cemetery, then excavate until a coffin or remains were found, then conduct a forensic analysis and compare our results with records from the San Bernardino County Sheriff-Coroner to make sure the individual in that grave was the one identified on the list. Once corroborated, the excavation team carefully examined and documented the remains to ensure modern forensic standards were applied and that no evidence of foul play not previously reported is present. Finally, samples for DNA analysis were taken. Once sampled, any DNA profiles drawn from the sample will be checked against state-wide and national DNA databases in an attempt to match these new profiles with those of family members of missing persons.

Working in groups of five or six students, teams were assigned a specific burial within the cemetery associated with an unidentified individual whose remains had the potential to yield a DNA profile. Students excavated to levels where remains were encountered, then exposed the individual for analysis and documentation. Once analyzed and matched to the Doe they were seeking, a tissue or bone sample was taken for submission to the California Department of Justice. The individual was then re-interred and the location was marked for future reference.

A total of eighteen individuals were documented and examined for DNA sampling during the 2015 field season. The primary goal of collecting bone and tissue samples for the extraction of DNA was reached. We hope that in the upcoming weeks and months, DNA profiles are successfully drawn from these samples by the California Department of Justice Missing Persons DNA Program and identifications are made.

In addition to identification, we were able to focus on other research goals. We were able to identify trends in the rate of decomposition for individuals in the cemetery, which will help us further refine our methodology both in this cemetery and elsewhere. This was aided by a research project initiated and carried out by our students that studied the pH of coffin materials and their effects on rates of decomposition. We were also able to better understand how cemetery workers organized their burials in the past, which will lead to more excavations that result in the intended individual being found.

Although students found the field school to be both physically and emotionally challenging, many appreciated the chance to contribute to the identification of people who until now had lost their identities and appreciated the opportunity to provide closure to the loved ones of these individuals who until now had been largely forgotten by society.