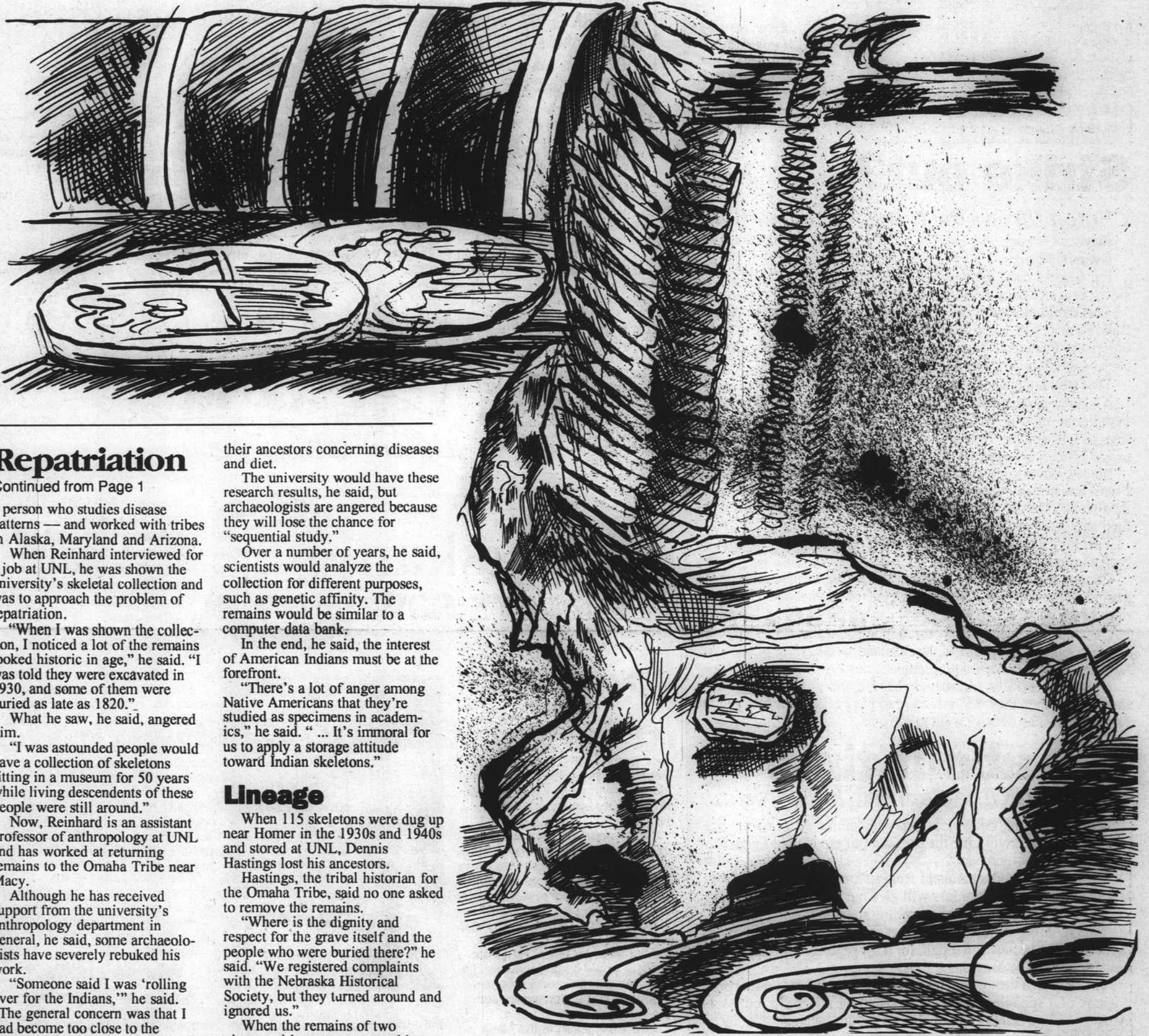


Returning tribes' remains a difficult, emotional task



James Mehling/DN

Repatriation

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a person who studies disease patterns — and worked with tribes in Alaska, Maryland and Arizona.

When Reinhard interviewed for a job at UNL, he was shown the university's skeletal collection and was to approach the problem of repatriation.

"When I was shown the collection, I noticed a lot of the remains looked historic in age," he said. "I was told they were excavated in 1930, and some of them were buried as late as 1820."

What he saw, he said, angered him.

"I was astounded people would have a collection of skeletons sitting in a museum for 50 years while living descendants of these people were still around."

Now, Reinhard is an assistant professor of anthropology at UNL and has worked at returning remains to the Omaha Tribe near Macy.

Although he has received support from the university's anthropology department in general, he said, some archaeologists have severely rebuked his work.

"Someone said I was 'rolling over for the Indians,'" he said. "The general concern was that I had become too close to the Indians, too friendly, and I've lost my scientific perspective of the issue."

In a science that digs up research from the ground, reburying it can fly in the face of logic.

Reburial is an angry issue, Reinhard said, because some archaeologists think they are losing research opportunities by putting artifacts back in the ground.

In an argument at Reinhard's house, he said, one archaeologist told him it was unprofessional to take sides with American Indians.

He said many anthropologists were afraid that by becoming involved in reburial, there was no way to make it a winning situation and that his work "was ruining their reputations."

"It's a peculiar thing," he said. "I've noticed that archaeology and anthropology and Native Americans are in two different worlds, and there's not much crossover."

But Reinhard was able to walk the line between UNL's research and the Omaha Tribe's remains.

The tribal leaders found value in research themselves, he said. They wanted studies done on the remains that would answer questions about

their ancestors concerning diseases and diet.

The university would have these research results, he said, but archaeologists are angered because they will lose the chance for "sequential study."

Over a number of years, he said, scientists would analyze the collection for different purposes, such as genetic affinity. The remains would be similar to a computer data bank.

In the end, he said, the interest of American Indians must be at the forefront.

"There's a lot of anger among Native Americans that they're studied as specimens in academics," he said. "... It's immoral for us to apply a storage attitude toward Indian skeletons."

Lineage

When 115 skeletons were dug up near Homer in the 1930s and 1940s and stored at UNL, Dennis Hastings lost his ancestors.

Hastings, the tribal historian for the Omaha Tribe, said no one asked to remove the remains.

"Where is the dignity and respect for the grave itself and the people who were buried there?" he said. "We registered complaints with the Nebraska Historical Society, but they turned around and ignored us."

When the remains of two pioneer girls were uncovered in western Nebraska by the Nebraska Daughters of the American Revolution, they were given an elaborate funeral, Hastings said, while his ancestors were shipped off to research laboratories.

Hastings took his frustration into action and drafted a legislative bill that would order repatriation. LB340 was taken to Washington, he said, and indirectly initiated the federal repatriation (NAGPRA) act.

Even before the bills passed, he said, he noticed the climate toward repatriation had warmed, and UNL started to return artifacts.

In working with the university and Reinhard, Hastings said the research provided valuable information for his tribe.

"In an era where we didn't know much about our people, the scientists started to speak to us about our people and what they did and what they ate."

Teamwork

This cooperation also was helped by UNL's four-member NAGPRA committee, formed last March. Eric Jolly, UNL director of

affirmative action and diversity and a NAGPRA member, said repatriation was a difficult, personal issue.

Jolly also is a member of the Cherokee tribe. He is familiar with the workings of administration, while understanding American Indian rituals and observations.

"I'm able to attend our meetings and provide a bridge between the necessary demands of materials managements from the academic community," he said, "and to highlight the types of communication we have to have about those material demands when we're talking to the tribal offices."

Jolly said he was able to outline the specifics of repatriation.

The tribal entities have independent self-governing status in the U.S. Constitution, he said, and the repatriation of their remains is similar to the repatriation of remains of U.S. military personnel who die overseas.

Skeletal remains, eagle feathers, medallions, peace pipes and any object of religious significance were examples of the items being repatriated, he said.

He said the repatriated items were not those generally placed on exhibit. Objects such as moccasins, shrouds, beadwork, pottery and other items gathered appropriately through tribal permission would remain on exhibit.

When the items are returned, the tribe holds a repatriation ceremony, which is broken into two parts — funeral and recleansing. The land is purified and prayers are offered for the return of the remains.

"The remains of our ancestors are important in the same way that every individual is concerned about the proper care and respect of the legacy of our ancestors," he said.

Years ago, he said, American Indians' religious practices were outlawed. As part of returning their religious freedom, he said, the government needed to return religious icons and materials.

"To imagine not having access to religious sites and symbols for Christians is no different than having access to same sites and symbols of Native American spiritual leaders."

Jolly said NAGPRA workers

were cataloging and identifying the remains left in boxes at UNL. It is a task, he said, that is not as easy as it seems.

"The university has to find a way to convey to the tribal organizations just how an extensive project this is," he said.

"I think at the same time the university has to be sensitive to the fact that material that was once handled as objects of research are being returned to individuals who view them as objects of worship."

Although the identification takes a long time, he said, UNL has set the pace in being responsive to NAGPRA demands.

"We're trying to do this in ways that serve everyone," he said. "Where there is research interest, we share with tribes the potential of research interest and the option of allowing it to go on."

Some tribes have allowed UNL to keep their materials.

"By being highly responsive, we're beginning to build trust," he said. "... My heart is in both communities. I don't feel torn on the issue."