

ONE OF THE BOYS: ALAN MAY'S THREE SEASONS WITH ALEŠ HRDLIČKA IN THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS

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ABSTRACT

Aleš Hrdlička recruited a number of young men as crew members for his three seasons of archaeological fieldwork for the Smithsonian Institution in the Aleutian Islands from 1936 to 1938. However, only one of his “boys,” Alan May, an apple grower from Wenatchee, Washington, endured the experience for all three seasons. Why this might have been so, and what it was like to work with the “Old Man,” are revealed in glimpses from May’s carefully kept journals from those years.

KEYWORDS: Alaska memoirs, physical anthropology, archaeological field methods

INTRODUCTION

Earned the old-fashioned way—through his own published works, by professional accomplishments, as well as through personal contact with those whom he met and with whom he worked—Aleš Hrdlička’s reputation remains secure in the annals of Alaskan anthropology. Today, he is well remembered as the country’s most renowned physical anthropologist of the first half of the twentieth century, yet one whose appalling field procedures created repercussions lingering even now (Krogman 1976; Mason 2006; Miraglia 1992; Prokopec 2004; Pullar 1994; Schultz 1945; Street 1994). Hrdlička is also remembered, as Loring and Prokopec (1994) titled a review of his life, as “A Most Peculiar Man.” He was certainly an irascible and elitist academician, and one with a misogynist bent (e.g., Montagu 1944:116). William Laughlin, a young crew member with Hrdlička in the Aleutian Islands in 1938, wrote that “the deprecation of females recurred often and included skeletons” (Laughlin n.d.:8).

Yet while his scholarly contributions have been the subject of numerous published discussions and critiques, Hrdlička’s personal idiosyncrasies today live on mostly through oral tradition—passed down over the last three-quarters of a century from those in the academic world

who knew him firsthand to their students, and from them to their students. Similarly, stories of Hrdlička persist in those Alaska Native communities in which he worked. In Atka, for example, some elders in the 1970s told me about the “Doctor,” or “Hard Liquor,” who had visited the island before World War II. (This appellation, also recorded by Mason [2006:130] in Larsen Bay on Kodiak Island, charmingly rendered Hrdlička’s unfamiliar name easier to pronounce, but, since Hrdlička rarely drank, was misleading.) In his recent review of the life and contributions of William Laughlin, who died in 2001 and had first traveled to Alaska in 1938 as a student crew member of Hrdlička’s final field season in the Aleutian Islands, Albert Harper, a former student of Laughlin’s, noted with perhaps only slight exaggeration that Laughlin recounted stories of his summer in the Aleutians with Hrdlička “on a daily basis for the next 55 years” (Harper 2002:7). Like William “Bill” Workman, I and others who also studied with Laughlin would likely not dispute Harper’s claim.

As it turned out, Laughlin survived his experience with Hrdlička to become the foremost Aleutian anthropologist of the 1960s and 1970s (Frohlich et al. 2002). It may also be noted that it was Laughlin who, as one of

Bill Workman's professors at the University of Wisconsin, was instrumental in getting Bill to the field in Alaska—to Kodiak Island—in 1962. By my admittedly tenuous reckoning, therefore, Bill, like me, is a direct lineal academic descendant of Aleš Hrdlička. It is fortunate for Bill and me that intellectual, unlike genetic, inheritance allows for substantial change and evolution within a mere generation, since there are now many of us in the broad field of Alaskan anthropology who can work our own lineages back to Hrdlička.

On a more serious note, I offer this brief perspective on the work of a pioneer Alaskan anthropologist to honor the importance Bill Workman has always given—in his classes, in his writings, and in personal conversations—to acknowledging and placing in historical context the efforts of those anthropologists and others who, for better or worse, led the way in northern studies. Bill himself has been an exemplary leader in our field, and I pay tribute to him here for his own contributions, for his generosity, and for the sense of history that he has consistently imparted to his efforts.

HRDLIČKA IN THE ALEUTIANS

For three field seasons, from 1936 to 1938, the nation's most prominent physical anthropologist, Aleš Hrdlička, set forth to southwestern Alaska—returning to complete several years of archaeological investigations on Kodiak Island and, for his first time, to the Aleutian Islands and to Russia's Commander Islands, west of the Aleutians (Hrdlička 1945). These ventures continued his program of anthropological studies in Alaska, begun in 1926 and continued in the late 1920s and early and mid-1930s (Hrdlička 1930, 1943, 1944).

In each of his three Aleutian seasons, Hrdlička took with him a small group of young men—"boys," as he often referred to them. In 1936, the group included George Corner, Sidney Connor, M. Osborne, and Alan May. The following year, he was accompanied again by May and Connor, along with newcomers Paul Guggenheim, Paul Gebhard, Walter Wineman, and Stanley Seashore (Fig. 1). The final season, 1938, saw Hrdlička with four new faces, William Laughlin, Laughlin's Willamette University friend William Clemes, Harold Cowper, and James Botsford (the latter two both from Buffalo), along with, for his third sea-

son, May. It appears for the most part that these men had come to Hrdlička's attention through chance encounters and personal and family contacts (Laughlin, for example, recommended Clemes to Hrdlička). Regardless, almost all seem to have been young college men who, perhaps significantly, had little, if any, background in archaeology, anthropology, or Alaska.

All, that is, except Alan May. Born in Norwich, England, in 1895, May served as an officer in the British Army in World War I before immigrating to the United States in 1918. May was in his early forties and married at the time of his three seasons with Hrdlička. Moreover, although he was then an apple grower in Wenatchee, Washington, May had a long-term interest in archaeology, having traveled extensively and having served in the mid-1930s as president of the Columbia River Archaeological Society. It was in the summer of 1935, when Hrdlička made a visit to this organization, that the two met. May showed him some skeletal materials and artifacts from the area, an encounter that ultimately led to his joining Hrdlička the following summer.

This paper is based on the personal diaries of Alan May, not only the only one of Hrdlička's "boys" to take part in all three seasons of Aleutian Island fieldwork, but also, as far as I know, the only one to have maintained a detailed, extended written account of almost every day of his time with Hrdlička. To my knowledge, no similar document exists for any other part of Hrdlička's career.¹ Following each field season, May faithfully and carefully typed his daily handwritten notes and bound them with his own photographs and items such as telegrams, letters, and newspaper clippings pertaining to his trips. May's commentaries, totaling well over four hundred pages of text, range broadly over his varied experiences. From the other passengers aboard the steamers from Seattle to Alaska (including such luminaries as the artist Sidney Lawrence), to the villages and towns they made brief stops at along the way, to his fellow crew members, May offers a rich chronicle of his adventures to the Aleutians.

Although I was familiar with May from both his own (May 1942) and Hrdlička's (1945) accounts, my opportunity to know him personally occurred in 1982, when he contacted the Anchorage Museum of History and Art (now the Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center) to discuss donating some of his personal collection of arti-

1 Paul Gebhard, a member of Hrdlička's 1937 crew, recently kindly gave me a copy of his diary and photographs from that year. It is much briefer than May's.



Figure 1. The 1937 field crew on Unalaska Island. From left: Wineman, Gebhard, Guggenheim, Connor, May, and Seashore (University of Alaska Anchorage Archives, Alan May Collection, Photograph 42a).

facts from his world travels, including specimens from the Aleutian Islands collected during his trips with Hrdlička. The museum contacted me regarding this potential donation, prompting me to begin a correspondence with May that lasted through the 1980s. In 1983, I had the good fortune to visit May at his home on Whidbey Island, Washington, outside of Seattle (Fig. 2). I again saw May when he came to Alaska to visit and to arrange transfer of his papers to the University of Alaska Anchorage Archives. May died in 1993.

This paper, then, is really about two people. On one hand, it explores the manner and personality of Aleš Hrdlička over the course of three Alaskan field seasons in the late 1930s, as seen through the words of May. On the other hand, we also glimpse May himself and come to appreciate how it was that he was drawn to work for such a difficult task master. I focus on two quite interrelated



Figure 2. Alan May outside an outbuilding at his home on Whidbey Island, Washington, in 1983 (Photograph by Douglas W. Veltre).

subjects about which May frequently wrote in his diaries—first, Hrdlička's archaeological interests and field methods, and, second, Hrdlička's personality and treatment of those around him. Perhaps because May was too old to accept without question Hrdlička's often harsh ways, and perhaps because he was by nature somewhat outspoken, his diaries, though polite and perhaps even restrained at times, nevertheless speak with some candor about his feelings towards Hrdlička and, to a lesser extent, the others on the crews. In this regard, it should be noted that May was clearly aware of the sensitive and critical nature of many of his entries. In a brief preface to the diaries he wrote: "It should be remembered that this account has been copied from a diary written at the time of the occurrences and that it has not been rewritten. If it had been rewritten, doubtless many of the remarks, criticisms, and statements would have been modified or left out entirely." What follows, much in his own words, is but a sampler from May's experience with "The Doctor," or, more frequently, "The Old Man."

HRDLIČKA'S ARCHAEOLOGICAL INTERESTS

That Hrdlička was not much of an archaeologist is beyond dispute. He was fixated on acquiring human remains, often so disinterested in other materials that he frequently let his "boys" keep artifacts they found, including items from various burial caves. On top of this, he was generally a frustrating man to work for. Over and over again, May's diaries reveal Hrdlička's stubborn and arbitrary nature. For example, in 1938, Clemes, Laughlin, and May collected some blades from the Anangula site on a small island off-shore from Nikolski village on Umnak Island. May "suggested to the Doctor that he had better come and look, but no, he preferred to go to the show [i.e., movies were shown aboard the ship they were traveling on]—'dere is nothing dere' he said. A foolish statement considering that he had never been on the island and had no means of knowing anything about it" (5 June 1938).² That site, which might not have interested Hrdlička in any case since it contained no organic remains, including burials, would eventually become one of the oldest known sites in the entire Aleut region (McCartney and Veltre 1996).

Similarly, when May learned from someone in Nikolski of a possible mummy cave on Ilak Island in addition to the one they had been to the year before, he approached Hrdlička with the suggestion that they add the

island to their itinerary, as they were planning on sailing past it anyway. "'Dere is nothing to it—I am not interested' he replies. What can one do with a man like that? Inconsistent to the nth degree" (6 June 1938).

Excavating always went quickly—there were no small hand tools, only picks and shovels, and there was little or no effort made to take notes, make plan drawings, or the like (Figs. 3–5). An occasional photograph might be taken, but usually only if the subject were an especially well-laid-out burial and only if the picture could be made before Hrdlička insisted that the burial be removed. Hrdlička was always impatient with the progress the boys made while digging, but actually slowed them down with his advice. May wrote (14 June 1938):

We, that is, Clemes, Laughlin and I were working along in fine shape and then when the Doctor came out he had so many suggestions . . . to make, had to show the boys how to dump a wheelbarrow and so on that he generally upset things. He never gives a word of appreciation or praise no matter how well the boys do. He is a hard man to work for.... While he stayed around we could only accomplish about half as much work. . . . He [would] tell the boys they were not holding their shovels the correct way and so on. Discouraging.

A delightful drawing made by Gebhard in 1937, included in May's diaries, illustrates the working conditions (Fig. 6).

On another occasion, when May had excavated alone in the morning, he visited Hrdlička at lunch time and inquired if the Doctor was going to work in the afternoon. Obviously feeling rejected by the crew, Hrdlička replied, "Of course I vork, but nobody seems to vant me to vork with them." May, very politely and diplomatically, invited Hrdlička to join him, but in his diary silently complains, "he cannot make a straight line and generally messes up my nice clean looking cut. ... He does not seem to realize that he spoils it when he works with me" (25 June 1938).

Interestingly, May's realization that Hrdlička was a poor archaeologist came early. After returning home from his first season, May wrote the following as a postscript to his 1936 journal:

Dr. Hrdlička's method of excavation was completely new to me, but, of course, I assumed such a prestigious man knew what he was doing. His method was to commence at the bottom of the site using a pick until undercut enough to cause

2 Here and subsequently, citations to May's diaries consist of the date of entry.



Figure 3. Excavation on Amaknak Island, Unalaska Bay, in 1936. Corner (far left), Hrdlička (far right), and unidentified visitor to the site (University of Alaska Anchorage Archives, Alan May Collection, Photograph 148b).

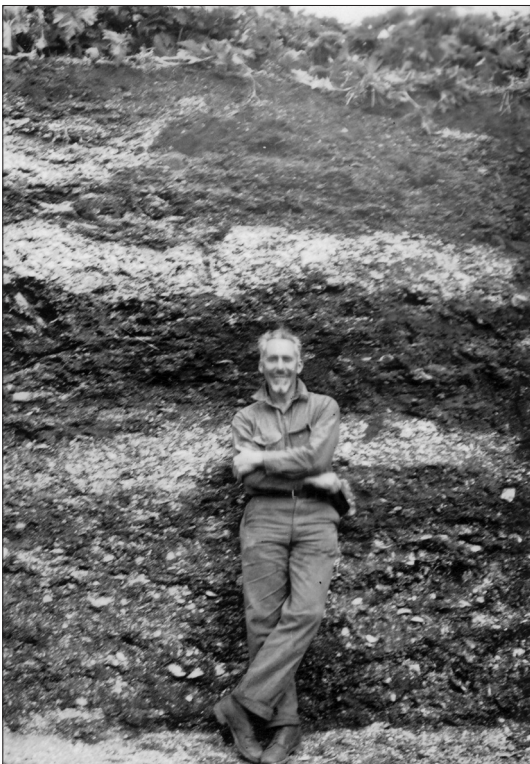


Figure 4. Alan May in front of twelve feet of midden exposure, probably on Amaknak Island, Unalaska Bay, in 1937 (University of Alaska Anchorage Archives, Alan May Collection, Photograph 55c).



Figure 5. “‘King of Attu,’ seated on his throne of whale bones.” Alan May in 1936 (University of Alaska Anchorage Archives, Alan May Collection, Photograph 124a).

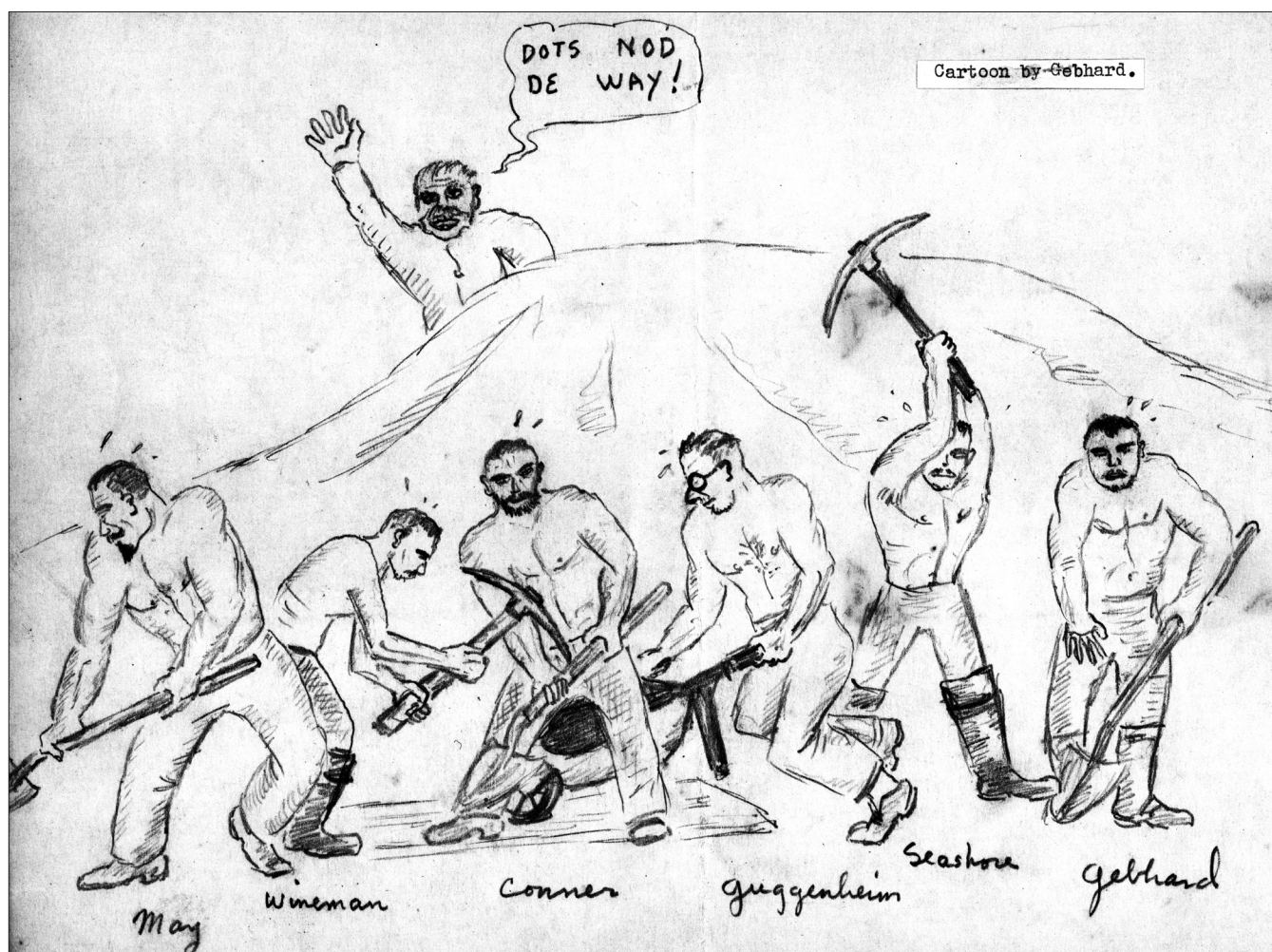


Figure 6. Drawing by Paul Gebhard in 1937, showing Hrdlička, in the rear, shouting digging instructions to that summer's crew. From left: May, Wineman, Connor, Guggenheim, Seashore, and Gebhard (University of Alaska Anchorage Archives, Alan May Collection, unnumbered illustration).

some of the upper portion to fall down. This debris was visually searched for artifacts and then wheelbarrowed to the dump. Many artifacts were found on the dump later. Stratigraphy [i.e., excavating by following observed stratigraphic units] as I knew it was non-existent. The Doctor divided the site into three parts—the bottom, the middle, and the upper, and we were supposed to know which level the specimens came from. Portions falling from the upper level would, of course, include some artifacts from the middle level or even possibly the bottom level. Thus, stating that artifacts came from such and such a level was haphazard in the extreme. The usual way, of course, is to start at the top and work down six or perhaps twelve inches at a time. I think this was too slow for the Doctor, for his main interest was to obtain as many skulls as possible.

Regarding Hrdlička's preoccupation with human remains, May includes in his diary a poem written by crew member Osborne recounting their excavation of mummies from Kagamil Island—an enterprise that involved transporting bags full of bones over a rough beach and into a small boat in a "bucket brigade" style. A portion of that poem (undated 1936) reads:

Let the world beware
And stay out of his hair
When a harvest of skulls he's a-reaping.
He'd rather have bones than all precious stones,
Hot coffee or snoreless sleeping.

On Kagamil he had his will,
Two caves right full of mummies.
And on the shore of the bight

Was a very strange sight,
Mummies relayed by the dummies!

That the boys felt that they were, indeed, “dummies,” mere unskilled laborers, is attested to by another poem—actually, a song—written by Clemes and meant to be sung to the tune of “Oh My Darling, Clementine.” One stanza goes:

Here’s the Doctor, here’s the Doctor
Who has combed the U.S.A.
For the boys with mighty muscles
And their brains of straw and hay.

Hrdlička did, in fact, have his doubts about the capabilities and maturity of his crew members, and his paternalistic attitude comes through time and again. In his own posthumously published account of his Aleutian expeditions, much written in diary-like form, Hrdlička wrote (1945:353):

The boys are disorderly, as usual. Their wives should thank me some day for the little discipline I am able to instill into them. The average American college boy is certainly short of a paragon in many respects. And their discussions are often so juvenile. Not one I have ever had knew how to sing or play an instrument, nor how to keep a house and even himself in order, cook a decent meal, or properly pack a box. But perhaps this was due to some un-natural selection. . .

However, Hrdlička did favor May, who, it should be reiterated, was older and more experienced in archaeology than the other crew members. Frequently, Hrdlička asked May to take charge of the boys, and Hrdlička occasionally spoke to him about career opportunities in archaeology.

Hrdlička’s paternalism towards his “boys” included his fancying himself as quite a cook. With apparent self-satisfaction, he wrote: “Make wonderful cooking inventions! At every meal have something new and tasteful—and never a drop or crumb left over. Cooking, right cooking such as ours, is not a drudgery but a high art, art to make much from little, and that tasteful. And there is no end of possible inventions. Time and again the boys wonder where I get it all, yet it’s the same few substantials . . .” (Hrdlička 1945:353). Not surprisingly, the boys had a different take on things, as May described (13 July 1938):

Our food supplies seem to be somewhat off balance. Apparently the Doctor ordered exactly what he wanted and paid no attention to my revised list. [More than once May was asked to help make

supply lists for Hrdlička, only to have his efforts ignored.] ... We have fifty pounds of coffee and only two coffee drinkers amongst us! With half a pound of bacon per person per day the Doctor at the last minute decided to get another side! Then there is the large amount of cheese, 75 pounds, but only three of us eat cheese.

But, ever the problem-solver and optimist, May simply wrote, “However, we’ll get along all right.”

In this vein, the song by Clemes quoted above continues with the following stanzas:

Here’s the Doctor, Here’s the Doctor
Every morning just at six
Bellows “Time” and grunts a warning
Better start to swing your picks.
Fries the cookies in the washpan
Pours the butter in the tea
Makes us sniff his queer concoctions
Tastes like kelp weed from the sea.

Other examples of Hrdlička’s poor planning skills, combined with extreme frugality, fill May’s diaries. When they were camped in two cabins on Amchitka Island, for example, May wrote concerning their equipment and food supplies: “I find that the Doctor’s idea of sufficient equipment for us three to cook and live with is one small frying pan, two pots and one pail. No plates, cups or any thing else” (12 July 1938). Hrdlička, living in a different cabin from May, “complains that he has no knife, fork or spoon for himself ‘and now de ship is gone’!” May scrounged about the two cabins and found utensils for the helpless Hrdlička.

Some of Hrdlička’s lack of foresight is quite remarkable; one can almost hear the exasperation in May’s voice: “the Old Man has come up here [to the Aleutian Islands], of all places in the world, without any hip boots. And he was always so insistent on the remainder of us having them. It looks as if we shall have to carry him across all rivers and in and out of the launch at most landings” (2 June 1938). This situation was captured on film (Fig. 7).

Another of Hrdlička’s traits that frustrated the crew was his frugality. One of many examples occurred on Kodiak Island when Hrdlička had the opportunity to purchase some new nails for crating up the last of the materials from his work at the Uyak site. May wrote of Hrdlička’s reaction to the new nails: “‘No, no. Does wont do, ve vant old ones, rusty ones’ he said. So after a while some old rusty bent nails were found and given to him. This made him quite happy for he had saved a few cents by not buying new nails!” (27 May 1938).



Figure 7. Carrying Hrdlička ashore in Nikolski Village, Umnak Island, 1938 (photograph courtesy of Paul Guggenheim).

Paternalism aside, Hrdlička could also be quite selfish. Once (27 May 1938), when Laughlin was “so terribly sick and weak” on board ship, Hrdlička did not even offer him the use of the second, unused bunk in his cabin, and Laughlin had to remain sleeping on the floor. On another occasion, this time on Amchitka Island when the group was split between two nearby cabins, May and the boys with him needed the gasoline that was in Hrdlička’s cabin. Because Hrdlička wasn’t going to use it, they asked if they could have it: “However, although he has no use for it he will not let us have it” (13 July 1938).

DISCUSSION

May’s diaries are full of fascinating glimpses into the methods and manners of Aleš Hrdlička.³ As such, they comprise documentation not found elsewhere of one of the key figures in American anthropology. While unfortunate, it might not be particularly surprising that such a prominent figure would be so difficult to work for. Hrdlička’s elite manner, likely much more prevalent in the early twentieth century, might still be found among anthropologists and other academics.

Far more difficult to reconcile from May’s diaries are Hrdlička’s horrendous field methods and his sole preoccupation with human remains, even when put in the context of his times. Although the younger crew members may not have been fully aware of Hrdlička’s shortcomings in this regard, Alan May certainly was. In an undated postscript to his three-year journal he wrote:

He was the foremost physical anthropologist in the country, but he definitely was not an archaeologist. I think his interest in archaeology was merely a means of obtaining more skeletal material. He wanted human bones; often he would say ‘Don’t bother with that... vat ve vant is bones.’ There is no doubt in my mind that by failing to use the accepted stratigraphical method of excavation he ruined more than one site.

Hrdlička’s ability to organize and lead three seasons of work in the Aleutian Islands resulted from his autocratic decision-making—his unchallengeable “father knows best” attitude—and this outweighed his lack of scientific rigor (Fig. 8). I have no doubt that, had he been in charge of a crew of “boys,” May *himself* would have done a better job of conducting an archaeological program in the Aleutians than did Hrdlička. That for his Aleutian expeditions Hrdlička sought the field assistance, with the exception of May, of crews who lacked substantial archaeological experience and, hence, were not likely to challenge his authority is consistent with his lifelong pattern of preferring to work alone (Street 1994:10).

His criticisms aside, however, May certainly liked Hrdlička, and he catered to him with only occasional outward complaint. This was especially clear during the third field season, 1938, when May noticed that Hrdlička’s physical condition had deteriorated over the previous year. One night (9 June 1938) on board ship while anchored off Kanaga Island, Hrdlička accidentally dropped his notebook to the floor. As he picked it up for him, May saw a separate paper with “My Last Will and Testament” written in Hrdlička’s hand. “I do feel sorry for the Old Man, he has aged so much in the last twelve months,” May wrote. That night, Hrdlička’s failing health haunted May: he had a nightmare in which Hrdlička died while they were on Amchitka Island, and the crew did not know what to do with the body. It is obvious that, despite Hrdlička’s peculiarities, May truly felt affection for him (Fig. 9).

In his obituary for Hrdlička, who died in 1943 at age seventy-four, M. F. Ashley Montagu (1944:116) wrote: “Hrdlička was a kindly soul, and appeared much more formidable than he really was. . . . In some ways Hrdlička reminded one of a little boy, a shy little boy.” This perception was also noted by May, a portion of whose postscript offers a fitting end to this paper:

3 Preparation of May’s full diaries for publication is in progress.

“The Old Man” as we called him was, to say the least, an odd character, but in spite of all his strange idiosyncrasies I sincerely liked the old chap.

The Old Man was a hard man to work for. It was rarely he ever gave a word of commendation and just saying Thank You appeared to be an effort for him.

Actually he was an enigma, totally incomprehensible, for he was egotistical, imperious, domineering, arrogant and selfish while he also had many child-like qualities. Despite all this I learned to like the old chap though of course there were times when I detested him. Oftimes his manners were atrocious though he knew better. When the occasion warranted it he could turn on the charm like a faucet, and when he wanted he could indeed be most charming.... Yes, I liked him, admired his erudition, even though he was quite impossible most of the time.



Figure 9. Hrdlička (left) and May share a laugh in 1938 (photograph courtesy of Paul Guggenheim).



Figure 8. Hrdlička lectures to his crew and others aboard the Ariadne, 1938 (University of Alaska Anchorage Archives, Alan May Collection, Photograph 16b).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My gratitude goes to Drs. Paul Gebhard and Paul Guggenheim, who traveled with Hrdlička to the Aleutians, for making their personal records and photographs available to me. I also thank Michael Yarborough and Steven Street, who kindly provided helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper, and Lois Spees, who assisted me in the preparation of May's diaries.

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