

GETTING STARTED

On a warm day in late spring, 1982, as the early summer winds were stripping the fading azalea blooms from their branches, spreading them in colorful blankets across the ground, a man walked into a restaurant carrying a human skull. He was not a criminal, not a scientist, but a backhoe operator tasked with clearing the soft peats from the base of a nearby pond. As he was depositing the dark spoils in a heap along the pond's western rim, the skull appeared, glinting in the morning sun.

The pond, one of many dotting the vast tract of land being cleared to make way for the new Windover Farms housing development, would yield the remnants of early Floridians who lived and died along its banks thousands of years ago. The skull would set in motion events leading to the discovery of one of the most significant archaeological sites in the world, Windover Pond.

My involvement with Windover would come twenty years later. When the site was discovered, I was just finishing high school and had no plans of becoming an archaeologist. In fact, I had never even heard of archaeology's parent discipline, anthropology, until I'd stumbled across it in the University of Central Florida's course catalog.

I enrolled at UCF and began coursework toward a BA in anthropology. But having already spent two years in college drifting through an associate's degree, I was anxious to begin a career. So I switched gears, deciding instead to become a firefighter/paramedic. For the next thirteen years, I immersed myself in the world of emergency medicine. I became a firefighter, and then a medic, and worked in one of the most exciting, gratifying fields there is for one of the best fire departments in the state, the Orlando Fire Department.

I inherited several traits from my father: good teeth, a bad temper, inherent restlessness, and an insidious curiosity of the world. Not "the world" in a geological sense, although geology fascinates me, but "the world" as "the other": distant cultures, far off places, seeing how others lived. Our house was full of books, our garage a final resting place for stacks of back-issue *National Geographics*. As a naval officer, my father travelled extensively throughout his adult life. At sixteen years of age, he escaped the small town of Gulfport, Mississippi, to pursue a career in the military. Having dropped out of school, he enlisted in the Navy with only a ninth-grade education, and went on to achieve a master's in theology from Northwestern University, the rank of Captain, and a forty-two-year career that took him all over the globe.

I share his wanderlust. After a decade of blood, guts, and fire, I was ready for something a bit more cerebral, a job that didn't involve rushing into burning buildings or tending the angry transients that populated Orlando's west side. Once I hit my ten-year anniversary with OFD, my pension secured, I applied to the graduate program in anthropology at Florida State University. I was accepted, retired from the fire department, packed up my belongings, and headed north. It was as a new graduate student at FSU that I first met the people from Windover.

Anthropology, "the study of man," is composed of four sub-disciplines. Cultural anthropology examines the origins, dissemination, and idiosyncrasies of human culture; linguistics is the study of human language; archaeology is the study of humans based on their material remains, typically recovered through excavation; and biological

anthropology, traditionally known as physical anthropology, examines humans from a biological perspective.

Each of these sub-disciplines can be further broken down into various specialties. There are historic and underwater archaeologists; linguistic anthropologists that study the origins of language, others that study its dissemination over time and space; various types of cultural anthropologists – but I've always found them to be such a bizarre group that I really can't tell you much about what goes on in their strange, theory-bound world; and the biological anthropologists, which I find to be the most fascinating of all. Biological anthropologists include paleoanthropologists (those who study human origins); primatologists (who study our primate relatives); forensic anthropologists (who apply human skeletal analysis to contemporary, legal issues); and finally, bioarchaeologists (those exciting and brilliant individuals that examine issues of ancient health through the analysis of human remains recovered from archaeological sites). I wanted to be a bioarchaeologist.

The human skeleton is a guide to the life history of the individual, every surface a landscape of biological clues. My background in medicine instinctively drew me to the field of bioarchaeology, in which I learned the science and art of human skeletal analysis. It was during my early training as a bioarchaeologist that I came to know the people from Windover. Their skeletons were housed within the Department of Anthropology at FSU, carefully stored within sturdy metal cabinets in a secured lab. Through endless hours of analysis over the next few years, I would come to know each of them. Their bones would be my guide to the past.

The skeletons were excavated from Windover more than twenty years before I arrived at FSU. Their excellent preservation was the result of chemistry and luck. The dark peats within the base of the pond that held the remains for thousands of years provided the perfect environment for the preservation of skeletal tissue: a neutral pH and very little oxygen. It is this remarkable preservation that has enabled a glimpse into the health and history of each individual, since many of their bones are intact, many of the skeletons complete.

My years as a medic instilled in me a fascination with traumatic injury. Trauma patients were my favorite types of patients, the most complex to stabilize and treat. Shattered bone from gunshot wounds, crushing injuries from car crashes – an endless variety of force-related wounds. I applied that fascination to the Windover skeletons. My master's thesis examined their fractures. I was curious how many of the individuals had sustained broken bones during life and which of their bones were most commonly broken. I was also curious about what had caused these injuries; whether the fractures were the result of accidents, such as falls, or the result of violence, since blunt-force trauma can be indicative of combat.

The trauma analysis was just the beginning. With each bit of information I gathered, new questions arose. I wanted to know more about their overall health. My dissertation examined a full spectrum of pathologies, from dental disease to arthritis, infection to nutritional stress. Every aspect of my research involved spending hours poring over each of the ten thousand bones that make up this remarkable population.

I came to know them personally. I knew them by age: the fragile bones of the newborns that never made it to their first birthday; the elderly who somehow managed to live into their fifties, their joints frozen by arthritis, their teeth worn and falling out. I knew them by their sex: the robust, muscular frames of the males; the gracile yet sturdy

bones of the females; both sexes exhibiting the tell-tale signs of a physically demanding life. But most of all I came to know them by their pathologies: the woman with the broken femur who managed to heal from this serious injury, yet lived with a significant limp that would have made gathering food a difficult and painful endeavor; the young boy with spina bifida whose emaciated legs would never have allowed him to walk or run.

Each of the individuals represented someone who lived thousands of years in the past, yet suffered from the same illnesses and injuries we encounter today. They did it without modern medicine, without surgical intervention. They lived in a time that predated some of our most fundamental cultural inventions: pottery, metallurgy, agriculture. These things were unknown to ancient people of Windover.

When I applied to Florida State, I had never heard of the Windover site. I didn't know that my advisor, Dr. Glen Doran, had led the excavations. It was good fortune; fate, if you believe in such things, but coming to FSU and being able to cut my teeth as a bioarchaeologist on such remarkable skeletons has been a unique opportunity, one that has shaped my future, guided my research.

I knew the basics of the site's discovery. The skeletons had surfaced during construction of a housing development in Titusville, Florida, back in the early 1980s. The excavations were conducted over three field seasons spanning 1984-86. I knew the pond's chemistry had allowed for exceptional preservation and that the well-preserved skeletons were accompanied by an array of grave goods. What I didn't know was the site's full story.

Only one book had been written about Windover. In 2000, Doran edited a massive technical volume, a compilation of research highlighting the multidisciplinary nature of the site's analysis. But for the average reader, the book is a behemoth full of statistics, tables, and technical jargon. So I broke out my favorite "nerd weapon": the outline. I initially thought I could reduce the contents of Doran's book into something more palatable to the general public. But when the outline was complete, it seemed dry and academic. I had designated the chapters based on aspects of recovery within the excavations: site discovery, the skeletons, the material culture, the DNA analysis . . . (I'm dozing off just recounting it). This wouldn't work.

I needed a fresh approach, one that would take the reader through the incredible adventure of the site's discovery and the three field seasons of excavations that followed. So I deleted the old outline and decided that the only way I was going to recreate the events at Windover was to talk to those who were there. I wanted to step back in time and experience what the discovery and excavation of the site had been like for those involved. I wanted to meet the individuals whose labor had resulted in one of the most important archaeological sites in North America, if not the world. I wanted to return to Windover.

I had worked with Doran for many years but we never really discussed the events surrounding the site. It seemed we were always too busy working on the skeletons to discuss their discovery and emergence from the pond. Doran had mentioned the people involved in the early stages of the site's discovery: Jim Swann, the powerful and influential land owner who donated much of the materials and machinery that facilitated excavations; Steve Vanderjagt, the backhoe operator who first noticed the pale bones within the spoils; Lynn Hansel and Bill Tanner, who worked for Swann,

handling his land permits and overseeing construction crews within the development; and the many volunteers who were integral to the site's excavation. Their names were part of the history and lore of the site, ghost-like and ephemeral.

Besides Doran, I knew only one other person involved in the excavations. A bioarchaeologist with Florida's Bureau of Archaeological Research in Tallahassee, Dave Dickel had served as co-director of the project, overseeing the excavations and performing the initial analyses of the skeletons. When I was a student, I consulted with Dave on skeletal projects, since he had a sharp eye and a wealth of experience when it came to pathological analysis of human remains. He was also a colorful character with a curious perspective on science and life. But we never really discussed Windover.

I wanted to know what it was like at the moment of discovery. What did it feel like to be the first to set eyes on a skull that had been tucked away in a pond for thousands of years? How did it feel to cut through those dense layers of peat, revealing the beautifully preserved body of an ancient Floridian and be the first to touch the bones of someone who lived so long ago? What were those long days under sun-scorched skies like as the field crews toiled within the soft base of the pond? And what was it like at the end of the final field season, to stand and watch the water, held at bay by an extensive network of pumps, return to the pond, slowly covering the soils that had protected the people of Windover for so long?

I needed to track down the individuals I didn't know, and sit down and talk with those I did. With their help, I could recreate the early events at Windover, the day the first skull appeared in the spoil pile, and how the events of the next few years would lead to one of the most incredible archaeological finds in the world. This would be their story: the story of Windover pond.