

Bones of contention

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For decades the remains of B.C.'s Haida ancestors have been locked away in metal drawers as specimens in museums around the world. Now, the Haida are fighting to bring them home, Alexandra Gill writes

SKIDEGATE, B.C. - Andy Wilson has spent the past seven years collecting some very special bones. Bones so precious they can't be kept here, in the main cemetery, overlooking the tiny town of Skidegate on the Queen Charlotte Islands.

The bones are buried in a sacred grove, somewhere in the spruce forest behind us, explains Wilson, the soft-spoken man who co-chairs the local committee responsible for bringing the human remains of his Haida ancestors back home.

"I can't take you there," says Wilson, staring out over the inlet at the lush mountains of Moresby Island. A sad shadow falls across his kindly face.

The Haida Repatriation Committee has retrieved more than 350 skeletal remains. Among the aboriginal groups involved in this groundswell now shaking up museum policies all over world, the mighty Haida of the Northwest Pacific has been one of the most successful.

The vast majority of their ancestral remains have come from the basement archives of four North American museums, where they were locked in sterile storage vaults, some for more than 100 years. A few lost bones have trickled in from private collectors. There are still hundreds more out there.

In October, a group of 30 community members will travel to Chicago, where officials from the Field Museum of Natural History will hand over 156 sets. For the Haida committee, it's the biggest load yet.

The remains -- some just partial fragments of skull and pieces of vertebrae, others complete skeletons -- will be wrapped in muslin, and packed with cedar shavings in blue plastic crates. After many public and private ceremonies, the crates will be flown to this mystic archipelago, 700 kilometres northwest of Vancouver.

Here in Skidegate, the fragile cargo will then be transferred to traditional bentwood cedar boxes. The 90 ancestors that hail from the south, plus 25 unidentified remains, are to be reburied next to the others, in a mass grave at the secret site behind the cemetery. The rest will go north to the town of Old Massett.

Wilson doesn't say why he can't bring a non-native to the burial site. Instead, he turns to the grave of the late Chief Tanu, and tries to explain by way of another story.

"It was 13 years ago," says Wilson, pulling his jacket tighter against a gust of salty air. Chief Tanu, Wilson's uncle, had taken his nephew out on a fishing trip.

"He said he'd heard some stories about me," Wilson continues, his voice low and lulling. "He said 'I know all about your drinking escapades and your womanizing. It's time for a change. You don't need that in your life anymore.' "

Did the young rebel listen? Wilson, now 50, looks up, squinting in mild astonishment.

"I haven't had a drink since that day. I didn't have any choice," he adds, shrugging. "He was a chief. I had to listen."

Respect. To the Haida, it's a notion as integral to their way of living as the sea is to the land, as important as the black raven cawing overhead is to their legend of creation.

Others might discuss the spiritual importance of repatriation. Museum heads debate the ethics involved, curators talk about building relationships, anthropologists rail against the loss to science and some elected leaders, in Britain especially, have turned the topic into a hot political potato.

But for Wilson, this exhausting quest to bring his ancestors home and put their souls to rest all boils down to respect.

"Those bodies never should have been taken away in the first place," he says. "It's time to give them back to the people who will look after them and respect them. This is about getting back what's rightfully ours. And for me, it's also about healing the hurt inside from all the things that have happened to us in the past.

"This is a way of saying we're still alive and we're still strong and we're here to get back our relatives."

It's Friday night and the Skidegate Community Hall is throbbing with the sound of drums beating and women singing. The air is thick with steam from vats of boiled crab. This is the third of several summer seafood feasts, intended to raise money for the trip to Chicago.

Nika Collison, Wilson's co-chair, estimates this one repatriation will cost \$100,000. The dinners, staffed and supplied by volunteers, have been a huge success with tourists. Eighty-five tickets were sold tonight, at \$35 each. At this rate, Collison figures they'll raise at least one-fifth of their budget through the feasts.

Robert, a visitor from Victoria who sailed to Skidegate from Prince Rupert this morning, laughs as a mangy dog in the doorway barks at the procession of dancers in their feathered masks and long ceremonial button blankets.

"You always see a lot of dogs on reserves," he chuckles.

Perhaps, but the Queen Charlottes Islands are not a native reserve. The Haida, who have lived here for at least 10,000 years, have not yet signed any treaties or formally relinquished control of their land. Last year, the Council of the Haida Nation filed an unprecedented lawsuit in the B.C. Supreme Court, claiming aboriginal title to all lands

in the Charlottes and the surrounding waters in the Hecate Strait, an area believed to contain billions of dollars worth of oil and gas reserves.

Guujaaw, the charismatic president of the Haida First Nation, says the claim is not about money -- it's about protecting the environment on this maze of misty isles known in their own language as Haida Gwaii, land of wonders.

This rugged archipelago of 1,884 islands boasts an ecosystem so unusual that scientists compare its importance to the Galapagos Islands off Ecuador. Archaeological evidence -- including the recent discovery of the bones of a 17,000-year-old black bear -- suggest some areas may even have been inhabited at the end of the last ice age.

In 1863, the Haida population was approximately 10,000 strong. By the end of the summer, it was nearly wiped out. According to a sailor's account, a European passenger on a ship to Victoria fell ill with smallpox. The captain ordered the diseased man ashore, even though he was well aware of the potential effect on the natives, who had no resistance.

The disease spread like wildfire. The shell-shocked survivors of Skung'gwaii, T'anuu, K'uuna and other villages around Moresby Island fled their ravaged ghost camps and banded together in Skidegate. In the north off Graham Island, they assembled at Old Massett. When the 1915 census was counted, there were only 588 Haida left.

It was these abandoned villages from which the human remains and cultural artifacts in the Chicago museum were excavated. The graves were looted during three field expeditions in 1897, 1901 and 1903, says Helen Robbins, the Field Museum's repatriation specialist.

At the time, bodysnatching was common among amateur adventurers and anthropologists, who thought they were collecting specimens of a dying race. The practice might have been condoned then, but they were also violating a central tenet of native faith -- the souls of the dead cannot rest in peace if their bones are not left in their homeland.

"There are lost spirits out there and they've asked me to help them," says Lucille Bell, co-chair of the Old Massett Repatriation Committee.

Nine years ago, Bell was working as an intern at the Royal British Columbia Museum in Victoria. One night, she was there late.

"It was very dark. I heard the echoes of children in the stairwell. I was surprised. I thought 'Who would bring their children to work so late at night?' The guard said I was the only person there. I later learned there was a child's skeleton among the remains. I believe the spirit of this child was giving me a message."

Back in the land of the living, Vic "Yellow Hawk" White swaggers out of the seafood feast to grab a smoke in the parking lot. White is a Native American from Arkansas, who now works in California for the Quaker Organization American Friends Service Committee. He's in Skidegate for a Circle of Elders conference.

White, who cuts quite a powerful figure in his mirrored sunglasses and leather hat, has been involved with several repatriations himself. He well understands the delicacy of the task.

"These spirits have already been laid to rest before they were disturbed," he intones, pulling a finger of tobacco from a fringed pouch hanging off his belt. "I don't have a clue whether they're happy or unhappy, but they were disturbed and you have to be careful."

Being careful means you can't just bring back the bones, he explains. You need to bring back the burial artifacts as well. "Maybe someone was buried with his favourite hat. It might be an important ceremonial item. We don't have all the ceremonies we used to have on this side. But on the other side, they still exist. And that spirit is going to want his hat.

"Yep," he says, blowing out his smoke. "You have to be careful. The people who do this are very, very strong."

In a large woodshed that smells as fresh as the forest, Guujaaw grunts and climbs right on top of a giant cedar pole, to lend some muscle to his chisel. The council president does his carving late at night, when he's not off fighting lawsuits, quietly terrorizing lumber companies, or dining with socialites from the Rockefeller Foundation in New York, which is exactly where he's headed the next day.

The members of the repatriation committee insist their work is not political. Guujaaw scoffs at the suggestion.

"Everything's political," he says, putting down his tools to wipe the sweat from his nose. "Even art is political."

Repatriation has raised its own set of debates within the community. Last year, the two town councils each held meetings to discuss the potential of conducting DNA tests on the ancestors' bones. The motion was overwhelmingly opposed, most vocally by the members of the repatriation committee, and the hereditary chiefs decided against it.

While genetic tests aren't needed for the title claim, Guujaaw says he supported the idea. "It would have been interesting to see how we fit in the world scheme of genetics. Everything's happening so fast."

Museums, however, are a bit more sluggish. In 1998, four years after repatriation process began, the Royal British Columbia Museum handed over a dozen sets of remains. The next year, the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology gave back its six skeletons. Three years ago, the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Ottawa gave up 148 sets of bones.

There are no laws requiring repatriation of artifacts or human remains from Canadian museums, although it was one of the three key issues identified in the 1992 Task Force Report on Museums and First Peoples.

In the United States, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act requires museums receiving federal funds to initiate the return of human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects and objects of cultural patrimony to federally recognized tribes, if requested. The law, however, does not extend to international remains.

The Chicago museum's decision to repatriate its Haida bones, which were never on display, makes it only one of three major U.S. museums to go beyond the law and return items to indigenous people from other countries. The other museums are the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C. (which has told the Haida they must get in line with the American groups), and the American Museum of Natural History in New York, which returned 48 sets of bones to the Haida last year.

"We didn't have to return these," says Jonathan Haas, the Chicago museum's field archaeologist. "But we're not interested in a fight over ownership. We are interested in doing the right thing."

Andy Wilson sits down with a sigh and takes a swig from his bottle of de-alcoholized beer. The dinner is over and the Legion in Queen Charlotte City is hopping with a live R&B band. Wilson, however, is exhausted and just stares blankly when asked if he sees repatriation as a springboard to politics.

"Uh-huh. Right." By day, this former plumber works as a cultural interpreter. He staffs the canoe shed, next to the Haida Gwaii Museum in Skidegate, greeting visitors who come to see the cedar canoe Bill Reid carved for Expo '86. At the moment, he's also frantically trying to finish making the bentwood boxes in time for trip to Chicago. He has 50 more to go, and they each take several days to cut, steam, bend and paint.

Wilson was ready to call it quits after last year's trip to New York. Some old injuries were acting up. And then an MRI revealed polyps in his stomach. It took two surgeries to remove them. There were more aches and pains, and a problem with some prescription drugs.

"You get pretty burnt out doing this," says Wilson.

Sure, there are benefits to being an unpaid volunteer on the committee. Wilson's been able to travel, and get a first-hand look at some impressive collections in the back rooms of museums. On the return trip from Ottawa, he met his future wife on the ferry. They now have an eight-month old daughter.

But it's the emotional toll that really drains him.

"I feel very sad that we have to do this. And when we're at the museums, we go straight from the transfer room into meetings and interviews. It's hard to hold back the tears." After New York, Wilson took six months off. But when the committee asked him to return, he did.

"Like a lot of people said, if you start something, you've got to finish it. I thought I'd be able to go fishing and traveling," he laughs. "But that's all right. There's time down the road."

The next leg of this journey is going to get a whole lot tougher. After all their ancestors are returned from the U.S., the committee members will turn their focus to Europe and the U.K.

Earlier this year, Collison and her cousin Vince, the other co-chair of the Old Massett committee, had a meeting with officials at the British Museum, which "might" have a skull from Haida Gwaii in its collection.

Collison expected the Brits to be a bit standoffish and stuffy. She was delightfully surprised by their warm reception. They would not, however, talk about the skull's return.

"They wouldn't discuss repatriation, but they did meet with us," says Collison. "It's progress."

Collison's enthusiasm might be premature. There are bigger political wheels in motion that threaten to stomp all over this tiny step forward. Last year, the directors of 30 of the world's leading galleries and museums, including the British Museum, issued a landmark declaration opposing the wholesale repatriation of cultural artifacts to governments or descendants of original owners in other countries, seized during imperial rule or by means now considered unethical.

"The universal admiration for ancient civilizations would not be so deeply established today were it not for the influence exercised by the artifacts of these cultures, widely available to an international public in major museums," states the Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums.

Nancy Hushion, a cultural-management consultant from Toronto and former president of the Canadian Museum Association, was at the ICOM conference in Paris when the Declaration was presented.

"The majority of people there felt it was arrogant and extremely aggressive," she recalls.

The delegates might have been taken aback, but there was only one museum director at the conference willing to condemn the declaration.

"Nobody in the museum fraternity wants to talk about it," says George Abungu, the former director of the National Museums of Kenya and the lone voice of dissent.

"It is a delicate issue that involves very well-established museums with a lot of funding," he explains in an e-mail correspondence.

This declaratory bone of contention might have a chilling effect on efforts to reclaim the Haida's ancestors, but there are other skeletons in this closet. The declaration was

prompted by increased pressure on the British Museum to return the Parthenon Marbles to the Greek government in time for the 2004 Olympic Games.

To further complicate matters, a long-awaited report on the repatriation of human remains will be presented to the British Government this fall. The working group is said to be sympathetic to human-repatriation claims. But member Maurice Davies, the deputy director of Britain's Museums Association, recently told the Sydney Morning Herald that bureaucrats within the Blair government have warned them "against recommending law reforms that might indirectly assist the Greeks."

The bone keepers have been sounding alarms as well.

"There is enormous interest in human evolution; huge interest in how modern humans came out of Africa and spread across the world," says Robert Foley, an anthropologist from the Leverhulme Centre for Human Evolutionary Studies at Cambridge University. "These bones help us understand that.

"These collections are central to what we do. If we have to hand some of this material over, it will be tragic."

Collison isn't out to deplete the world of its Haida culture. But when it comes to her ancestors, the arguments don't sway her.

"It all just comes down to curiosity," she says, curling up on the leopard-print chaise in her cozy living room, where modern furnishings mingle comfortably with traditional Haida paintings with cedar sculptures.

"I think it's okay to keep a few secrets and have a few mysteries. I think we know where we come from. We don't need science to tell us."

Well, there are a few mysteries she doesn't mind unravelling.

"Books on the Haida all talk about our high art forms, but what really matters to me is that our people know how highly developed we were before contact. We had sandpaper and glue and all sorts of things you don't even think about. Personally, I think we should have at least one example of each piece. We need that knowledge too."

The ancestors are still the committee's first priority. But after all the bones are back in Haida soil, they plan to go after cultural materials, beginning with the Royal British Columbia museum, which has more than 200,000 Haida artifacts.

"We're looking at repatriating 50 per cent, to start off negotiations," says Collison, sounding every inch the savvy politician. Only 32, she has plenty of fight in her.

She laughs at her own tenacity. "It shouldn't be a political issue, but it is. It's political because we have to build trust and relationships with museums. We really do see the benefit of working with them, not warring with them."

The committee is not, however, out to change any laws. Collison says they will work with museums on a case-by-case basis. "We want them to want to give our ancestors back. We want them to 'get it.' "

Collison believes you can tell a lot about how the rest of the world values another nation by the way they treat their dead. "Most people would not dig up their ancestors and put them in a metal drawer. Those people didn't think we were human. The rest of the world is finally starting to treat us the way they would treat their own. And if they're going to respect us as a nation, they have to respect the way we treat our deceased.

"We do not treat our ancestors like tourist attractions. It's just not cool to say 'Hey, come see our dead.' You can do that with Jim Morrison, but not us. We're Haida."