

The Last Secrets of Skull and Bones



Take a look at that hulking sepulcher over there. Small wonder they call it a tomb. It's the citadel of Skull and Bones, the most powerful of all secret societies in the strange Yale secret-society system. For nearly a century and a half, Skull and Bones has been the most influential secret society in the nation, and now it is one of the last.

In an age in which it seems that all that could possibly be concealed about anything and anybody has been revealed, those blank tombstone walls could be holding the last secrets left in America.

You could ask Averell Harriman whether there's really a sarcophagus in the basement and whether he and young Henry Stimson and young Henry Luce lay down naked in that coffin and spilled the secrets of their adolescent sex life to fourteen fellow Bonesmen. You could ask Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart if there came a time in the year 1937 when he dressed up in a skeleton suit and howled wildly at an initiate in a red-velvet room inside the tomb. You could ask McGeorge Bundy if he wrestled naked in a mud pile as part of his initiation and how it compared with a later quagmire into which he so eagerly plunged. You could ask Bill Bundy or Bill Buckley, both of whom went into the C.I.A. after leaving Bones—or George Bush, who ran the C.I.A.—whether their Skull and Bones experience was useful training for the clandestine trade. ("Spook," the Yale slang word for secret-society member, is, of course, Agency slang for spy.) You could ask J. Richardson Dilworth, the Bonesman who now manages the Rockefeller fortune, just how wealthy the Bones society is and whether it's true that each new initiate gets a no-strings gift of fifteen thousand dollars cash and guaranteed financial security for life.

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The facade of the Skull and Bones tomb at Yale.

Photograph by Benno Friedman

You could ask . . . but I think you get the idea. The leading lights of the Eastern establishment—in old-line investment banks (Brown Brothers Harriman pays Bones's tax bill), in blue-blood law firms (Simpson, Thacher & Bartlett, for one), and particularly in the highest councils of the foreign-policy establishment—the people who have shaped America's national character since it ceased being an undergraduate power, had *their* undergraduate character shaped in that crypt over there. Bonesman Henry Stimson, Secretary of War under F.D.R., a man at the heart of the heart of the American ruling class, called his experience in the tomb the most profound one in his entire education.

But none of them will tell you a thing about it. They've sworn an oath never to reveal what goes on

inside and they're legendary for the lengths to which they'll go to avoid prying interrogation. The mere mention of the words "skull and bones" in the presence of a true-blue Bonesman, such as Blackford Oakes, the fictional hero of Bill Buckley's spy thriller, *Saving the Queen*, will cause him to "dutifully leave the room, as tradition prescribed."

I can trace my personal fascination with the mysterious goings-on in the sepulcher across the street to a spooky scene I witnessed on its shadowy steps late one April night eleven years ago. I was then a

sophomore at Yale, living in Jonathan Edwards, the residential college (anglophile Yale name for dorm) built next to the Bones tomb. It was part of Jonathan Edwards' folklore that on the April evening following "tap night" at Bones, if one could climb to the tower of Weir Hall, the odd castle that overlooks the Bones courtyard, one could hear strange cries and moans coming from the bowels of the tomb as the fifteen newly "tapped" members were put through what sounded like a harrowing ordeal. Returning alone to my room late at night, I would always cross the street rather than walk the sidewalk that passed right in front of Bones. Even at that safe distance, something about it made my skin crawl.

But that night in April I wasn't alone; a classmate



Eighteen-karat-gold Bones pin made by Tiffany & Co.

and I were coming back from an all-night diner at about two in the morning. At the time, I knew little about the mysteries of Bones or any of the other huge windowless secret-society tombs that dominated with dark authority certain key corners of the campus. They were nothing like conventional fraternities. No one lived in the tombs. Instead, every Thursday and Sunday night, the best and the brightest on campus, the fifteen seniors in Skull and Bones and in Scroll and Key, Book and Snake, Wolf's Head, Berzelius, in all the seven secret societies, disappeared into their respective tombs and spent hours doing *something*—something they were sworn to secrecy about. And Bones, it was said, was the most ritualistic and secretive of all. Even the very door to the Bones tomb, that huge triple-padlocked iron door, was never permitted to open in the presence of an outsider.

All this was floating through my impressionable sophomore mind that night as my friend Mike and I approached the stone pylons guarding the entrance to Bones. Suddenly we froze at the sight of a strange thing lying on the steps. There in the gloom of the doorway on the top step was a long white object that looked like the thighbone of a large mammal. I remained frozen. Mike was more venturesome: he walked right up the steps and picked up the bone. I wanted to get out of there fast; I was certain we were being spied upon from a concealed window. Mike couldn't decide what to do with the bone. He went up to the door and began examining the array of padlocks. Suddenly a bolt shot. The massive door began to swing open and something reached out at him from within. He gasped, terrified, and jumped back, but not before something clutched the bone, yanked it out of his hand and back into the darkness within. The door slammed shut with a clang that rang in our ears as we ran away.

Recollected in tranquillity, that dreamlike gothic moment seems to me an emblem of the strangeness I felt at being at Yale, at being given a brief glimpse of the mysterious workings of the inner temples of privilege but feeling emphatically shut out of the secret ceremonies within. I always felt irrelevant to the real purpose of the institution, which was from its missionary beginnings devoted to converting the idle progeny of the ruling class into morally serious leaders of the establishment. It is frequently in the tombs that the conversions take place.

November, 1976: Security Measures

It's night and we're back in front of the tomb, Mike and I, reinforced by nine years in the outside world, two, skeptical women friends and a big dinner at Mory's. And yet once again there is an odd, chilling encounter. We're re-creating that first spooky moment. I'm standing in front of the stone pylons and Mike has walked up to stand against the door so we can estimate its height by his. Then we notice we're being

watched. A small red foreign car has pulled up on the sidewalk a few yards away from us. The driver has been sitting with the engine running and has been watching us for some time. Then he gets out. He's a tall, athletic-looking guy, fairly young. He shuts the car door behind him and stands leaning against it, continuing to observe us. We try to act oblivious, continuing to sketch and measure.

The guy finally walks over to us. "You seen Miles?" he asks.

We look at each other. Could he think we're actually Bones alumni, or is he testing us? Could "You seen Miles?" be some sort of password?

"No," we reply. "Haven't seen Miles."

He nods and remains there. We decide we've done enough sketching and measuring and stroll off.

"Look!" one of the women says as she turns and points back. "He just ran down the side steps to check the basement-door locks. He probably thought he caught us planning a break-in."

I found the episode intriguing. What it said to me was that Bones still cared about the security of its secrets. Trying to find out what goes on inside could be a challenge.

And so it was that I set out this April to see just how secure those last secrets are. It was a task I took on not out of malice or sour grapes. I was not tapped

for a secret society so I'm open to the latter charge, but I plead guilty only to the voyeurism of a mystery lover. I'd been working on a novel, a psychological thriller of sorts that involved the rites of Bones, and I thought it wouldn't hurt to spend some time in New Haven during the

week of tap night and initiation night, poking around and asking questions.

You could call it espionage if you were so inclined, but I tried to play the game in a gentlemanly fashion: I would not directly ask a Bonesman to violate his sacred oath of secrecy. If, however, one of them happened to have fudged on the oath to some other party and that other party were to convey the gist of the information to me, I would rule it fair game. And if any Bonesman wants to step forward and add something, I'll be happy to listen.

What follows is an account of my search for the meaning behind the mysterious Bones rituals. Only information that might be too easily traced to its source has been left out, because certain sources expressed fear of reprisals against themselves. Yes, reprisals. One of them even insisted, with what seemed like deadly seriousness, that reprisals would be taken against me.

"What bank do you have your checking account at?" this party asked me in the middle of a discussion of the Mithraic aspects of the Bones ritual.

I named the bank.

"Aha," said the party. "There are three Bonesmen on the board. You'll never have a line of credit again. They'll tap your phone. They'll..."

Most Sunday-night sessions start with talk of prep-school masturbation and don't stop until the intimate details of Saturday night's delights have come to light.

Before I could say, “A line of *what?*” the source continued: “The alumni still care. Don’t laugh. They don’t like people tampering and prying. The power of Bones is incredible. They’ve got their hands on every lever of power in the country. You’ll see—it’s like trying to look into the Mafia. Remember, they’re a secret society, too.”

Wednesday Night, April 14: The Dossier

Already I have in my possession a set of annotated floor plans of the interior of the tomb, giving the location of the sanctum sanctorum, the room called 322. And tonight I received a dossier on Bones ritual secrets that was compiled from the archives of another secret society. (It seems that one abiding preoccupation of many Yale secret societies is keeping files on the secrets of other secret societies, particularly Bones.)

This dossier on Bones is a particularly sophisticated one, featuring “reliability ratings” in percentiles for each chunk of information. It was obtained for me by an enterprising researcher on the condition that I keep secret the name of the secret society that supplied it. Okay. I will say, though, that it’s not the secret society that is rumored to have Hitler’s silverware in its archives. That’s Scroll and Key, chief rival of Bones for the elite of Yale—Dean Acheson and Cy Vance’s society—and the source of most of the rest of the American foreign-policy establishment.

But to return to the dossier. Let me tell you what it says about the initiation, the center of some of the most lurid apocryphal rumors about Bones. According to the dossier, the Bones initiation ritual of 1940 went like this: “New man placed in coffin—carried into central part of building. New man chanted over and ‘reborn’ into society. Removed from coffin and given robes with symbols on it [*sic*]. A bone with his name on it is tossed into bone heap at start of every meeting. Initiates plunged naked into mud pile.”

Thursday Evening: The File and Claw Solution to the Mystery of 322

I’m standing in the shadows across the street from the tomb, ready to tail the first person to come out. Tonight is tap night, the night fifteen juniors will be chosen to receive the one-hundred-forty-five-year-old secrets of Bones. Tonight the fifteen seniors in Bones and the fifteen in each of the other societies will arrive outside the rooms of the prospective tappees. They’ll pound loudly on the doors. When the chosen

junior opens up, a Bonesman will slam him on the shoulder and thunder: “Skull and Bones: Do you accept?”

At that point, according to my dossier, if the candidate accepts, he will be handed a message wrapped with a black ribbon sealed in black wax with the skull-and-crossbones emblem and the mystic Bones number, 322. The message appoints a time and a place for the candidate to appear on initiation night—next Tuesday—the first time the newly tapped candidate will be permitted inside the tomb. Candidates are “instructed to wear no metal” to the initiation, the dossier notes ominously. (Reliability rating for this stated to be one hundred percent.)

Not long before eight tonight, the door to Bones swings open. Two dark-suited young men emerge. One of them carries a slim black attaché case. Obviously they’re on their way to tap someone. I decide to follow them. I want to check out a story I heard that Bones initiates are taken to a ceremony somewhere near the campus before the big initiation inside the tomb. The Bonesmen head up High Street and pass the library, then make a right.

Passing the library, I can’t help but recoil when I think of the embarrassing discovery I made in the manuscript room this afternoon. The last thing I wanted to do was reduce the subtleties of the social func-

tion of Bones to some simpleminded conspiracy theory. And yet I do seem to have come across definite, if skeletal, links between the origins of Bones rituals and those of the notorious Bavarian Illuminists. For me, an interested but skeptical student of the conspiracy world, the introduction of the Illuminists, or Illuminati, into certain discussions (say, for instance, of events in Dallas in 1963) has become the same thing that the mention of Bones is to a Bonesman—a signal to leave the room. Because although the Bavarian Illuminists did have a real historical existence (from



Deer Island, hidden among the Thousand Islands, is just a few miles northeast of Alexandria Bay, New York.

1776 to 1785 they were an esoteric secret society within the more mystical freethinking lodges of German Freemasonry), they have also had a paranoid fantasy existence throughout two centuries of conspiracy literature. They are *the* imagined megacabal that manipulated such alleged plots as the French and Russian revolutions, the elders of Zion, the rise of Hitler and the house of Morgan. Yes, the Bilderbergers and George De Mohrenschildt, too. Silly as it may sound, there are suggestive links between the historical, if not mytho-conspiratorial, Illuminists and Bones.

First consider the account of the origins of Bones to be found in a century-old pamphlet published by an anonymous group that called itself File and Claw after

the tools they used to pry their way inside Bones late one night. I came upon the File and Claw break-in pamphlet in a box of disintegrating documents filed in the library's manuscript room under Skull and Bones's corporate name, Russell Trust Association. The foundation was named for William H. (later General) Russell, the man who founded Bones in 1832. I was trying to figure out what mission Russell had for the secret order he founded and why he had chosen that particular death's-head brand of mumbo jumbo to embody his vision. Well, according to the File and Claw break-in crew, "Bones is a chapter of a corps of a German university. It should properly be called the Skull and Bones chapter. General Russell, its founder, was in Germany before his senior year and formed a warm friendship with a leading member of a German society. The meaning of the permanent number '322' in all Bones literature is that it was founded in '32 as the second chapter of the German society. But the Bonesman has a pleasing fiction that his fraternity is a descendant of an old Greek patriot society founded by Demosthenes, who died in 322 B.C."

They go on to describe a German slogan painted "on the arched walls above the vault" of the sacred room, 322. The slogan appears above a painting of skulls surrounded by Masonic symbols, a picture said to be "a gift of the German chapter." "*Wer war der Thor, wer Weiser, Bettler oder Kaiser? Ob Arm, ob Reich, im Tode gleich,*" the slogan reads, or, "Who was the fool, who the wise man, beggar or king? Whether poor or rich, all's the same in death."

Imagine my surprise when I ran into that very slogan in a 1798 Scottish anti-Illuminist tract reprinted in 1967 by the John Birch Society. The tract (*Proofs of a Conspiracy* by John Robison) prints alleged excerpts from Illuminist ritual manuals supposedly confiscated by the Bavarian police when the secret order was banned in 1785. Toward the end of the ceremony of initiation into the "Regent degree" of Illuminism, according to the tract, "a skeleton is pointed out to him [the initiate], at the feet of which are laid a crown and a sword. He is asked *whether that is the skeleton of a king, nobleman or a beggar*. As he cannot decide, the president of the meeting says to him, 'The character of being a man is the only one that is of importance' " (my italics).

Doesn't that sound similar to the German slogan the File and Claw team claims to have found inside Bones? Now consider a haunting photograph of the altar room of one of the Masonic lodges at Nuremburg that is closely associated with Illuminism. Haunting because at the altar room's center, approached through an aisle of hanging human skeletons, is a coffin surmounted by—you guessed it—a skull and crossed bones that look exactly like the particular arrangement of jawbones and thighbones in the official Bones emblem. The skull and crossbones was the official crest of another key Illuminist lodge, one right-wing Illuminist theoretician told me.

Now you can look at this three ways. One possibility is that the Bircher right—and the conspiracy-minded left—are correct: the Eastern establishment is the demonic creation of a clandestine elite manipulating history, and Skull and Bones is one of its recruiting centers. A more plausible explanation is that the death's-head symbolism was so prevalent in Germany when the impressionable young Russell visited that he just stumbled on the same mother lode of pseudo-Masonic mummery as the Illuminists. The third possibility is that the break-in pamphlets are an elaborate fraud designed by the File and Claw crew to pin the taint of Illuminism on Bones and that the rituals of Bones have innocent Athenian themes, 322 being *only* the date of the death of Demosthenes. (In fact, some Bones literature I've seen in the archives does express the year as if 322 B.C. were the year one, making 1977 anno Demostheni 2299.)

I am still following the dark-suited Bonesmen at a discreet distance as they make their way along Prospect Street and into a narrow alley, which, to my dismay, turns into a parking lot. They get into a car and drive off, obviously to tap an off-campus prospect. So much for tonight's clandestine work. I'd never get to my car in time to follow them. My heart isn't in it, anyway. I am due to head off to the graveyard to watch

the initiation ceremony of Book and Snake, the secret society of Deep Throat's friend Bob Woodward (several Deep Throat theories have postulated Yale secret-society ties as the origin of Woodward's underground-garage connection, and two Bonesmen, Ray Price and Richard Moore,

who were high Nixon aides, have been mentioned as suspects—perhaps because of their experience at clandestine underground truth telling). And later tonight I hope to make the first of my contacts with persons who have been inside—not just inside the tomb, but inside the skulls of some of the Bonesmen.

Later Thursday Night: Turning the Tables on the Sexual Autobiographies

In his senior year, each member of Bones goes through an intense two-part confessional experience in the Bones crypt. One Thursday night, he tells his life story, giving what is meant to be a painfully forthright autobiography that exposes his traumas, shames and dreams. (Tom Wolfe calls this Bones practice a forerunner of The Me Decade's fascination with self.) The following Sunday-night session is devoted exclusively to sexual histories. They don't leave out anything these days. I don't know what it was like in General Russell's day, maybe there was less to talk about, but these days the sexual stuff is totally explicit and there's less need for fabricating exploits to fill up the allotted time. Most Sunday-night sessions start with talk of prep-school masturbation and don't stop until

According to one source, each initiate gets a no-strings, tax-free gift of \$15,000 from the Russell Trust Association just for having been selected by Bones.

the intimate details of Saturday night's delights have come to light early Monday morning.

This has begun to cause some disruptions in relationships. The women the Bonesmen talk about in the crypt are often Yale co-eds and frequently feminists. While it might seem to be a rebuke to Bones's spirit of consciousness raising, none of these women is too pleased at having the most intimate secrets of her relationship made the subject of an all-night symposium consecrating her lover's brotherhood with fourteen males she hardly knows. As one woman put it, "I objected to fourteen guys knowing whether I was a good lay. . . . It was like after that each of them thought I was his woman in some way."

Some women have discovered that their lovers take their vows to Bones more solemnly than their commitments to women. There is the case of the woman who revealed something very personal—not embarrassing, just private—to her lover and made him swear never to repeat it to another human. When he came back from the Bones crypt after his Sunday-night sex session, he couldn't meet her eyes. He'd told his brothers in Bones.

It seems that the whole secret-society system at Yale is in the terminal stages of a sexual crisis. By the time I arrived this April, all but three of the formerly all-male societies had gone co-ed, and two of the remaining holdouts—Scroll and Key and Wolf's Head—were embroiled in bitter battles over certain members' attempts to have them follow the trend. The popular quarterback of the football team had resigned from Scroll and Key because its alumni would not even let him make a pro-coeducation plea to their convocation. When one prominent alumnus of Wolf's Head was told the current members had plans to tap women, he threatened to "raze the building" before permitting it. Nevertheless, it seemed as though it wouldn't be long before those two holdouts went co-ed. But not

Bones. Both alumni and outsiders see the essence of the Bones experience as some kind of male bonding, a Victorian, muscular, Christian-missionary view of manliness and public service.

While changing the least of all the societies over its one hundred forty-five years, Bones did begin admitting Jews in the early Fifties and tapping blacks in 1949. It offered membership to some of the most outspoken rebels of the late Sixties and, more recently, added gay and bisexual members, including the president of the militant Gay Activist Alliance, a man by the name of Miles.

But women, the Bones alumni have strenuously insisted, are different. When a rambunctious Seventies class of Bones proposed tapping the best and brightest

of the new Yale women, the officers of the Russell Trust Association threatened to bar that class from the tomb and change the locks if they dared. They didn't.

That sort of thing is what persuaded the person I am meeting with late tonight—and a number of other persons—to talk about what goes on inside: after all, isn't the core of the Bones group experience the betrayal of their loved ones' secrets? Measure for measure.

Tuesday, April 20: Initiation Night— Tales of the Tomb and Deer Island

When I return to New Haven on initiation night to stand again in the shadows across the street from Bones in the hope of glimpsing an initiate enter, it is, thanks to my sources (who insist on anonymity), with a greater sense of just what it means for the initiate to be swallowed up by the tomb for the first time.

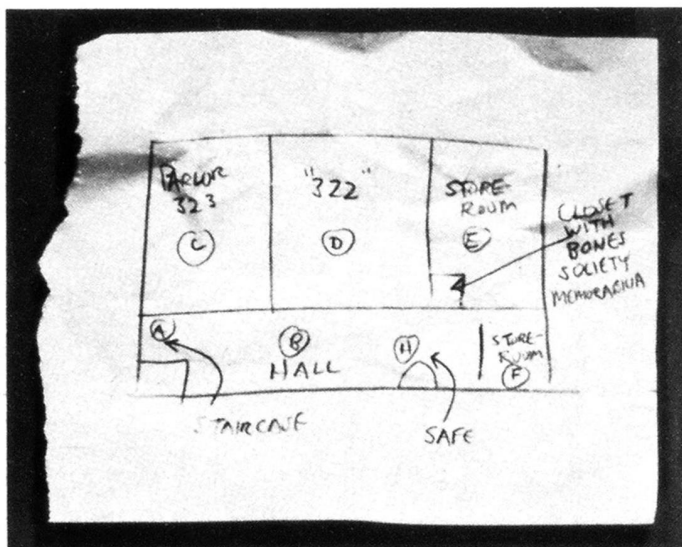
The first initiate arrives shortly before eight p.m., proceeds up the steps and halts at attention in front of the great door. I don't see him ring a bell; I don't think he has to. They are expecting him. The doors open. I can't make out who or what is inside, but the initiate's reaction is unmistakable: he puts his hands up as if a gun has been pointed at him. He walks into the gloom and the door closes behind him.

Earlier, according to my source, before the initiate was allowed to approach that door, he was led blindfolded to a Bones house somewhere on Orange Street and conducted to the basement. There two older Bonesmen dressed in skeleton suits had him swear solemn oaths to keep secret whatever he was to experience in the tomb during the initiation rite and forever after.

Now I am trying to piece together what I know about what is happening to that

initiate tonight and, more generally, how his life will change now that he has been admitted inside. Tonight he will die to the world and be born again into the Order, as he will thenceforth refer to it. The Order is a world unto itself in which he will have a new name and fourteen new blood brothers, also with new names.

The "death" of the initiate will be as frightful as the liberal use of human skeletons and ritual psychology can make it. Whether it's accompanied by physical beatings or wrestling or a plunge into a mud or dung pile I have not been able to verify, but I'd give a marginally higher reliability rating to the mud-pile plunge. Then it's into the coffin and off on a symbolic journey through the underworld to rebirth, which takes place in room number 322. There (*Continued on page 148*)



Floor plan of Bones as sketched by an 1877 break-in crew.

ber tell them that they were not competent to judge his performance. "You didn't come to Boston University because of your fullness," he said. "You came because of your emptiness." But only 500 of them out of a student body of 23,700 called for Silber's resignation. The rest, for the most part, had ceased caring.

So no one had a plan except John Silber. John Silber's plan was to keep his job. He sent all the trustees a Becker research report showing that the image of B.U. was vastly improved since he had taken over. He saw that they were bombarded with telegrams and letters from major figures in politics and education, all supporting him, and dentistry dean Goldman saw that they heard from the dentists. "I got phone calls from every damn dentist in town," said one trustee. Silber made certain they understood that the B.U. crisis was part of a national epidemic: since December, ten college faculties had asked their presidents to resign. One of those faculties, as it happened, was at the University of Maryland's Baltimore campus, and the man they had asked to resign was none other than Calvin Lee, the former B.U. acting president whom the faculty had preferred to John Silber back in 1970. On April 27, when the full board of trustees convened, a lot of trustees showed up who thought that John Silber was just wonderful and that the review committee had put him through a terrible, trying time. Hans Estin

called the board meeting to order, went through the routine agenda and then came to the issue of Silber's presidency. He asked Silber to leave the room.

"I refused," Silber recalled. "And he said, 'John, for goodness' sake, why can't you behave like a gentleman and leave the room?' And I said, 'Hans, don't talk to me about being a gentleman. My poke is on the table. My career, my life, my employability, everything else, is on the table. And what have you invested? A half of an afternoon.' I said, 'I'll tell you what, Hans. You put your poke on the table. I hear you are worth something like five to ten million dollars, maybe more. Put everything on the table—not part of it—put everything on the table, because that's what I have on the table. And then you and I will walk out of the room together. And if they give me a vote of confidence, I'll pick up your poke. And if they give you a vote of confidence, you've got mine. But don't tell me to leave the room while you've got nothing invested and I have everything invested.'"

John Silber stayed in the room. He defended himself brilliantly. His supporter Arthur Metcalf defended him brilliantly. The Estin forces did manage to get through a plan to reorganize B.U., but in a way that John Silber knew he could eventually work out to his advantage. In the end, the trustees gave Silber a unanimous vote of confidence—with two abstentions—and it was over. Against all the odds and most

of the forces at Boston University, John Silber had prevailed.

For quite a while, the people at Boston University did not know it was over. Peter Gabriel knew and resigned as dean on May 4, 1976. But he was almost alone in understanding what had happened. On May 20, when the final reorganization plan was announced, a few more people realized that Silber was likely to retain his power. Some of the vice-presidents were fired. Dean Warren Ilchman quit. The 1976-77 school year began. Hans Estin resigned as board chairman, and Arthur Metcalf took his place. John Silber was appointed to Jimmy Carter's advisory panel on education. He was writing articles for *Harper's* and giving interviews to *Yankee* magazine. "It's not the average annual income of a family that keeps it in poverty," he was saying. "It's the lack of direction, control, understanding, knowledge of how to cope." In short, John Silber was still there. His salary was now eighty thousand dollars a year. And finally the reality began to dawn. How would B.U. ever get rid of him? Who would hire him? Who could afford to hire him? The crisis at B.U. had made John Silber's negative qualities so visible that no one else might ever pluck him away.

Still, there was one bright spot to it all. It wasn't much, but it was better than nothing: if Silber ever did resign, B.U. would have no difficulty finding a new president. John Silber had made the place famous. #

The Last Secrets of Skull and Bones

(Continued from page 89) the Order clothes the newborn knight in its own special garments, implying that henceforth he will tailor himself to the Order's mission.

Which is—if you take it at face value—to produce an alliance of good men. The Latin for "good men" is "*boni*," of course, and each piece of Bones literature sports a Latin maxim making use of "*boni*." "Good men are rare," is the way one maxim translates. "Of all societies none is more glorious nor of greater strength than when good men of similar morals are joined in intimacy," proclaims another.

The intimacy doesn't really begin to get going until the autobiographical sessions start in September. But first there are some tangible rewards. In the months that follow tonight's initiation, the born-again Bonesmen will begin to experience the wonderful felicity of the Protestant ethic: secular rewards just happen to accrue to the elect as external tokens of their inner blessedness.

Fifteen thousand dollars, for instance. According to one source, each initiate gets a no-strings, tax-free gift of fifteen thousand dollars from the Russell Trust Association just for having been selected by Bones. I'd heard rumors that Bonesmen were guaranteed a secure income for life in some way—if only to prevent a downtrodden alcoholic brother from selling the sec-

rets for a few bucks. When I put this question to my source, the reply was that of course the society would always help a downtrodden member with interest-free loans, if necessary, but, he added, the only outright contribution was a flat fifteen-thousand-dollar payment.

When I mentioned the fifteen-thousand-dollar figure to writer Tom Powers, a member of a secret society called Elihu, he, like members of other secret societies, professed incredulity. But the day after I spoke to him I received this interesting communication from Powers:

"I have checked with a Bones penetration and am now inclined to think you have got the goods where the fifteen thousand dollars is concerned. A sort of passive or negative confirmation. I put the question to him and he declined to comment in a tone of voice that might have been, but was not, derisory. Given an ideal opportunity to say, 'That's bullshit!' he did not.

"The interesting question now is what effect the fifteen-thousand-dollar report is going to have on next tap day. The whole Bones mystique will take on a mercenary air, sort of like a television game show. If there is no fifteen thousand, the next lineup of tappees will be plenty pissed. I can hear the conversations now: outgoing Bones members telling prospects there is one

thing they've got to understand, really and truly—there is no fifteen thousand!!! While the prospects will be winking and nudging and saying, 'I understand. Ha-ha! You've got to say that, but just between us. . . .'

"If Bones has got a cell in C.I.A.," Powers concluded his letter, "you could be in big trouble."

Ah, yes. The Bones cell in the Central Intelligence Agency. Powers had called my attention to a passage in Aaron Latham's new novel, *Orchids for Mother*, in which the thinly veiled version of C.I.A. master spy James Angleton recalls that the Agency is "Langley's New Haven all over again. . . . Secret society'd be closer, like Skull and Bones."

"There are a lot of Bonesmen around, aren't there?" asks a young C.I.A. recruit.

Indeed, says the master spy, with all the Bones spooks it's "a regular haunted house."

If you were a supersecret spy agency seeking to recruit the most trustworthy and able men for dangerous missionary work against the barbarian threat, wouldn't you want someone whose life story, character and secrets were already known to you? You'd certainly want to know if there were any sexual proclivities that might make the future spy open to temptation or blackmail.

Now, I'm not saying the C.I.A. has

bugged the Bones crypt (although who could rule it out with certainty?). But couldn't the Agency use old Bonesmen to recruit new ones, or might they not have a trusted descendant of a Bonesman—just one in each fifteen would be enough—advise them on the suitability of the other fourteen for initiation into postgraduate secrets?

Consider the case of once gung-ho C.I.A. Bonesman William Sloane Coffin, who later became a leader of the antiwar movement. A descendant of an aptly named family with three generations of Bonesmen, Coffin headed for the C.I.A. not long after graduation from Bones. And the man Coffin tapped for Bones, William F. Buckley Jr., was himself tapped by the C.I.A. the following year.

When I tried to reach Coffin to ask him about C.I.A. recruiting in Bones, I was told that he was "in seclusion," writing his memoirs. (Okay, Chaplain, but I want to let you know that I'll be looking in your memoirs to see just how much you tell about the secrets of Bones and the C.I.A., how loyal you still are to their secrets. Which side are you on?)

In the late summer following his initiation, right before he begins his senior year, the initiate is given a gift of greater value than any putative fifteen-thousand-dollar recruitment fee: his first visit to the private resort island owned and maintained by the Russell Trust Association in the St. Lawrence River. There, hidden among the Thousand Islands, the reborn initiate truly finds himself on an isle of the blessed. For there, on this place called Deer Island, are assembled the active Bones alumni and their families, and there he gets a sense of how many powerful establishment institutions are run by wonderful, civilized, silver-haired Bonesmen eager to help the initiate's establishment dreams come true. He can also meet the wives of Bonesmen of all ages and get a sense of what kind of woman is most acceptable and appropriate in Bones society and perhaps even meet that most acceptable of all types of women—the daughter of a Bonesman.

A reading of the lists of Bonesmen selected over the past one hundred forty-five years suggests that like the secret society of another ethnic group, certain powerful families dominate: the Tafts, the Whitneys, the Thachers, the Lords, for instance. You also get the feeling there's a lot of intermarriage among these Bones families. Year after year there will be a Whitney Townsend Phelps in the same Bones class as a Phelps Townsend Whitney. It's only natural, considering the way they grow up together with Bones picnics, Bones outings and a whole quiet panoply of Bones social events outside the campus and the tomb. Particularly on the island.

Of course, if the initiate has grown up in a Bones family and gone to picnics on the island all his life, the vision—the introduction to powerful people, the fine manners, the strong bonds—is less awesome. But to the nonhereditary slots in a Bones class of fifteen, the outsiders—frequently the football captain,

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the editor of the *Yale Daily News*, a brilliant scholar, a charismatic student politician—the island experience comes as a seductive revelation: these powerful people want me, want my talents, my services; perhaps they even want my genes. Play along with their rules and I can become one of them. They want me to become one of them.

In fact, one could make a half-serious case that functionally Bones serves as a kind of ongoing informal establishment eugenics project bringing vigorous new genes into the bloodlines of the Stimsonian elite. Perhaps that explains the origin of the sexual autobiography. It may have served some eugenic purpose in General Russell's vision: a sharing of birth-control and self-control methods to minimize the chance of a good man and future steward of the ruling class being trapped into marriage by a fortune hunter or a working-class girl—the way the grand tour for an upper-class American youth always included an initiation into the secrets of Parisian courtesans so that once back home the young man wouldn't elope with the first girl who let him get past second base.

However, certain of the more provincial Bones families do not welcome *all* genes into the pool. There is a story about two very well-known members of a Bones class who haven't spoken to each other for more than two decades. One of them was an early Jewish token member of Bones who began to date the sister of a fellow Bonesman. Apparently the Christian family made its frosty reaction to this development very plain. The Christian Bonesman did not convince his Jewish blood brother he was entirely on his side in the matter. The dating stopped and so did the speaking. It's an isolated incident, and I wouldn't have brought it up had I not been told of the "Jew-canoe" incident, which happened relatively recently.

There's a big book located just inside the main entrance to Bones. In it are some of the real secrets. Not the initiation rites or the grip, but reactions to, comments on and mementos of certain things that went on in the tomb, personal revelations, interpersonal encounters. The good stuff. I don't know if the tale of the brokenhearted token gay and the rotting-paella story are in there, but they should be. I'm almost sure the mysterious "Phil" incident *isn't* there. (According to one source, the very mention of the name "Phil" is enough to drive certain Bonesmen up the wall.) But the unfortunate "Jew-canoe" incident *is* in that book.

It seems that not too long ago the boys in a recent Bones class were sitting around the tomb making some wisecracks that involved Jewish stereotypes. "He drives a Cadillac—you know, the Jew canoe." Things like that. Well, one Jewish token member that year happened to be present, but his blood brothers apparently didn't think he'd mind—it being only in fun and all that. Then it got more intense, as it can in groups when a wound is suddenly opened in one of their number. The Jewish member stalked out of the tomb,

tears in his eyes, feeling betrayed by his brothers and thinking of resigning forthwith. But he didn't. He went back and inscribed a protest in the big book, at which time his brothers, suitably repentant, persuaded him not to abandon the tomb.

Outsiders often do have trouble with the Bones style of intimacy. There was, for instance, the story of one of the several token bisexuals and gays that Bones has tapped in recent years. He had the misfortune to develop, during the long Thursday and Sunday nights of shared intimacy, a deep affection for a member of his fifteen-man coven who declared himself irrevocably heterosexual. The intimacy of the tomb experience became heartbreaking and frustrating for the gay member. When the year came to a close and it came time to pick the next group of fifteen from among the junior class, he announced that he was not going to tap another token gay and recommended against gay membership because he felt the experience was too intense to keep from becoming sexual.

There's a kind of backhanded tribute to something genuine there. The Bones experience can be intense enough to work real transformations. Idle, preppie Prince Hals suddenly become serious students of society and themselves, as if acceptance into the tomb were a signal to leave the tavern and prepare to rule the land. Those embarrassed at introspection and afraid of trusting other men are given the mandate and the confidence to do so.

"Why," said one source, "do old men—seventy and over—travel thousands of miles for Bones reunions? Why do they sing the songs with such gusto? Where else can you hear Archibald MacLeish take on Henry Luce in a soul-versus-capital debate with no holds barred? Bones survives because the old men who are successful need to convince themselves that not luck or wealth put them where they are, but raw talent, and a talent that was recognized in their youth. Bones, because of its elitism, connects their past to their present. It is more sustaining, for some, than marriage."

Certainly the leaders that Bones has turned out are among the more humane and civilized of the old Yankee establishment. In addition to cold warriors, Viet warriors and spies, there are as many or more missionaries, surgeons, writers (John Hersey, Archibald MacLeish) and great teachers (William Graham Sumner, F.O. Matthiessen) as there are investment bankers. There is, in the past of Bones, at least, a genuine missionary zeal for moral, and not merely surplus, value.

It's now a century since the break-in pamphlet of the File and Claw crew announced "the decline and fall of Skull and Bones," so it would be premature for me to announce the imminence of such an event, but almost everyone I spoke to at Yale thought that Bones was in headlong decline. There have been unprecedented resignations. There have been an increasing

number of rejections—people Bones wants who don't want Bones. Or who don't care enough to give up two nights a week for the kind of marathon encounter any Esalen graduate can put on in the Bougainvillea Room of the local Holiday Inn. Intimacy is cheap and zeal is rare these days. The word is out that Bones no longer gets the leaders of the class but lately has taken on a more lackadaisical, hedonist, comfortable—even, said some, decadent—group. (I was fascinated to learn from my source that some Bones members still partake in certain sacraments of the Sixties. Could it be that the old black magic of Bones ritual has kind of lost its spell and needs a psychedelic dramatizing these days?)

And the reasons people give now for joining Bones are often more foreboding than the rejections. They talk about the security of a guaranteed job with one of the Bones-dominated investment banks or law firms. They talk about the contacts and the connections and maybe in private they talk about the fifteen thousand dollars (regardless of whether Bones actually delivers the money, it may deliberately plant the story to lure apathetic but mercenary recruits). Bones still has the power to corrupt, but does it have the power to inspire? The recent classes of Bones just do not, it seems, take themselves as seriously as General Russell or Henry Stimson or Blackford Oakes might want them to.

The rotting-paella story seems a perfect emblem of the decay. The story goes that a recent class of Bones decided they would try to cook a meal in the basement kitchen of the tomb. It was vacation time and the servants were not on call to do it for them. They produced a passable paella, but left the remains of the meal there in the basement kitchen, presuming that someone would be in to clean up after them. Nobody came in for two weeks. When they returned, they found the interior of the tomb smelling worse than if there actually *had* been dead bodies there. The servants refused to cook the meal for the next autobiographical session unless the Bonesmen cleaned up the putrefying paella themselves. The Bonesmen went without food. I don't know who finally cleaned up, but there's a sense that like the paella, the original mission of Bones has suffered from neglect and apathy and that the gene pool, like the stew, is becoming stagnant.

I began to feel sorry for the old Bonesmen: after a few days of asking around, I found the going too easy; almost too many people were willing to spill their secrets. I had to call a halt. In the spirit of Bonesman Gifford Pinchot, godfather of the conservation movement, I'm protecting some of the last secrets—they're an endangered species. I have to save some for my novel. And besides, I like mumbo jumbo.

It's strange: I didn't exactly set out to write an exposé of Skull and Bones, but neither did I think I'd end up with an elegy. #

THE LAST SECRETS OF SKULL AND BONES

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