

The police had a body, or at least what was left of one. It was too late to determine easily the race, the age, even the sex of what had once been a human being. So they did what many before them had done: They took it to the American Museum of Natural History.

Waiting for them there was Dr. Harry L. Shapiro, prepared once again to make anthropology work for law enforcement. Dr. Shapiro is 80 years old now, though still gangly as an adolescent, and while over the decades others have learned the skill that is called forensic anthropology, he is considered the dean of this art of telling all from a piece of bone, a skull, the curve of the pelvic cage.

There are differences in the bones of male and female, of short and tall, of young and old, and Dr. Shapiro is adept at reading these differences. This is not his work, exactly, but he has felt the thrill of it because of a deep interest in the remains of old bones and those who will never make old bones themselves.

So down the long hallway, past entomology and mammalogy, the police come, bearing remains. If ever a man worked in an ivory tower, it is Dr. Shapiro, whose sunny corner office in the museum is filled with papers and books and ceremonial masks and a bust of Peking man that the anthropologist thinks bears a marked resemblance

About New York

The Art of Drawing Meaning From Mute Bones

By ANNA QUINDLEN

In those circles where people talk anthropology, he is known for his work on racial characteristics and inbreeding, for his classic study of the natives of Pitcairn Island — the descendants of the men who mutinied on the *Bounty* and their Polynesian wives. In those circles where people talk murder, he is known for his ability to take a handful of bone fragments and turn them into a victim.

He has made 15 trips to the Polynesian islands for anthropological study — “Oh, I’m very fond of the Polynesians,” he says warmly — and dozens of appearances in court, in murder and paternity cases.

He has been responsible both for the Hall of the Biology of Man at the museum and the identification of the remains of thousands of American soldiers at the end of World War II. When a self-styled bishop in Brooklyn was accused of murdering two young sisters and burning their bodies, it was Dr. Shapiro who scrutinized pieces of bone not much bigger than postage stamps and decreed that there were the remains of two people there, that both were female and that both were young

and pelvis of a body discovered in a dumpster in Freeport.

Dr. Shapiro examined the remains, the telltale sutures of the cranium, the third molars and the pubic synthesis, and pronounced judgment: female, white, late teens, dead perhaps six months.

“Some years ago I had a very similar case,” he said. “They found this skeleton in some bushes behind the stadium up in the Bronx. The Medical Examiner called me, and I looked at it for him. It was female, around 26, I thought. I estimated that the body had probably been exposed for about a year. They hadn’t told me this, but apparently when they found the body they also found a wide belt with a large buckle. And they took that to the home of a missing young woman about the right age, who had been missing about that length of time, and when her sisters saw it they just screamed. It was hers. So I was pleased to know I had been correct.”

Dr. Shapiro has also practiced

nese, 25 years before. “I thought, now what if she walks in and I was wrong?” said Dr. Shapiro. “And, my God, she walked in and she was exactly what I said she was.”

At one time he was seeing as many as five children a week so the agencies could put them up for adoption.

“I had one extraordinary case which gave me the power, which I never expected to have, to alter someone’s birth certificate,” he said. An English woman had married a black American soldier during World War II. When they were finally reunited, she was pregnant by another man, expecting a child she agreed to give up for adoption.

When she and her husband arrived at the hospital for delivery, the nurse behind the desk wrote on the baby’s birth certificate, “Race: Negro.” “The baby was a blond, blue-eyed boy,” Dr. Shapiro said. “The agency came to me for my opinion, and I told them they must change the birth certificate from black to white.”

He does not see many babies anymore, and the days are long gone when he met with war refugees to try to find physical characteristics that might prove their identities. But the system that Dr. Shapiro set up to identify unknown war dead has been used ever since, and when remains of a body are found that cannot be readily identified, it is

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But the chairman emeritus of the anthropology department at the museum and professor emeritus of the discipline at Columbia University has managed to achieve an easy balance between the academic and the everyday.

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Last week, a man called him from Peoria, Ill., asking about a tribe of Filipino natives, a young woman whose racial lineage he had determined when she was an abandoned baby asked if she could stop by, and a detective from Nassau County visited him with the skull

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Dr. Shapiro has also practiced upon the living, and these are the stories that give him greatest pleasure. For many years, babies abandoned on the streets of New York City were brought to him by charitable agencies because he was an expert in racial mixtures.

The young woman who came to see Dr. Shapiro the other day he had adjudged Oriental, probably Chi-

more, and the days are long gone when he met with war refugees to try to find physical characteristics that might prove their identities. But the system that Dr. Shapiro set up to identify unknown war dead has been used ever since, and when remains of a body are found that cannot be readily identified, it is still Dr. Shapiro whom many police officers and medical examiners think of first.

"They forget that I'm retired," he said. "The amount of time this has taken has been incredible, and there are many other things to do. But this does have a certain fascination."