Is Geronimo's skull residing at Yale's Skull and Bones? Was it stolen from the grave by Prescott Bush?

11-Nov-2005

Dear Cecil:

I'm getting mixed signals on a story about the great Native American leader Geronimo. According to various references, his bones were stolen from his grave in Fort Sill, Oklahoma, where he was a prisoner until his death. Some accounts claim they now reside in the famous Tomb at Yale's Skull and Bones Society. One version of the story has the president's grandfather, Prescott Bush, being the man who took them. Any definitive answer on this? --Ben Fenwick, Oklahoma City

Cecil replies:

This story has everything--famous names, a secret society, a generous helping of the macabre. What it doesn't have a lot of is facts. Here's one thing we can say for sure: that the young whippersnappers at Skull and Bones, a supposedly-but-not-really supersecret undergraduate society at Yale, thought for years that they had Geronimo's bones in their clubhouse, the Tomb. On the far-from-certain list is this: that they ever did.

The legendary Apache warrior Geronimo died a captive of the U.S. Army at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, in 1909 and was buried there in an Apache cemetery. As far as anybody knew that's where the body stayed until the 1980s, when Ned Anderson, a leader of the San Carlos Apache, agitated to have Geronimo's remains returned to his native Arizona. In the wake of the publicity Anderson's group got an unexpected letter. The writer, claiming to be a member of Skull and Bones, said Geronimo's bones had been stolen by several S&B alumni during a late-night grave robbery in 1918, apparently while the men were serving as army officers at Fort Sill. The bones supposedly had been on private display at the Tomb ever since. The letter writer subsequently delivered a photo showing a display case with a skull in it and a picture of Geronimo nearby, plus a copy of a purported internal S&B history telling of the 1918 raid. ("Crooks"--exploits in which members steal treasures from nonmembers, or "barbarians"--are a hallowed S&B tradition.) According to the history, one of the thieves was Prescott Bush, father of U.S. president number 41 and grandfather of number 43.

The outraged Apache traveled to New York to meet with S&B representatives and demand that Geronimo's S&B be returned. In one account of the meetings the S&B people admit, "We have a skull that we call Geronimo." Alexandra Robbins, in *Secrets of the Tomb: Skull and Bones, the Ivy League, and the Hidden Paths of Power* (2002), says S&B offered to give the Apache the abovementioned display case and a skull. But they also said they'd had the skull examined and found it wasn't Geronimo's but rather that of a ten-year-old boy. Suspicious, the Apache refused the offer, and there's been no progress to speak of since. The story still surfaces occasionally, playing into rants about the tyrannical Bush family, S&B as an arm of the Illuminati, callous treatment of Native Americans, and so on.

But here's the thing: There's no good reason to believe Geronimo's remains ever left Oklahoma, and plenty of reasons to think they didn't. One obvious problem is the description of the theft in the S&B history: "The ring of pick on stone and thud of earth on earth alone disturbs the peace of the prairie. An axe pried open the iron door of the tomb, and Pat [short for 'patriarch,' the honorific used among S&B alums] Bush entered and started to dig. . . . At the exact bottom of the small round hole, Pat James dug deep and pried out the trophy itself. . . . We quickly closed the grave, shut the door and sped home."

What a hoot, eh? Trouble is, the description bears no relationship to the actual burial place, which wasn't a mausoleum with a door, as the account suggests, but rather a conventional grave in the ground. An S&B representative has described the "crook" account as a hoax, and no less than celebrity biographer Kitty Kelley, in *The Family: The Real Story of the Bush Dynasty* (2004), writes that the whole thing was a tall tale cooked up by Prescott Bush and friends that made its way into S&B lore. OK, so Kelley isn't a sterling source, but most accounts agree that stories of Geronimo's bones having been moved were circulating before 1918--put in play, perhaps, by the local Apache in hopes of discouraging thieves. (Today the grave is covered by a concrete slab and marked with a pyramid of stones, but these were added after 1918.) A Fort Sill spokesman tells me, "There is no evidence to indicate the bones are anywhere but in the grave site."

One never knows, of course. Conceivably if the various Apache factions got together and demanded that the grave be exhumed, the feds would cave and we could settle the matter once and for all. As it stands, I'm betting what's left of Geronimo is still at Fort Sill.

--CECIL ADAMS