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Under the pavement outside the Old Don Jail, 15 dead men tell their tale

Posted: June 12, 2009, 4:43 PM by Rob Roberts



By Chelsea Murray, National Post

In the dank and dusty halls of the Don Jail, the gloom of a grey June morning cut by fluorescent spotlights, Ronald Williamson walks among

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rows of metal-barred cells and describes what men felt like as they waited to die in line to die.

“You’re on death row. You know what’s coming. You know in a short period of time you’ll be walking to the cells and putting a hood on your head,” he tells a cameraman. “I can’t imagine it’s not on your mind every second of the day.”

Thirty-three men took that walk, and 15 of them were buried just outside the prison’s thick stone walls.

In the fall of 2007, Mr. Williamson (pictured at top) and his team of archaeologists was asked by the jail’s current owner, Bridgepoint Health, to find the these bodies—buried between 1870 and the 1930s—that archived records said lay beneath the pavement outside the Old Don Jail, at Gerrard Street East and Broadview Avenue.

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They ripped up the Don’s former east exercise yard (now a parking lot) and dug up the earth and bones underneath (lower photo). Bridgepoint had to uncover the bodies before they could begin to preserve and redevelop the prison as their new hospital’s medical research and administration centre.

The team has found every last one, including George Bennett, the man who shot father of Confederation George Brown in 1880.

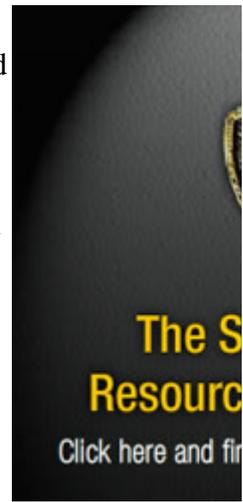
“We were charged with getting them out of the ground and reburying them,” he says. “All that was left was skeletal remains and whatever remained of their clothing or casket, which at this point was really only iron nails.”

A natural storyteller who divulges details about the project with pride, Mr. Williamson admits he wouldn’t be satisfied with a simple academic paper on the dig because too few people would read it.

Instead, he’s collaborating with Ballinran Productions, a Toronto-based film company making a History Channel docudrama on the buried men’s stories.

Local media reported the team finding their first three bodies, but because discoveries were so intermittent and scattered over a year, the story got lost in the shuffle of daily news and no one followed up.

But as Mr. Williamson’s team continued to dust and toil, the Ballinran crew watched, insistent they film every body unearthed. “We were a bit anxious about not finding anything — without skeletons it’s not much of a story,” says producer Daniel Thomson. “They went seven or eight days without finding anything, but then they found the first body and it was exhilarating”

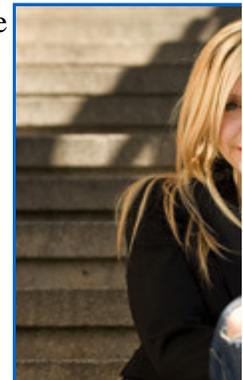


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Uncovering and then identifying the skeletons was a grueling process. Records showed the locations of some men, but others buried later were laid undocumented between and around the recorded ones.

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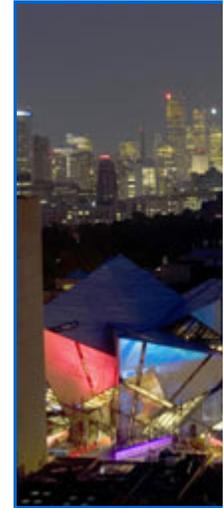
And all bodies were decomposed, except for bones and shreds of clothing, so it wasn't easy picking up the pieces. "I don't know if you've ever seen a skeleton, but you can't just pick it up. It's bone by bone," Mr. Williamson explains. "And there are 240-odd bones in the body."

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Archaeologists separated skeletons into categories based on body type and clothing. Something as small as a button or shoe could reveal in which time period men lived. (Those executed in the jail's early years wore shell buttons, while men in later years wore glass or metal ones).

The team also compared height and bone structure to prison records and pictures or descriptions found in the media.

When it got down to the nitty-gritty, they relied on CSI-like forensic techniques such as 3-D facial reconstruction to identify similar-looking skeletons.



In rare cases team members knew immediately whom they had found. Bennett — who shot George Brown — was buried in a three-piece suit and silver-ornamented coffin with a cross on its top.

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Frederick Davis— who killed an eight-year-old boy on Queen Street in 1920 — had a gold bridge and a skull eaten away with decay from terminal-stage syphilis.

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On a cold day last December, Brown and Davis, along with 13 other Don men—some identified, some soon-to-be—were laid to rest in St. James Cemetery on Parliament Street, a serene place far from the prison and taunting gallows that humiliated them at death.



"They were buried down the hill towards Rosedale Valley Road. It's a beautiful site, quite lovely," says Douglas Stoute, the dean of St. James Cathedral, who led the re-interment ceremony.

"We wanted to treat the bodies with as much dignity as possible. They're still entitled to dignity and prayers."

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In Canada's present justice system, Bennett, who shot Brown in the foot (he died months later from infection), would have been charged with manslaughter at worst. Other executed men might have been found innocent or exonerated later with DNA testing.

This is one of the most disturbing things about the Don men's stories, Mr. Williamson later adds, still looking at the camera. So many of them didn't even deserve to die.

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