

Whose skull and bones?

By Kathrin Day Lassila '81 & Mark Alden Branch '86

Did Skull and Bones rob the grave of Geronimo during World War I? For decades, it has been the most controversial and sordid of all the mysteries surrounding Yale's best-known secret society. The story was widely rumored but, despite the efforts of reporters and historians and the public complaints of Apache leaders in the 1980s, never verified. An internal history of Skull and Bones, written in the 1930s and leaked to the Apache 50 years later, mentioned the theft. But Bones spokesmen have always dismissed the story as a hoax.

A former senior editor of the *Yale Alumni Magazine* has now discovered the only known contemporary evidence: a reference in private correspondence from one senior Bonesman to another. The letter was written on June 7, 1918, by Winter Mead '19 to F. Trubee Davison '18. It announces that the remains dug up at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, by a group that included Charles C. Haffner Jr. '19 (a new member, or "Knight"), have been deposited in the society's headquarters (the "Tomb"): "The skull of the worthy Geronimo the Terrible, exhumed from its tomb at Fort Sill by your club & the K-t [Knight] Haffner, is now safe inside the T- [Tomb] together with his well worn femurs[,] bit & saddle horn."

Mead was not at Fort Sill, so his letter is not proof. And if the Bonesmen did rob a grave, there's reason to think it may have been the wrong one. But the letter shows that the story was no after-the-fact rumor. Senior Bonesmen at the time believed it. "It adds to the seriousness of the belief [that the theft took place], certainly," says Judith Schiff, the chief research archivist at Sterling Memorial Library, who has written extensively on Yale history. "It has a very strong likelihood of being true, since it was written so close to the time." Members of a secret society, she points out, were required to be honest with each other about its affairs.

Moreover, the yearbook entries for Haffner, Mead, and Davison confirm that they were all Bonesmen. (The membership of the societies was routinely published in newspapers and yearbooks until the 1970s.) Haffner's entry confirms that he was at the artillery school at Fort Sill some time between August 1917 and July 1918.

Marc Wortman, a writer and former senior editor of this magazine, discovered the letter in the Sterling Memorial Library archives while researching Davison's war years for a book—*The Millionaires' Unit*, released this month by PublicAffairs press—about Yale's World War I aviators. The letter is preserved in a folder of 1918 correspondence in one of the 16

June 7.

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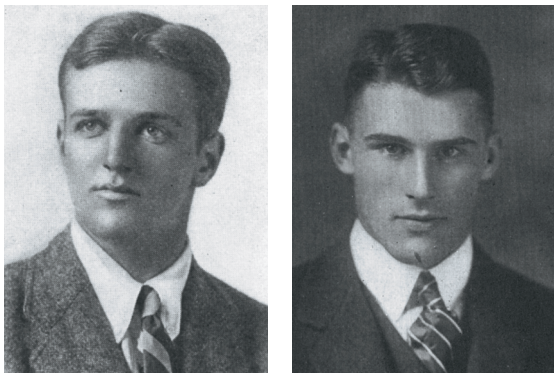
Dear Trubee bsc.

The only K-ts who have been here to give dope are among those who have already written you - so there is nothing new that we can tell you. Haffner bsc. refused to comment himself on anyone - for he doubted his judgment, and our club has kept off the subject on purpose.

We got a slick letter from the p-ts abroad telling the

imitation of K-t Allen at San-huar.

The skull of the worthy Geronimo the Terrible, exhumed from its tomb at Fort Sill by your club & the K-t Haffner, is now safe inside the T- together with his well worn femurs - bit & saddle horns



boxes of the F. Trubee Davison Papers. Mead's was one of many letters Davison received that year about Bones matters. With the war on, the Bonesmen were scattered around the United States and Europe, and society business like choosing new members had to be conducted by mail. "Lists of people to be tapped would come to Trubee and he would comment on them," says Wortman. Mead's letter also relays the news that Parker B. Allen '19 had been initiated as a member in Saumur, France, and Allen's yearbook entry confirms his membership in Bones and his posting to artillery school in Saumur.

THE GERONIMO RUMOR first came to wide public attention in 1986. At the time, Ned Anderson, then chair of the San Carlos Apache Tribe in Arizona, was campaigning to have Geronimo's remains moved from Fort Sill—where he died a prisoner of war in 1909—to Apache land in Arizona. Anderson received an anonymous letter from someone who claimed to be a member of Skull and Bones, alleging that the society had Geronimo's skull. The writer included a photograph of a skull in a display case and a copy of what is apparently a centennial history of Skull and Bones, written by the literary critic F. O. Matthiessen '23, a Skull and Bones member. In Matthiessen's account, which quotes a Skull and Bones log book from 1919, the skull had been unearthed by six Bonesmen—identified by their Bones nicknames, including "Hellbender," who apparently was Haffner. Matthiessen mentions the real names of three of the robbers, all of whom were at Fort Sill in early 1918: Ellery James '17, Henry Neil Mallon '17, and Prescott Bush '17, the father and grandfather of the U.S. presidents.

Anderson arranged a meeting with Bones alumni Jonathan Bush '53, a son of Prescott Bush; and Endicott Peabody Davison '45, a son of Trubee Davison. At the meeting, Anderson has told several journal-

ists, the Bones representatives produced a display case like the one in the photo. But they told Anderson that the skull inside it was that of a ten-year-old boy. They offered the skull to Anderson, but he declined, as he believed it was not the same one in the photo.

Some researchers have concluded that the Bonesmen could not have even found Geronimo's grave in 1918. David H. Miller, a history professor at Cameron University in Lawton, Oklahoma, cites historical accounts that the grave was unmarked and overgrown until a Fort Sill librarian persuaded local Apaches to identify the site for him in the 1920s. "My assumption is that they did dig up somebody at Fort Sill," says Miller. "It could have been an Indian, but it probably wasn't Geronimo."

Mead's letter, written from one Bonesman to another just after the incident would have occurred,

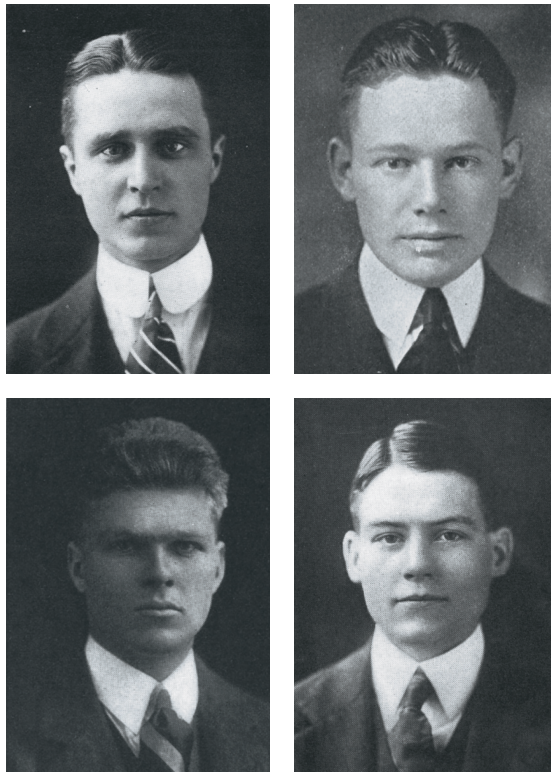
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A recently discovered letter to **F. Trubee Davison '18** (top, left) from **Winter Mead '19** (top, right) seems to confirm the rumor that Skull and Bones members plundered the grave of the Apache warrior **Geronimo** (left) and brought his skull to their "Tomb" in New Haven. The **letter** (far left) begins with a discussion of new members: "Knights" (initiates), including Charles C. Haffner Jr. '19, had visited Mead to give "dope" (information) about possible candidates. Mead also mentions that Parker B. Allen '19 had been initiated at Saumur, France. The rest of the letter (not shown) speculates on the whereabouts of Haffner's Army unit.

suggests that society members had robbed a grave and had a skull they believed was Geronimo's. It does not speak to whether Skull and Bones may still have such a skull today. Many have speculated that they do, but there is no direct evidence. Alexandra Robbins '98, who wrote the 2002 Bones exposé *Secrets of the Tomb*, says she persuaded a number of Bones alumni to talk to her for her book. "Many talked about a skull in a glass case by the front door that they call Geronimo," Robbins told the alumni magazine. (Representatives of Skull and Bones did not return calls from the magazine by press time.)

Alleged grave robbers, clockwise from top left: **Prescott Bush '17, Charles C. Haffner '19, Henry Neil Mallon '17, and Ellery James '17.** Haffner, who is credited with the theft of Geronimo's skull in the recently discovered letter, went on to become a general in World War II and then chair of the printing company R. R. Donnelly & Sons. A purported Skull and Bones account of the theft, leaked in the 1980s, identifies the other three by name. Bush became a Connecticut businessman, a U.S. senator, and the father and grandfather of two U.S. presidents. Mallon became chair of the oilfield service company Dresser Industries and the first employer of George H. W. Bush '48. James was a banker with Brown Brothers Harriman until his untimely death in 1932.



Skull and Bones and other Yale societies have a reputation for stealing, often from each other or from campus buildings. Society members reportedly call the practice "crooking" and strive to outdo each other's "crooks." And the club is also thought to use human remains in its rituals. In 2001, journalist Ron Rosenbaum '68 reported capturing on videotape what appeared to be an initiation ceremony in the society's courtyard, in which Bonesmen carried skulls and "femur-sized bones."

IT MAY HAVE BEEN EASIER FOR THE BONESMEN to plunder an Apache's grave if they shared the racial attitudes typical of their era and social class. At the

time, says Gaddis Smith, Larned Professor of History emeritus, who is writing a history of Yale since 1900, "there was a racial consciousness and a sense of Anglo-Saxon superiority above all others." He notes that James Rowland Angell, who became president of Yale in 1921, "would say, very explicitly, that we must preserve Yale for the 'old stock.'" Smith adds, "The slogan of the first major fund-raising campaign for Yale, in 1926, was 'Keep Yale Yale.' The alumni knew exactly what it meant."

At the same time, many of those complicit in what was apparently the desecration of a grave cherished ideals of service and fellowship, and had lived up to them by enlisting for the war voluntarily. A striking example is chronicled in Marc Wortman's book, *The Millionaires' Unit*, which began as an article for this magazine about a group of Yale undergraduates who took up the new sport of aviation in order to fight for the Allies ("Flight to Glory," November/December

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2003). Trubee Davison was the co-founder and moving spirit of this project. Before the United States had even entered the war, he recruited two dozen elite and wealthy young Yalies of his set—five of them Bonesmen—to devote themselves to flying. Out of these efforts grew the first squadron in what is today the Naval Air Reserve.

The letter might not have been discovered if Davison hadn't founded the aviation group. It might not even have been written if he hadn't endured great personal suffering for the war effort. Davison never made it overseas; he crashed during a training flight and was disabled for the rest of his life.

It was while he was recuperating at home that his fellow Bonesmen wrote to him about candidates for membership, initiations abroad, and other society business. The Geronimo letter, with its matter-of-fact reports of troop units and its boast about a grave robbery, speaks to the complex and contradictory mores of the privileged class in early twentieth-century America. [Y]