

Podcast Transcript: “Secrets of the Campus Cadavers”

Narrator: From the University of Utah, this is “Secrets of the Campus Cadavers.” I’m Brooke Adams and this is Episode 6 — “Unclaimed Bodies.”

Narrator: The Utah State Prison was initially located in what is now Sugarhouse Park in Salt Lake City. It moved to the Point of the Mountain — home to the city of Draper — in 1951.

I traveled there with Kate Hovanes, SWCA’s architectural historian. We wanted to see if there was any evidence tying bones discovered during a construction project at the University of Utah to the prison. Given what has happened historically with cadavers, Hovanes thought prison records might provide clues to the bones found at the U.

Hovanes: In some cases, prisoners didn’t have next of kin or, you know, for whatever reason no one came to claim their bodies. And so that was a potential source of bodies for the medical school just because if prisoners had no one to claim them then they would be buried at state expense. And so, the idea in visiting the prison was that they might have records of that that might tell us something more about how that would have functioned, maybe how the claiming system worked. Anything.

Narrator: The records office at the prison is located in a metal building on the far west side of the property. During the early 1900s, information on each prisoner was entered by hand in large leather-bound ledger books, which is what we’ve come to see.

Hovanes already had a working timeline in mind, which helped her decide which books she wanted to look through.

Hovanes: The way we figured out sort of what period we think the remains are from and this is hardly an exact science, I should preface that first, was partly archeology. The remains actually weren’t found in isolation. They were found in association with a number of historic artifacts.

So, these included things like crucibles and beakers and, in some cases, chemical bottles, that sort of thing.

Narrator: Which can be dated by historical archeologists by looking at when they were likely made and where they may have come from.

Hovanes: Yeah, there’re a couple things that made it difficult to figure out, I guess, more exacting dates and part of that is that dating artifacts can be really tricky. In some cases, they may be used for a longer period than when they were actually made. And so, you might see something that was created a decade earlier but still in use a decade later.

Narrator: Looking at records for development of the Presidents Circle area also helped Hovanes narrow the window.

Hovanes: So, Presidents Circle has undergone a lot of change since 1899 when it first started being built. And so, knowing where we found the remains we sort of figured out what was going on and when and that gave us a better sense of probably the late date when they would have been deposited. They definitely post-date 1905. And by the 1930s, they'd actually filled in the upper section of Cottam's Gulch, which is where they were found, near the George Thomas Building because that was the point at which the George Thomas Building was being constructed. So, we can be fairly confident that they date to somewhere between 1905 and 1933.

Narrator: Hovanes carefully went through each ledger for the years 1905 through 1933, scanning each page for information on prisoners who might have died while in custody as a result of illness, injury or execution. She also reviewed Board of Corrections minutes to see if there was any mention of a policy allowing the U's medical school to take unclaimed corpses.

Hovanes: To be honest, the records are pretty terse. Usually they'll just sort of say "dead" if someone died, which was actually pretty uncommon as far as I can tell from the records for prisoners to die while in prison. You don't see very much of that.

Narrator: For most years, only one or two deaths occurred, noted with time and date. A few entries explain how a body was disposed of or give a place of burial. One inmate was buried on the prison grounds in 1908 when it was located in Sugarhouse.

Hovanes: But what we did find was actually two different records of prisoners' bodies being taken by the medical school.

Narrator: Both men died in the 1920s, after passage of Utah's cadaver law, and disposal of the bodies is thoroughly documented. One record documents delivery of a prisoner's body to the medical school in 1929. But the most detail is about the story of prisoner Mike Bacca, which was documented in the newspaper, prison records and a memorandum dated July 13, 1920.

Hovanes: It's a little unclear what that says. It may mean that these were particularly well documented examples of unclaimed bodies being used by the medical school program as cadavers, or it may mean that because it was so uncommon, they had to record it.

Narrator: Here is Hovanes reading that newspaper story.

Hovanes: *JURY INVESTIGATES PRISONER'S DEATH*
 Mike Bacca, convicted murderer who died at the state prison Sunday after serving three years of a forty-five-year sentence, died of heart failure, according to a decision of a coroner's jury in City Judge William D. Reger's court yesterday.
 The body is being held at the Carl Eddington funeral parlors and, according to the authorities yesterday, will be turned over to the medical school of the University of Utah unless claimed by relatives this week.

Narrator: There is no way to know whether there is a connection between the bones found at the U and those inmates. Those were the only two references to the university Hovanes found,

leading her to conclude it was unlikely that the Utah State Prison was a primary source of cadavers for the medical school. And that brings us back to the close connection between the medical community and the U School of Medicine — and specifically, Dr. Eugene Whitney and Dr. William Calderwood.

Hovanes: They worked as county physicians and as a result they were the folks who would have been in charge of basically unclaimed bodies and disposing of them appropriately.

Narrator: They each also had close working relationship with the jails, the morgue and other hospitals in the county. The connection between the medical school and the local medical community was really tight at the time. Dr. Whitney was employed with Holy Cross, which is now Salt Lake Regional Medical Center, and that hospital has a particularly interesting history.

Holy Cross Hospital served as the county hospital and took charity cases, including vagrants and others who had no friends or family. In 1909, St. Mark's Hospital took on that role and also served employees of the Utah Copper Company (now known as Kennecott Copper) and other mining, railroad and industrial operations in Utah.

Hovanes: We didn't end up actually looking at any hospital records to see if we could match the injuries that were found on the cadavers. Records from that period can be a little spotty and there's no guarantee that we would have had any success. And there's also kind of the question, at least for me as a historian, about why. Can we? Absolutely, we can try and do that research, but should we? It may not be super relevant depending on what we want to find.

Narrator: The identity of these bones and why they came to be in Cottam's Gulch will remain a mystery. Adding to that mystery is the fact that a receipt from 1909 shows cadavers were being cremated, though it is unclear where this took place. That practice was definitely the norm once the medical school moved into a new building in 1920, which had its own crematory.

Hovanes: Once they were no longer needed, and I just want to state this outright, generally the way they were handled was with a great deal of respect. What happened is pretty unclear. It's possible that this may represent a period of change in the medical school, this might date to when they were shifting buildings. The anatomy lab in particular tended to shift around a lot. And it's possible somebody was either lazy, didn't know what they were doing, or just made the wrong choice. So, it's a little unclear why they ended up in Cottam's Gulch and, you know, chances are good we'll never know.

What's really relevant is that although they weren't treated with respect at the time, they're now being treated with the appropriate amount of respect.

Narrator: Today, bodies are exclusively donated, and are cremated once they've served their purpose to the medical school. Many remains are returned to families. Some are buried at a U plot in the Salt Lake City Cemetery. That plot is now a place to honor body donors and their contribution to science and medicine. It's where our story ends, next time on "Secrets of the Campus Cadavers."

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