

Jarilla Man

DNA from a human skull found in the Jarilla Mountains matched that of a femur found more than thirty miles away near El Paso. Charlie Enis rested his head on his hand and stared at the computer screen in disbelief. He rechecked the details of work by the student who did the analysis. There was no error. The skull and femur were from the same person with a probability exceeding 99.99%. His mind filling with questions, Charlie made his screen flash through additional passwords to access a reference database.

The database revealed a Cox Ranch cowboy found the skull in a little canyon close to Monte Carlo Pass in 1924. Visual analysis suggested it was twenty or thirty years old at that time. The femur emerged from the sand at Boat Rock during Ft. Bliss military maneuvers in 1975. Subsequent searches found no more bones. Several photographs and background notes in the new database system, part of a major study in the New Mexico State University Department of Sociology and Anthropology, indicated nothing extraordinary about the bone locations. They were in rarely traveled desert. Glancing at his Ironman Timex, he grimaced. He was late. Logging off his computer and practically sprinting out of his office, he headed down the hall for a University Avenue Exit.

Charlie met Harry Lee Whitehorse every Thursday at the Hacienda for a green chile fix and to compare notes on university gossip. After a ten-minute walk, Charlie scanned tables in the Hacienda's cool twilight and found Harry holding up his hand at a window table to get his attention.

Harry's bright white teeth stood out against his brown skin in a big grin as he nodded and said, "Hey Charlie P-Enis! What's happening man? You look like General Crook when Geronimo surrounded his division."

Charlie swung his hand parallel to the floor. "I'm OK. Except, I wish my middle name wasn't Patrick! What would you call me if it wasn't?"

Harry shrugged. "Lone Ranger? Don't take it so personal man. You're just too much fun to tease with a name like that. Sit down and tell me your woes." A Mescalero Apache, Harry had produced some of the most acclaimed research papers in the NMSU History Department. One, on the latter years of Geronimo, had been printed in the New

Yorker Magazine and nominated for a Pulitzer. He was completing his dissertation when he met Charlie at Yale. Charlie was still an undergraduate then, but he was part of a research team doing forensic DNA studies. Harry was quick to recognize the potential value of DNA analysis for his own research, and followed Charlie's work with a keen eye. When Charlie received his doctorate, Harry pushed NMSU to hire his friend.

Charlie's lanky frame slumped in a chair. He took a deep breath and blew it out sounding like a surfacing whale. "You're right! I'm flummoxed. Harry, I've uncovered a mystery that might be significant beyond just being an unexpected artifact."

Harry's smile grew. Sober-minded Charlie rarely showed excitement about anything. "Ah, desperation! This is serious. OK Dr. P-E... uh, White Man, what's your big mystery? Tell me!"

Charlie nodded. "OK, Tonto. I'll tell you. We have some great new equipment as part of the big DNA study we're doing with a university consortium in California."

Harry frowned, puzzled.

"You know, Harry, for the study we're doing to identify and trace lineages of Indian tribes using Y chromosome and other DNA analysis."

"Oh, yeah. So did you find out I was your grandfather?"

"Do you want to hear this or not?"

Harry nodded and cocked his head toward Charlie to catch every word.

"To train for the work, students practice running different DNA tests on known samples including some from the bone collection in our department and some materials over in Biology. Then they do cross-correlations of the results. That way they learn good analysis technique and they develop an appreciation for why they need to be very careful handling the samples. For example, we don't want to show bird DNA matches that from a horse – that kind of thing."

Harry nodded. "OK. Comprendo!"

"I was going through their results this morning. As expected the samples were all uncorrelated except for one pair of bones done by our best student. I checked her data; there's no doubt that it's correct."

"So you've found a flying horse?"

“No! A human skull found in the Jarillas in 1924 has the same DNA as a femur found over thirty miles away near El Paso in 1975!”

Harry’s mouth formed a circle of surprise. “Wow! How old are the bones?”

“There’s a note in the database that old Professor Tillman, who got the skull from the cowboy who found it, estimated it was twenty or thirty years old in 1924. I’ve only seen photographs of it but I won’t argue with that estimate. It’s at least a hundred years old now.”

The waitress came with the iced tea Harry ordered and took their enchilada orders. They sipped their tea and wiggled around in their chairs as they wrestled with the riddle. Half way through the enchiladas Harry laid down his fork, folded his hands over his plate and said, “You haven’t lived here long enough to know about the Fountain murders, but you might have just stumbled on the solution to a mystery that’s haunted this area for a very long time.”

Charlie shook his head. “What are you talking about?”

“Albert Fountain was a big time local Republican politico and prosecutor who, with his eight-year old son Henry, disappeared near White Sands in February 1896. They were never found. A posse followed horse tracks leading from Fountain’s wagon toward the Jarillas but lost them after a cattle herd destroyed the trail. Cowboys, posses, and Apache trackers searched all over the Tularosa basin for weeks but found no trace of them.

“Maybe your results are saying the kidnappers chopped old Albert up in pieces and buried them all over the desert to keep him from being easy to find and impossible to identify. They probably sold the kid off into Mexico to work in some mine. Remnants of the family are still around Las Cruces. In fact I think one of Albert’s great great-grandsons is in one of my classes.”

Now it was Charlie’s turn to lay down his fork. He could barely speak through his excitement and mouth full of enchilada. “The skull is definitely male!” He nodded and swallowed. “A murder in 1896 is consistent with its age! A sample of the grandson’s DNA will prove if the skull is Fountain’s! If it is, then you’ve got yourself another paper in the New Yorker and I’ve got some significant exposure for more grant money! Can you get a little sample of the grandson’s hair and bring it by the lab?”

“Yeah, I think so. I have him in class at 3:00 today. I’ll bring it by your office before 5:00.”

“Smoking! I’ll run the test and we’ll know by 8:00.”

The enchiladas vanished quickly as Harry and Charlie discussed how to reveal that they had found and identified the remains of Albert Fountain. What a coup! This little exercise might win them national recognition.

At 4:50 Harry appeared at Charlie’s office door with a long white business envelope containing a small snippet of shiny black hair.

“You didn’t touch it did you Harry?”

“Nope. We Apaches have more sense than that son.”

“Good! Let’s go downstairs!”

Harry sat and watched poker-faced. Charlie ran the tests, his heart pounding. He had to concentrate just to keep his hands steady. Nothing was said until Charlie finally sat down at a keyboard and began a series of rapid-fire keystrokes that lit a computer screen in multicolored line graphs and numbers.

“OK Harry! Here goes the correlation with the DNA from the great great grandson and the skull.” He hit the *Enter* key and waited tapping his fingers. “This will take about a minute,” he said glancing up at Harry’s eager eyes, and then at his Timex.

Harry watched only Charlie’s face. The numbers and line wiggles flashing across the screen meant nothing to him. Charlie was literally holding his breath. Suddenly he winced as if slapped. Disappointment fell like a stone in Harry’s gut.

“No correlation! We struck out old friend.” Charlie exhaled in a low whistle. He appeared to grow small as he slumped down in his chair and ran his fingers through his hair.

Harry stood to leave and squeezed Charlie’s shoulder “Well we tried. Even Geronimo lost one once in a while. We’ll figure it out. See you next week.”

“Yeah, you bet, see you then,” Charlie muttered as he stared at the disappointing results.

Three weeks of lunch meetings at the Hacienda passed. Each meeting was filled with theories about how the bones became separated, who the person was, and when and how he died.

At the fourth meeting Charlie walked through the Hacienda doors to see Harry sitting at the same table where they schemed a month earlier. A big grin covered his face as he waved Charlie over to a chair.

“Sit down compadre! I know source of the skull and how the femur wound up 30 miles away!”

Charlie’s jaw dropped in disbelief as he pulled out a chair. “You’re full of it! How did you find that out? Talking to your grandmother?”

“Yep! How’d you know? I just got back from Mescalero an hour ago.” Harry laughed. “This is a good one old son, and the joke’s on us!”

“Come on Harry! Cut to the chase! You know I’m dying to find out.”

“Well, grandma and I were discussing an interview I did with Emma Nambe on outrages at the Indian School. I mentioned this mysterious skull and how it was from the same skeleton as another bone found thirty miles away near El Paso almost fifty years later. When I told her we first thought they might be Albert Fountain, she laughed until tears rolled down her cheeks and almost strangled on her snuff. She knew who it was.”

“Well come on man! Who was it?” Charlie practically shouted.

Harry held up a hand. “Cool down Dr. P-Enis!” Harry’s grin grew as he teased Charlie a few more interminable seconds. “The skull is Red Tally’s! He murdered Fountain! Ain’t that a hoot! Right case, wrong man!”

Charlie rolled his eyes. “That’s crazy. I did some checking. Oliver Lee was blamed for the murder but never convicted. Who is this Red Tally, and how did your grandmother know anything about him?”

“Well, the story is a family secret. Can you keep this to yourself?”

“You know I can!”

“OK. Tally is a hired killer whose range war assassinations in Colorado and New Mexico are legendary. The law never catches him. He’s a dead shot, has one eye and a big red beard that hangs down to his belly. My great grandfather is a cavalry scout and part-time tribal policeman named Yellow Boy. From a distance, he sees Tally murder Fountain. Fountain’s son, Henry, doesn’t get a scratch, but he’s made to sit in the wagon while Tally and Jack Stone, the rancher who hired him, stand around to watch Albert die.

Henry whips up the horses and gets away but bounces out of the wagon after a few miles.”

Charlie frowned. “Why does Tally let him get away?”

Harry shook his head. “He doesn’t care. He knows the wagon might travel several miles, but it’ll be easy to track and Henry is just a little boy. But old Henry, he’s smart and hides under some mesquite where Tally’s men can’t find him. Yellow Boy finds him that night nearly dead from exposure. He knows that if he’s discovered with Henry he’ll be hung on the spot. So, he carries him to a recluse named Rufus Pike for doctoring and to return him home. Pike doesn’t carry the boy home, fearful that if he does, Tally will murder the entire family. Besides, Henry doesn’t want to go back home. He thinks he has to avenge his father, blood-for-blood, before he can face his mother.”

“Harry this is crazy! Can you prove any of this?”

“Yeah. Just listen. Pike and Yellow Boy promise Henry they’ll help him kill Tally and Stone when he’s grown. Over the years they train him to be deadly accurate with a Sharps rifle and to survive in the desert. When Henry is about fourteen he tries to kill Jack Stone. He barely misses a sniper shot and Stone is after him like a mad rattlesnake. Henry and his amigos hide out on Sierra Blanca. They finally trick Stone, Tally and their riders into an ambush in Dog Canyon near Alamogordo. During the shoot-out Tally scatters their horses and gets away riding toward El Paso. Yellow Boy runs after him. Running all night, he gets in front of Tally and stands on Boat Rock to face him at sunup. That’s about where the femur was found, right?”

Charlie slowly nodded.

“Tally tries to get close, fires twice and misses. Yellow Boy fires once. He hits Tally in his good eye. He cuts off Tally’s head so the body can’t be identified and to prove to Henry he’s dead. During the ambush Henry puts a 45-70 slug through Jack Stone’s chest. Dying, Stone manages to shoot a gloating Rufus in the liver. Rufus dies in the Jarillas two or three days later just before Yellow Boy shows up with Tally’s head. Yellow Boy and Henry bury the head in the Jarillas and Rufus at his ranch. They disappear into Mexico, but come back four years later to kill Oliver Lee for his part in Albert’s murder. Lee, however, convinces Henry he’s innocent and didn’t have anything to do with it. A year later Henry has a tearful reunion with his mother who sends him to

medical school. He spends years as a general practitioner in Las Cruces under the name Henry Grace. He and Yellow Boy never tell anyone he's Henry Fountain.

“When Yellow Boy dies in 1950, Henry marries his nurse of twenty years, Roberta Gonzales, and tells my family the story. He begs them to keep it a secret. He dies in 1984. Roberta passes way ten years later.”

Charlie rested his head on his hand and nodded at Harry. “There's something to this tale. I was looking at the skull itself just yesterday. There's one bullet hole in it. Shot him in his good eye, huh?”

“It's true Charlie. My grandmother heard the story when she was fifteen. There's one other source. Roberta wrote it all down in her journal. Just before she died, she gave it to grandma.”

“And, we can't tell or use any of the story to show who the skull was or its significance?”

“Nope! It's a swear-on-your-honor family secret.”

Charlie smiled. “Well, even Geronimo lost one once in a while.”