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WELL-PRESERVED FIND AT MCV BONES GIVE CLUES TO 1800S PRACTICES

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Times-Dispatch Staff Writer **Date:** May 11, 1994 **Section:** Area/State

A muddy, stinky well full of bones -- discovered two weeks ago during construction at the **Medical College of Virginia** -- is giving researchers clues to some of the grim practices of 19th-century surgeons.

Among the prizes: a jaw in which an abscess was treated by sawing out several inches of chin.

About two dozen boxes of bones were hauled last week from a "limb pit" apparently used for **medical** discards from about 1840 to 1860. The shaft was discovered by a heavy-equipment driver digging 25 feet below East Marshall Street during construction of the **Medical Sciences Building** for Virginia Commonwealth University.

Dr. Douglas W. Owsley, a forensic anthropologist at the Smithsonian Institution, said only three other such collections are known in the world.

Owsley has just finished a study of **medical** discards excavated in New Orleans in 1987 and said he plans to head south to study the **VCU** trove several weeks from now.

"To me, it's very exciting," he said. "A collection like this is quite rare. It can tell you about the history of medicine and the development of surgery."

L. Daniel Mouer, the founder of **VCU's** Archaeological Research Center, has already started playing detective.

Two skulls, one from a man and one from a woman, have smashed temples -- but no exit wounds, which would have indicated gunshots.

Mouer speculated the wounds might be from a broomstick, perhaps a weapon of choice for an antebellum domestic quarrel. His theory was bolstered Monday when a third skull turned up, this time with a chunk of wood in it.

Other victims in the well may have been killed with fireplace poker, and some of the mangled limbs may have been run over by carriages.

The primitive, scarce nature of care is obvious from jaw bones in which the tooth sockets had healed over, and porous joints that had been almost completely eroded by arthritis.

Wavy arms show the toll of polio and rickets.

The refuse pit for cadavers, corpses and amputations apparently was used by **medical** students at the former **Medical** Department of Hampden-Sydney College, the predecessor of MCV.

The brick-lined well was full of water and topped by clay, preserving the specimens down to their cat-gut sutures.

Some skulls still have sprigs of hair, and intestinal flesh was recovered and will be tested for parasite eggs.

Another factor that preserved the bones: They apparently were toasted in a primitive crematorium -- perhaps a coal-fired furnace -- so the diseases would not spread to students.

Nonhuman debris in the shaft included a dozen shoes, chunks of imported dinner plates, a green wine bottle with a concave bottom, a pipette, and hand-blown test tubes and beakers.

Another find: a scalpel with a tortoise-shell handle. Today's are stainless steel.

Rubber-gloved technicians are using toothbrushes to clean the bones at VCU's archaeological center in an old auction warehouse on West Broad Street. The excavators found a dog's skull and an ox thigh that had been cut off with a surgical saw, instead of a butcher's knife.

"Somebody was practicing," Mouer said.

Mouer said the skeletons will be available to researchers studying health, nutrition and **medical** practices of the 1800s.

The bones were discovered April 26. Six days later, explorers armed with trowels and bamboo splints were finishing the dig when they found a smaller well at the bottom of the first one.

They capped Limb Pit II with cement, and pronounced the job done.

"It would've meant putting on Scuba gear and going down a well full of dead bodies," Mouer said.

"We'll leave that for archaeologists in two or three hundred years."

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