

Ron Rosenbaum's 1977 Esquire Magazine... Skull and Bones Article

by **Ron Rosenbaum**
Esquire Magazine
September, 1977
from [PrisonPlanet](#) Website

Esquire Magazine
September, 1977

Take a look at the 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](#) (Time magazine) lay down naked in the coffin and spilled the secrets of their adolescent sex life to 14 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 pie 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 William F. Buckley, both of who went into the CIA after leaving Bones - or **George Bush**, who ran the CIA / President - whether their Skull and Bones experience was useful training for the clandestine trade. ("Spook," the Yale 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.

You could ask... but I think you get the idea.

The lending lights of the Eastern establishment - in old-line investment banks (Brown Brothers Harriman pays Bone's tax bill), in a 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 a 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 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 the *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 adventuresome: he walked right up to 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 grasped, 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 tranquility, the 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 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 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 the 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..."

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 level 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.

The dossier of 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 194^o went like this:

"New man placed in coffin - carried into central part of the 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 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 the 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 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 function 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 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 mega-cabal 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 Bone'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-head brand of mumbo jumbo to embody his vision.

Well, according to the *File and Claw* breaking crew,

"Bones is a chapter of 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 BC."

They go on to describe a German slogan painted "on 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 Robinson) 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 in the "Regent degree" of Illuminism, according to the tract,

"a skeleton in 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 importance'".

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 the 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 BC were the year one, making 1977 anno Demostheni 2299.)

I am still following the dark-suited Bonesman 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 fore-runner 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 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 Bone'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 alumna 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 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.

The 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.

[Return to Skull and Bones](#)