

## **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 5 — “Cadavers through History.”

**Narrator:** In 1920, University of Utah President John Widtsoe issued what may be the most unusual memo ever. The memo said that cadavers could only be delivered to the medical school before or after school hours.

As you might imagine, there was a reason for that order.

At the time, the medical school was located next to a teacher training school that was attended by small children.

Here’s from his memo:

“At times the hearses are travelling all over the campus hunting for the medical school. At other times the training school children are grouped around the hearse while the bodies are being removed.”

**Narrator:** That fact had been brought to the U president’s attention in a letter from an unhappy parent.

In the last episode, we learned about how medical schools get and use cadavers today. In this episode, we’ll look at how they did it in the past.

We’re trying to find out how bones discovered during a construction project in the spring of 2016 came to be buried in Cottam’s Gulch, under the foundation of the George Thomas building. The remains were likely buried there between 1905 and 1933, when the building was erected.

And that takes us to the origins of the University of Utah medical school and the difficulty schools had in securing cadavers.

Dissecting corpses has always been the best way to learn what the body is like inside. But body donation was not always a common practice.

**Hovanes:** It’s honestly been an issue pretty much since the beginning of medicine.

**Narrator:** That's Kate Hovanes, an architectural historian with SWCA, the firm that conducted the archaeological excavation of the remains. Her role was to look at the history of cadaver use in Utah in the early 1900s. But to understand that she first had to go even farther back in time.

**Hovanes:** This really came to the forefront during the late 1700s when medical schools as we understand them today really kind of got their start. Basically, there was a proliferation of private medical schools. And as a result, a lot of medical schools needed bodies.

But at the same time, there was a huge cultural stigma against donating bodies.

There was the idea of during the Second Coming and the Resurrection, if you happened to have your arm chopped off, you wouldn't take your arm with you. So, you wouldn't want to have your body dissected because, you know, you'd come back that way. Religion was what really tended to motivated people to not want to donate their bodies to science.

**Narrator:** That's changed over time. Today nearly all major religions have no objection to body, organ or tissue donation. But back to the early 20th century. With medical schools in need of bodies and few if any willing donors, where did the bodies come from? The situation took a dark turn in Great Britain.

Laws there gave medical schools the authority to use bodies of executed criminals.

But that didn't meet the demand, which opened an unpleasant entrepreneurial niche. So-called "resurrectionists" began digging up freshly buried bodies and selling them to medical students.

**Hovanes:** Obviously in the days before embalming or when embalming was uncommon they really needed to be fresh.

**Narrator:** It was such good business that in 1828 two men — William Burke and William Hare — committed 16 murders. They sold each body to Edinburgh University. The case caused a public sensation, and later copycat murders spurred Parliament to action.

**Hovanes:** They needed bodies, no one was giving them bodies, so they turned to extra-legal methods of obtaining them. And that was kind of the point where governments recognized the fact that there needed to be some legal way of obtaining bodies, otherwise this sort of thing was definitely gonna happen again.

**Narrator:** So, Parliament gave anatomy instructors permission to use unclaimed bodies from more sources — hospitals, prisons, orphanages and workhouses. It also provided for the willing donation of bodies to science in 1832.

Now flash forward 70 years, hop the pond, cross the plains and you're in Utah, around 1905.

That's when the University of Utah School of Medicine was officially established as a two-year program in the Department of Biology. Fourteen students enrolled that first year. Classes included histology, embryology, bacteriology, chemistry — and, yes, anatomy.

**Hovanes:** So, when it first began, it was actually located in the James Talmage building, which at the time was known as the museum building. And that was first built in 1902 and then when the school started in 1905, that is where they were holding classes.

**Narrator:** The James Talmage building, which still stands on the southeast corner of Presidents Circle, housed the medical school until 1920, when it moved to the Medical Building — now known as the Life Sciences Building — which is just south of Presidents Circle and of the George Thomas building.

So now we have a physical location that fits our discovery. We have a time frame, 1905 to 1933. We have the beginnings of a medical school. And we have a need for cadavers.

Hovanes says there's no evidence of resurrectionists in Utah.

**Hovanes:** I have come across no information that would suggest this was ever the case in Utah, I just want to make that one real clear! In Utah, that was never how it operated.

**Narrator:** But at the time the U medical school started, there weren't any laws on the books about how to get bodies. Utah's physicians began looking for a legal means of doing so.

**Hovanes:** Really with Utah, it was more a matter of timing. In 1902, physicians in the Salt Lake area started to lobby the state senate to pass a law to legalize them claiming unclaimed corpses for use in dissection. And because there was no centralized authority to really figure out who would get which corpse, it didn't pass.

**Narrator:** State law at the time allowed county physicians to handle unclaimed bodies as they saw fit. And there just happened to be a close working relationship between the medical school faculty, county physicians, public hospitals and private practitioners.

**Hovanes:** From 1905 until 1907 they actually were getting their cadavers basically not by circumventing the law, but by stretching it. Basically, the county physician was allowed to dispose of unclaimed bodies as appropriate and they worked it out with the medical school where the appropriate way to dispose of them was to give them to the medical school.

**Narrator:** Now, back to those connections. Two stand out in particular. Eugene W. Whitney was on the faculty during the medical school's early years. He also was the Salt Lake County physician, the medical inspector for the public schools and on the staff of Holy Cross Hospital, which at the time was the county hospital. William R. Calderwood also was on the faculty and worked as an assistant county physician, attending patients at Holy Cross and the county jail.

Hovanes says this presumably would have put both physicians in a position to locate and access unclaimed bodies from county institutions such as the jail, the morgue and hospitals.

**Hovanes:** They had a stop gap measure going obviously with some of their professors working as county physicians and therefore being able to dispose of corpses, that was part of their job. But it was not illegal but not strictly legal.

**Narrator:** But obtaining bodies for educational use was still difficult and that's when the Utah Legislature stepped in to help the medical school secure cadavers.

**Hovanes:** Once it became clear that the medical school was going to be a thing they ended up lobbying successfully with the senate and passing a law in 1907 that they had the rights to any unclaimed bodies.

So, these were bodies that would have otherwise have been buried at public expense. Those could have come from a lot of different sources.

**Narrator:** Such as inmates who died while at the county jail or state prison, or people who died at local hospitals and were unidentifiable or had no family to claim them. With that lead, we visited the Utah State Prison in search of answers. That's coming next time on "Secrets of the Campus Cadavers."

This podcast is a production of University of Utah Marketing and Communications, produced, written and edited by Paul Gabrielsen and Brooke Adams.

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Web assistance by David White and Scott Troxel.

Marketing assistance by Collin Barrett and Jason Jiang.

Our music is "Procession" by Puddle of Infinity.

Special thanks to Christopher Nelson, Maria O'Mara, Lindsay Kester and Alice Whitacre.

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