

STORY OF INDIAN BONES

by Gene DeSmidt

Easter time at Tassajara. Early in the afternoon of April 6, I had Bill Steele out at the flats on his John Deere 310 digging up top soil for landscaping in front of the new baths. He had just delivered a scoopful in a ditch and guess what rolled out onto the ground—a human skull! Nobody could believe it. We all stopped work, and I had a meeting with the director. Could this have been a murder victim from the 50s? A lot of garbage was mixed in with the bones. Could this be a lost hiker who died, or could this be an Esselen Indian? What should we do?

Well . . . Teah called the sheriff at about 3:30—left a message and tried to call his car phone. I finally talked to Allan (the sheriff) at 7 that night and described the remains that we had boxed up. He said he would drive in the next day at about 11 A.M.

At about 11:30 A.M. on Thursday, a parade of vehicles swept into Tassajara—the sheriff, county coroner, the homicide division, archeologists, as well as the news media. When I went down to the baths, cars and cameras were gathered and the bones were spread out on the tailgate of a truck.

After many interviews, the sheriff/coroner took the box of bones into their truck. The next day the bones were taken to UC Santa Cruz, where a woman named

Allison Galloway works—she is a renowned forensic anthropologist who determines the age and disposition of skeletal remains.

Well . . . I got a call on Saturday at about 11 from the sheriff, and he said that Allison had determined that the bones were definitely Native American, and that they were probably over 150 years old. The teeth were flattened from eating acorns, and the thickness and texture of the bone indicated that this was an Esselen Indian, a male 25–30. So the sheriff told me he would call the Native American Heritage Society.

Since the phone at Tassajara is so difficult, it was convenient to have all information directed through my office answering service. On Monday the 11th I received a call from the Native American Heritage Society. Debbie Treadway, who said that according to lineage and descendant records the person most closely related to the Indian remains was a woman named Loretta Oscobar Wyer, a member of the Esselen tribe. I spoke with Loretta that afternoon, and she agreed to come into Tassajara the next day.

Well . . . At about 3:30 P.M. on Tuesday the 12th Loretta Wyer and her sister-in-law Ann Comilos arrived at Tassajara. They had just been at a hearing in Moss Landing concerning another set of remains on a commercial building site, and they both seemed stressed out and a bit wary. Bill Steele, Barbara Kohn and myself met with them at the site where the bones were unearthed. They found another bone there as we were talking. When we took a walk up to Suzuki Roshi's grave and over to the waterfall, she noticed the grave posts and rock markings.

We walked back down to the site and talked a little about what to do with the bones—whether the Esselen tribe wanted a private ceremony or could Tassajara be included. Also whether or not the site should be marked.

We decided to walk down to the lower barn to the painting of the Indian legend of how the Tassajara hot spring started. These two women got a kick out of the artist's rendering of feather head dresses, loin cloths, and body shapes. They also disagreed about what each of their elders said about the hot springs issuing forth from the maiden's hot tears or hot blood. Loretta said that her grandfather told her many stories.

Well . . . As we were walking back by the yurts, Loretta noticed something very large over in the garden 50 feet from us. Suddenly a huge golden eagle with a rabbit in its claws began to fly off as if startled. It dropped the rabbit and flew directly in front of us turning toward the east. Its wingspan was well over five feet. We all looked at each other, compared goosebumps, and stared in disbelief. Did this really happen?

Then, to really ice the cake, as we were walking to the front gate I noticed in the sky a cloud formation that perfectly resembled a skeleton with ribs. Loretta spoke in awe about how she had been having dreams about dinosaurs and skeletons, and that this sky was amazing. They left Tassajara to go back to Santa Clara.

I got a call on Thursday the 14th that Loretta was getting the remains back early Sunday morning from the UCSC. She wanted to find a way to get them back to Tassajara right away. We met Sunday at 9 A.M. at River Rock Cafe in Carmel Valley. After discussing some NAHS paperwork and some additional dreams she'd been having, we surreptitiously sequestered the skeletal "bone box" from her trunk to mine, and I took off for Tassajara. She had an Esselen tribal council meeting that afternoon to discuss the whole issue of reburial.

Well . . . On Wednesday April 20 I spoke on the phone with Loretta. She said that the tribal council, after hearing Loretta's testimony and a description of the community, decided that the people of Tassajara were of "good heart" and the remains should be reburied there with the Esselen people sharing a ceremony with them.

Well . . . Toady, an Esselen raised in Monterey, arrived at Tassajara on April 27 in the afternoon with his half-blind dog. He had just driven down from Washington state. I had been told by Loretta that they hoped he could carve a totem for the reburial, so I offered an 8" x 8" x 16' piece of old red cedar as a gift. He had no tools and no real carving experience, but he had an incredible open-eyed and disarming demeanor. Toady wandered about Tassajara for three days and found a reburial site up on the overlook trail. At the third switchback there is an outcropping of granite rocks that looked like they were piled up by nature. They are surrounded by seven blooming yucca stalks, all about ten feet high. Just to the north is a flattened knoll protected by three oak trees. From this spot you can see the place where the bones were unearthed as well as all around Tassajara.

Before Toady left Tassajara he left a shopping bag of things he picked up as he wandered through the hills—cedar bark, stones, a shell, feathers, leaves and river sand. He left a note entrusting me to make sure these things went into the grave.

Well . . . Not forgetting that the No Race was scheduled for May 14, I was involved in a push to complete the bathhouse, but I also wanted this discovery of the skeleton to be handled properly. With California Native American Heritage law, a complete shutdown of the job site would not have been unusual! But good fortune, good nature and a genuine spiritual connection made it possible for a simple reburial to take place on May 15.

Early Sunday morning (May 15) Loretta arrived with Charlene, the Wintu shaman. Charlene was about five feet tall, with raven black hair down to her

knees, a cigarette in her mouth and a smile on her face. She walked up to the reburial site and just sat alone for several hours. I and two Esselen men walked up the mountain with Loretta at about 11 A.M. and found the spot to dig the grave—about four feet deep and about three feet in diameter. The Esselens asked that no cameras be present. At about 1:45 P.M. a small party of tribal members (approximately twelve) assembled at the site with perhaps ten people from Tassajara including myself, my two daughters and Teah the director.

Charlene asked everyone to remove all metal objects from their person and to line up to be smudged before entering the circle around the grave. Charlene first “washed” each person with a smoking root from sunflower. Then Wolf (her assistant) “washed” each person with smoke from local sage. We all then formed a circle around the burial hold.

Charlene stood on the inside of the circle facing east. There seemed to be a somber and sad demeanor to the Esselen people. Charlene looked at everyone and said that as she had been sitting alone here, she had seen and heard many happy spirits moving about. That this was a magic place. And that only joy and positive feelings should leave with the people who were here. She had a Buddha-like presence.

Pulling out a small plastic ziplock bag containing some mustard-colored ochre from a sacred spot in Northern California, she walked in front of us pouring a continuous circular line around the grave. She asked that we all move forward to stand on this line, then that we hold hands and form a closed circle.

Well . . . We all stood in silence for perhaps three to four minutes. Then the bag of things that Toady had left was opened. Feathers, shells, leaves, bark and other things were placed on the bottom to line the grave. The lower extremity bones were carefully placed and then the upper body parts. Finally the skull was placed on top of this. (The Esselen used to bury people in an upright sitting position.) Some sand that Toady had found on the river bank was sifted over the top.

Charlene asked everyone to place a handful of dirt over the remains. After this Loretta asked everyone to leave except the family so that they could seal the grave and stack rocks up. A carved totem will be placed here in a year.

Wednesday May 18 just about dusk. I was sitting at the coffee/tea area at Tassajara, relaxing. As I looked into the northern sky beyond the zendo, I noticed a large silhouette. Sure enough, circling and gliding overhead was a magnificent golden eagle. Eight to ten people stood staring up as this great bird disappeared southwest directly over the grave site!