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CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS: EXHUMED

By Kara Briggs

Exhumed, the bone slivers looked as ordinary as anyone else's. Five centuries in the ground will do that, even though to some the remains are nothing less than revered. Still, Spanish researchers have devoted years to unearthing Christopher Columbus. They hope to prove his origins were Spanish and more noble, even princely, and not just another Italian sailor.

As a Native American, I can't help but enjoy this Spanish inquisition. That traveling man got around as much in death -- four cemeteries in two hemispheres -- as in his famed life. Now, he's experiencing the fate he unleashed, perhaps inadvertently, on untold thousands of American Indians whose graves were robbed in the name of science.

To be sure, science has given us life-saving vaccines and opened the skies for exploration by the curious human mind. "CSI" episodes assure us that DNA testing will solve every crime and resolve every mystery.

Yet every culture has prohibitions against disturbing the dead, and all families have the desire to protect their ancestors' graves. As science learns to peer deeper inside even the secrets of the human body, we all must ask ourselves, when is science for its own sake not worth the toll on our humanity?

The circumstances surrounding Columbus and his modern-day Spanish researchers, who want to one-up Italy, may make us chuckle. But it brings to mind another case. That's of the 9,000-year-old remains christened "Kennewick Man," but known to Northwest tribes as the Ancient One. Currently undergoing testing at Seattle's Burke Museum, this man's remains were certainly an important scientific find as one of the oldest in North America.

Recently, on April Fool's Day, Time magazine speculated about his appearance by depicting him on its cover as a blue-eyed, handsome man. The eye color had more to do with the politics around this case than any actual science.

Since the remains washed out of a bank along the Columbia River a decade ago, scientists have wrangled around the landmark 1990 Native American Graves and

Repatriation Act. That act, for the first time in American history, required museums, universities and institutions to give public account of the actual skeletons in their closets. More than 30,000 remains have been restored to their tribes and reburied. Still, more than 200,000 remain in storage. Whatever study or curiosity they elicited has apparently been satiated by a century of scientific analysis, if not sideshow exhibition.

In the case of the Ancient One, the lines were drawn. On one side the U.S. government and tribes, which sought to rebury the remains with the care and ceremony that would be given to a revered grandparent. On the other side, scientists and array of characters ranging from New Agers who claimed the remains as an ancient Viking ancestor to neo-Nazis who suggested he was one of the unknown white victims of a mythical genocide by Native Americans.

In the court of public opinion, scientists characterized the case as science against religion or knowledge against ignorance. Journalist Leslie Stahl on "60 Minutes" speculated that tribes feared study might reveal that whites were here first.

Amid the hoopla, last year the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that scientists could proceed because tribes couldn't prove that the Kennewick Man was their ancestor.

Yet among local tribes, and some scientists as well, it's well known that one day's walk from the site where the Ancient One was found stood a fishing village, known to be one of the oldest continuously occupied sites in North America.

By the time Kennewick Man would have visited, the village would have been well over seven centuries old.

For all the drilling, pulverizing and irradiating of the very skeletal remains that scientists celebrated for being well-preserved, what can we expect to learn? At best, probably that the Ancient One ate fish and berries, just like the other Indians of his area. That's where he should be returned and reburied.

Columbus should be so lucky.

The AMERICAN INDIAN POLICY AND MEDIA INITIATIVE is a grant-funded academic and professional project of the Communication Department at Buffalo State College. The Initiative's focus lies at the intersection of media, public policy and Native interests. The Initiative prepares and publishes commentaries, news, research and academic reports that offer original and authentic voices of and about Native America. Available online at AmericanIndianInitiative.buffalostate.edu