

# RETURN WITH A SHARING: COMING HOME TO THE KUSKOKWIM

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## BACKGROUND

Repatriation issues have presented difficulties for scientific institutions in recent years. Below, we discuss a repatriation case involving the remains of a woman that were removed from Crooked Creek, Alaska, by Aleš Hrdlička in 1930. Repatriation is the process by which museums and other institutions transfer possession and control of Native American, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian human remains, funerary objects, objects of cultural patrimony and sacred objects back to the tribes of origin (NMNH 2009). Despite the fact that different cultures treat human remains differently, and knowing that the inevitable bureaucratic hassles are going to be encountered, it is gratifying to know that progress is being made. The National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) staff of the Smithsonian Institution treated the authors fairly and reacted sensitively to a situation that might otherwise have been uncomfortable. The museum's Repatriation Office appears to have seized the opportunity to bring the interests of science and the Native community together as hoped fifteen years ago:

For all the controversy that surrounds repatriation in general, there still remains a need for increased communication between and sensitivity towards the different parties affected. There exists a unique opportunity to create a common ground of understanding, one that hopefully will be the ultimate legacy of repatriation at the Smithsonian and in the Nation as a whole (Zeder 1994:171).

We also acknowledge a simple suggestion Gordon Pullar made to the Larsen Bay Tribal Council in 1986 after learning of the simmering local resentment over Aleš Hrdlička's collection of human remains from Kodiak Island:

As I listened to the stories of Hrdlička's activities, my naïve response was to ask if a request had ever been made to the Smithsonian to return the skeletons and artifacts....I could not imagine at that time the chain of events that this request would generate (Pullar 1994:18).

The repatriation described in this paper means that the chain of events Pullar's words generated is still playing out. We acknowledge those who have supported this repatriation, which involved the remains of one woman. We trust that the words spoken to the woman on March 19, 2009, during the re-interment made their way across to her, along with the sharing, and brought her peace and rest.

## STALKING HRDLIČKA

Everywhere and at all times [Hrdlička] indulged in his absorbing passion for collecting knowledge and potential new data in the form of specimens. To the very last of his field-trips he derived the keenest happiness from every new skull which he could carry back to his boat to be added to the thousands of others he had already amassed at home (Schultz 1944:314).

Much of my [CW] familiarity with the life and work of Aleš Hrdlička comes from visiting places he investigated in his scientific quest to understand the human physiology of race. Known as the “father of physical anthropology” (NAA 1996:4), he was one of the first to propose that Native Americans had their genetic origins across the Bering Strait in Asia (i.e., Hrdlička 1912). In an effort to prove his theory, he observed, measured, excavated and collected his way across Alaska between 1926 and 1938.

I initially encountered Hrdlička’s long reach near the Chukchi Sea while working for the North Slope Borough’s Inupiat History, Language and Culture Commission (IHLC). IHLC and the elders reinterred human remains that I salvaged on their behalf from an eroding site along Nunavak lagoon south of Barrow. The site was originally disturbed and collections made of human remains there in the early 1920s, with Hrdlička’s input (Wooley 1989). Over the years I have visited dozens of archaeological sites in Alaska—on the North Slope, in the Kodiak Archipelago, on the Alaska Peninsula, in the Aleutian Islands and along the Kuskokwim River—that Hrdlička initially described and where he often collected “specimens.”

It can be a challenge to show up in a rural Alaskan village where Hrdlička was the first anthropologist to do fieldwork. He made a lasting first impression. In the Aleutians he was “Dead Man’s Daddy” (Starn 2004:180); around Kodiak people knew him as “Hard Liquor” (Harper 1986:91); at Crooked Creek he was “the Skull Doctor” and local boogeyman. Almost everywhere I’ve done fieldwork in Alaska, Aleš Hrdlička was there first—and he has not been forgotten. Even among anthropologists he continues to be known for his “Prussian arrogance” and his “gruff and belligerent manner of dealing with native peoples” (Fitzhugh 1994:viii).

Local suspicion of outsiders is a fact of rural Alaskan life. A heightened level of suspicion of archaeologists is partly based on a community’s past experience with collectors like Hrdlička whose accessioning ends justified their means. While we can’t judge early twentieth-century mores by using twenty-first-century principles, the legacy of those initial investigations can’t be escaped or ignored. I’ve felt their impact firsthand. More than once, after being introduced as an archaeologist to a local tribal member, I’ve been asked, only partly in jest, something like “So, are you here to steal our bones?” Such comments are wry reminders that I was following in the footsteps of an archaeologist who had treated Alaska Natives as second-class citizens.

The comments also caused me to reflect that just a short time ago leading scientists thought that Euro-American Caucasians were the pinnacle of evolution, the template against which so-called lesser members of the human race should be judged. Having myself been the “minority” while living in inner-city Cincinnati, British Columbia Indian reserves, and the Inupiaq community in Barrow, I knew the fallacy of those views. Human worth cannot be measured by skull type and skin color, but just a couple of generations ago many believed otherwise.

In the early 1980s, before I worked in Alaska, I did my master’s research on the west coast of Vancouver Island, British Columbia. At that time, repatriating traditional cultural property, including ceremonial dance regalia from Canadian museums, to their First Nation descendants was accepted by the Canadian anthropologists with whom I worked. However, when I began my professional career in Alaska in the mid-1980s, repatriation was more controversial. U.S. researchers seemed to be having a difficult time adjusting to the prospect of returning collections compared to our Canadian colleagues (see, e.g., Bray and Killion 1994).

The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) was passed in 1990 and formalized the repatriation process.<sup>1</sup> Among other things, it guides the process of how to treat human remains that might be encountered on certain cultural resource management projects. A single law didn’t instantly bring into balance the often competing interests between Natives and non-Natives, or between studying the past and addressing present needs. However a positive result of NAGPRA has been the respect that contemporary tribal rights and Native corporation interests are given in environmental impact statement (EIS)-mandated resource management work. Although indigenous people and western scientists can have different worldviews, NAGPRA, and other similar legislation, has helped foster a climate of mutual respect.

This paper is not about NAGPRA, or even about Aleš Hrdlička. Hrdlička put his version of the story into print in his *Alaska Diary* (Hrdlička 1943). Our current story is of a successful repatriation of human remains that Hrdlička took from Crooked Creek on the Kuskokwim River in 1930. The woman’s remains were given back by the Smithsonian and she was reinterred by the Crooked Creek Traditional Council (CCTC) on March 23, 2009. We present and examine the local version of events—the

oral tradition in which “the Skull Doctor” is still depicted as the boogeyman, and describe how Yup’ik and Athabaskan worldviews continue to structure life along the Middle Kuskokwim River.

### THE SKULL DOCTOR OF CROOKED CREEK

While working on archaeological surveys of the Donlin Creek Mine in 2006,<sup>2</sup> Wooley had the opportunity to discuss with local tribal council representatives, including Evelyn Thomas of the Crooked Creek Traditional Council, the process of conducting archaeological survey of the project area. One of many important issues to address before doing archaeology in Alaska is how to treat human remains that might be encountered—either through archaeological survey and testing or inadvertently during other project activities.<sup>3</sup>

In corresponding with Evelyn in January 2007 about human remains protocols and other issues, Wooley asked if the council had been contacted by any museums that may have had human remains from their village. He had assumed the tribal council would have been contacted by whatever institution held the remains. Wooley had recently re-read Hrdlička’s *Alaska Diary* (Hrdlička 1943) and recalled a reference to Hrdlička taking remains from Crooked Creek:

June 30. Late last night opened an old grave on a trader’s place, but the bones lay frozen in hard ice, so I had to leave everything (Hrdlička 1943:323).

July 3. After noon arrive at Parents, Crooked Creek, examine some sick, and take out the frozen-in skeleton I had to leave here before. Even now however must use kettlefuls of hot water, carried from the few rods distant house, to loosen the bones. A female, skull fine type, small parts still in ice (Hrdlička 1943:328).

Evelyn and her husband, Dennis Thomas, and their family live at the actual site (Parent’s Trading Post) from which the remains were taken (Fig. 1). Sam Parent, who ran the trading post, was Evelyn’s father. The trading post may have originally been the site of a fall caribou hunting camp. According to Zagoskin (1967:265), who explored the area in 1844, a summer camp [named Kvikhchagpak] was located at the mouth of Crooked Creek [i.e., the Kvikhchagpak or Khottylno] and was occupied by people from Kwigiumpainukamiut, a village near Kolmakovskiy Redoubt. It’s unclear where this camp was relative to

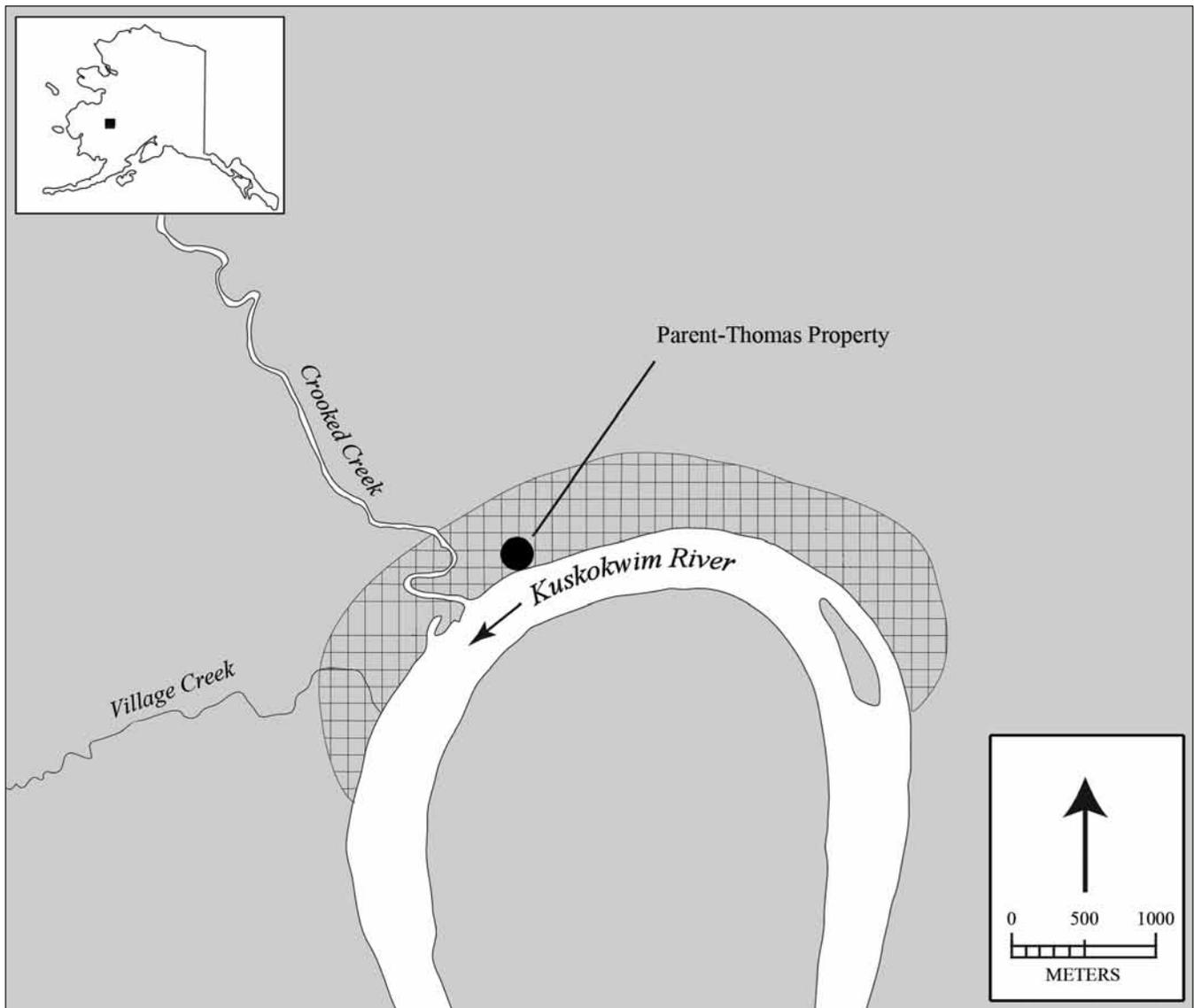
Crooked Creek, though cultural materials eroding from an early historic Native site upriver from the mouth of the creek, which were noted by Hrdlička (1943:328) may represent the summer camp that Zagoskin observed (Williams and Slayton 2006:14).

In subsequent phone discussions, Evelyn described the local oral tradition about Hrdlička’s 1930 visit, and also talked passionately about how he had caused the woman’s suffering in the afterlife, and what that implied for the local community. Wooley had seen an index of audiotaped elder interviews from the 1980s on file at the National Park Service that mentioned a visit from “the Skull Doctor”—presumably a taped version of the oral account that Evelyn related to Wooley in phone conversations. Evelyn was very concerned that the remains had been taken over local objections, that they were possibly in the NMNH, and that the woman’s spirit was not at rest. She expressed great interest in having the remains returned in order to set things right.

Wooley wrote to David Hunt, the manager of the physical anthropology collections at the NMNH, who searched their records and found that the remains Hrdlička had collected from Crooked Creek were still in the Smithsonian collection (cat. no. P351322). According to Hunt, Hrdlička collected one set of human remains that included a cranium, mandible, and some post-cranial elements; he determined that the remains were those of a female. Dr. Hunt determined the likely age of the remains based on prior examination by Smithsonian physical anthropologists and noted in an e-mail: “The sites that were excavated were considered to be “modern” or late period by both Hrdlička as well as by Henry Collins in his assessment in the 1960s.”

Wooley realized that repatriating the remains was the proper thing to do, and discussed the issue with Nick Enos and Stan Foo of Barrick (now Donlin Gold) during a July 2007 project planning meeting. They supported Wooley’s proposal to help the Crooked Creek Traditional Council work with the Smithsonian to get the remains of the woman returned to Crooked Creek so they could be reinterred.

The NMNH Repatriation Office started a process of scientific documentation of the human remains once the CCTC requested their assistance. A Smithsonian tribal travel grant funded two CCTC representatives—Evelyn and Dennis Thomas—to go to Washington and bring back the remains. Barrick supported Wooley’s continued assistance with the logistics of the repatriation as well



*Figure 1. Map showing location of trading post. Cross-hatching indicates approximate extent of the modern community of Crooked Creek.*

as research into pertinent portions of Hrdlička’s collections, field notes and photographs on file at the National Anthropological Archives facility in Suitland, Maryland.

In September 2007, Wooley helped Evelyn Thomas draft a repatriation request to Dorothy Lippert of the Smithsonian Repatriation Office. Evelyn discussed with the family and the tribal council the possibility of having DNA analysis of the remains done to try and determine if the woman was a family member, since she could have been Evelyn’s great-aunt or great grandmother. While members of the CTCC were upset that the remains had been removed originally, they did not object to Evelyn’s suggestion that DNA analysis be conducted.<sup>4</sup> The unanimous decision of the council was to request that the in-

dividual’s remains be returned to the family cemetery at Crooked Creek.

Evelyn submitted the formal request from the CCTC in November 2007 and heard back from the Smithsonian in 2008 that it was under consideration. The NMNH staff examined and analyzed the remains and decided to repatriate them. The requisite notice in the Federal Register occurred, a travel grant was made to the CCTC, and in March 2009 Wooley accompanied Evelyn and Dennis Thomas on a trip from Alaska to Washington, DC, where the remains were officially turned over to CCTC. The remains were reinterred in the Crooked Creek cemetery on March 19, 2009, with a Russian Orthodox ceremony led by David John.

In my opinion, there is a real possibility that the remains Hrdlička collected at Crooked Creek were from a mid-nineteenth-century Russian Orthodox burial. As it turns out, there was some green staining on one of the thoracic vertebrae. In an e-mail to Wooley from September 2008, Dorothy Lippert noted that the stain was consistent with a single metal object placed on the chest:

Since it's such a small spot and very localized, I'm thinking that it's from a single metal object that would have been placed on the chest. Possibly from a small ornament of some kind. When I used XRF spectroscopy to examine the green stain, I got a reading that's high in zinc, but less so in copper.

When I discussed this issue with physical anthropologist Joan Dale of the Alaska Office of History and Archaeology, she almost immediately recognized the stain as the imprint that a Russian Orthodox cross would have left. Donna Redding-Gubitosa (1992:111) described the impact of Russian Orthodoxy in the region by the 1850s and specifically at the Kwigiumpainukamiut site, downstream from Crooked Creek and across the river from Kolmakovsky Redoubt. Artifacts from the site included locally made molds used for making small Orthodox and Christian crosses, indicating the extensive use of these religious symbols in everyday life during the mid-1800s.

The anthropological aspects of this repatriation have been an interesting exercise in how the discipline of Alaska anthropology has evolved over the past century. The most rewarding aspect of the entire process has been getting to know Evelyn and Dennis Thomas and their large extended family, other residents of Crooked Creek, and members of the Smithsonian repatriation staff. It is also satisfying to know that the return and reburial of the unknown woman's remains have put things back in order for Evelyn and the Crooked Creek community.

## MY RELATIVES AND OUR RELATIONS

The woman originally taken from Crooked Creek is potentially—I [ET] would say very likely—a direct family relative of mine. She was probably related to my family on my father's side. Being buried on our land in historic times demonstrates a close cultural affiliation. I know the location of the original site. There is some sheet iron around there now.

The location where Hrdlička dug was a well-used site long before my grandfather started the trading post, as evidenced by Zagoskin's 1844 account of a summer

camp there (e.g., Zagoskin 1967). There is archaeological evidence of use and occupation of this location dating to about AD 1600 from an excavation of an adjacent site (SLT-088) (Williams and Slayton 2006). We also know through my family's oral history that this place was used for quite some time.

My father was Sam Parent, who ran the trading post he inherited from my grandfather; my mother was the late Theresa (Morgan) Parent, who was born at Ohagamiut above Kalskag. My mother's mother was Mary Joe Peterson from Mountain Village. In my grandmother's time, they were digging—maybe a building or cellar—when the bones were exposed. It was left open, and Hrdlička waited until people were gone to collect the bones. He finished his trip up the Kuskokwim to Stony River, and stopped back in at Crooked Creek later in the summer when people were dispersed at fish camps. He made sure most people were gone so he could more easily collect the bones. The story is that he pushed my grandmother aside when she angrily tried to stop him. According to my late aunt, the woman whose bones were taken was a member of my paternal grandfather's family. My family is still tied to this land, and by virtue of my continued association with this land, I am tied to the bones of my ancestors.

After that experience my great aunt, Sophie Sakar, used to call Hrdlička “the skull doctor”—he was the local boogeyman. Kids were told to behave or else he'd come and take their heads. I remember being frightened at the thought. One time, not long afterwards, a white man came over to me and picked me up off the floor—he was the first outsider I had seen since hearing the Skull Doctor story. I was terrified because I thought for sure some recent misbehavior had been found out and that he was going to pack me away!

If, as I suspect, the woman was my relation through my paternal grandfather's family, she would have been Athabaskan—Ingalik or perhaps a Dena'ina speaker. My grandmother was Massa Effemka, who died of tuberculosis around 1938–1939. Massa's father, my great grandfather, was Essemka or “Big Whiskers”—we don't know his English name. Massa's sister was Sophie Sakar. Her Indian name was Timkook, meaning “walking on the sides of her shoes.” Apparently her mukluk bottoms were made such that it caused her to walk that way. Sophie, who died of tuberculosis in 1968, had taught me a lot about traditional ways and we were very close. I called her my “ulla,” an affectionate and respectful term in Yup'ik.

When I heard the woman's bones were in the Smithsonian, I suspected that the removal of her body might help explain some of what has happened in Crooked Creek. Her spirit was wandering and angry. I sometimes couldn't figure out why certain things had been happening the way they were, but in hindsight, this may help explain it. Some events had occurred in the community that led us to believe that the person's spirit was wandering and unsettled. These events are of a somewhat personal nature to the community, but in general they involved what could be described as paranormal experiences including vivid dreams of a white man with flowing white hair accompanied by a subdued Native woman with a hole in her cheek. That man came to me in some unsettling dreams and said he owned something of ours. A number of other disturbing events occurred in and near the trading post.

I left the village in 1963 and went to school in Anchorage and Copper Center. When I returned some ten years later, major changes were happening due to the passage of ANCSA (Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act) and other events. I couldn't quite understand what my role should be, and when I spoke to the elders and they told me in time I would know. Back then, I didn't know what I was looking for. Then I inherited the family home, and continue to feel a strong connection to family and the community. By doing this repatriation I'm trying to help make things right, as best I can. This has been a way to set something right.

Dorothy Lippert of the Smithsonian's Repatriation Office was very helpful and was committed, both as a professional and a Native American woman, to help with the return. She understood and would tell the woman she was coming home, and helped so much in many other ways. Dorothy let me know that if we could show the remains were of my direct ancestor, the case would be expedited. I couldn't help but say how ironic it was that Hrdlička didn't have any problem taking them away, but we had to jump through a bunch of hoops to get them back!

Chris Wooley helped explain it would take time, but after what I thought was plenty of time—over a year—I put in a call to Alaska Senator Ted Stevens' office. As it turned out, one of the last acts in his long career as an Alaska senator was to ask the director of the repatriation office, Bill Billeck, about the case's status, thereby helping set a high priority for the repatriation. So many people were helpful and I'm pleased that they rewarded our hope that she would be returned and come home.

When we came to Washington, DC, we brought small bits of earth, wood and pieces of local food that we burned in a short ceremony when I first got to be in the room with her. We call that *avugbuk*, which roughly translates as "a sharing." It was kind of like an offering—it was a way to communicate with her by letting her know that everything was going to be okay and that we were going to bring her home. The elders instructed us to do this, and it was the right thing to do. As we brought her back to Alaska, the box she was in kept getting lighter and lighter. We know that she is at peace now and the strange things that were happening in Crooked Creek have stopped. It was such a relief when we reburied her—and it still is.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## NOTES

1. For the museums that comprise the Smithsonian Institution, the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) Act, passed in 1989 and amended in 1996, governs repatriation. The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) directs repatriation for other U.S. institutions that receive federal funding (NMNH 2009).
2. Northern Land Use Research, Inc., and Chumis Cultural Resource Services have worked together on the Donlin Gold project since 2004, conducting cultural resource management for the project and community archaeology in Crooked Creek. Crooked

Creek is a village whose inhabitants are primarily of Central Yup'ik and Ingalik Athabaskan heritage.

3. No human remains have been identified in or near the proposed project area as of the end of the 2011 field activities.
4. Wooley contacted Dennis O'Rourke of the University of Utah, an expert at ancient DNA analysis and Alaska Native populations, who was willing to assist; however, in the end, DNA analysis was not conducted because of contamination concerns.

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