

THE BIRMINGHAM ANTHROPOLOGICAL SOCIETY

PRESENTS

STONES & BONES

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We are particularly anxious to have all members attend our January 3rd meeting. This is for the purpose of electing officers for the forthcoming year. The officers to be considered are President, Vice President, Secretary-Treasurer, Editor, and three Trustees. Nominations, as usual, will be accepted from the floor, and we hope a fine turn-out and considerable enthusiasm and politicing will result in a good slate for '58.

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In addition to the business meeting, Mrs. Lloyd G. Bowers is going to continue the trip through Europe which began in Greece and Italy and covered part of Southern France. This part of the tour will continue through France and cover England, Scotland and Ireland. She has some slides of Stonehenge, as well as many other well known places which should undoubtedly be of considerable interest to our members.

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As many of you know, our T.V. show has been so warmly received we have been encouraged to continue for the entire year. Our programs will now run through May. As a result, we anticipate having a continued increase in our membership, and I think we all can share the pride that one year's effort on our parts has perhaps done more to bring the field of archaeology to the attention of folks in Alabama than any other single thing. It is our hope that we can interest certain business houses to further finance this program and to aid us in the areas that we have been carrying alone; namely, expenses for out of town guests, printing, etc.

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Our Past President, Mr. James Wilkinson, one of the strongest, most cooperative and best loved members of our Society, passed away in mid-December. Every one who knew him felt his warmth and charm. We plan to donate some books to the Birmingham Public Library in his memory. Anyone who wishes to share in this project may give their contribution to Mr. Bill Steele. The books purchased will be current items, primarily those covering archaeology in the Southeastern States.

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THE SACRED WELL

One of the most interesting and unusual archaeological sites on the continent of North America is the sacred well of Chichen-Itza which is near the ancient Mayan city of Chichen-Itza. This "well" is an enormous natural cavity in rock, about one hundred and sixty feet across at the widest point. From the brink of this great pit is a sheer drop of seventy feet to the surface of the water, the depth of which is about sixty feet.

From the time of the Spanish conquest, old traditions described the well of Chichen-Itza as the scene of cruel and inhuman sacrificial practices. Bishop Diego de Lands in his book, Relacion de las Cosas de Yucatan, states:

"From the court in front of these theatres (at Chichen-Itza) runs a wide and handsome roadway as far as the Well, which is about two stone's throws off. Into this well they have had and still have the custom of throwing men alive as a sacrifice to their gods in time of drought, and they believed that they would not die, though they never saw them again. They also threw in many other things like precious stones and things they prized, and so if this country had possessed gold it would have been this Well that would have the greater part of it, so great is the devotion that the Indians show for it."

There were other legends that women were flung into the water unbound and later hauled out by ropes and questioned. Don Diego Sarmiento de Figueroa, writing in 1579, gave this account in a report to Charles V of Spain:

"The Lords and principal personages of the land had the custom, after sixty days of abstinence and fasting, of arriving at daybreak at the month of the Cenote and throwing into it Indian women belonging to each of these lords and personages, at the same time telling these

women to ask for their masters a year favourable to his particular needs and desires.

The women, being thrown in unbound, fell into the water with great force and noise. At high noon those that could cried out loudly and ropes were let down to them. After the women came up, half dead, fires were built around them and copal incense was burned before them. When they recovered their senses, they said that below there were many people of their nation, men and women, and that they received them. When their heads were inclined downwards beneath the water, they seemed to see many deeps and hollows, and they, the people responded to their queries concerning the good or the bad year that was in store for their masters."

These reports concerning the sacred well were proved to be true by an American, Edward Thompson, who spent thirty years of his life studying and excavating the remains at the site of Chichen-Itza. Thompson decided to explore the well by use of a dredging apparatus and diving operations, which were highly successful. Confirmation of the grim truth of the old rumors is described by T. A. Williard in his book, The City of the Sacred Well. Williard states, "The dredge brought up a perfect skull, bleached and polished to whiteness. Later came other skulls and human bones, scores of them. Most of the skeletons were of youthful maids, but every now and then one was raised which had the breadth of shoulders, and the thick skull, and the heavy frame of a powerful man - no doubt some mighty warrior, sacrificed in the flower of his vigour, sent to grace the court of the Rain God."

Along with the human remains, Thompson's dredge produced hundreds of archaeological treasures. The balls of copal used as incense by the ancient Mayas were so numerous as to become monotonous, though they testified to the number of sacrifices and offerings which had been made throughout the centuries. But other artifacts appeared in the dredge; temple vases and incense burners, lande-heads, arrow-heads, axes and hammer-stones of flint, copper chisels, and discs of beaten copper, some of them embossed with figures of ancient gods of the Mayas. There were also golden objects, especially a large quantity of small golden bells, which had been deliberately flattened with a heavy maul before being thrown into the water. Lovely jade ornaments were found also, but these too appear to have been deliberately broken; not pulverized, but snapped apart so that it was not difficult to put them together again.

After the dredge had been employed to scoop out a huge hole in the layer of mud on the well's bottom, diving operations began. On the floor of the well the archaeologist came upon large, smooth-faced stones, some

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of which were carved, as he was able to detect by touch. These were attached to chains and hauled to the surface. One had carved on it a seated figure of a god or priest. Once these heavy objects were cleared, Thompson was able to explore the crevices and hollows in the bottom. As his fingers probed, they touched small objects of stone and metal, which he stuffed into a pouch at his side. On the surface he emptied out the pouch and saw the gleam of gold and the glistening green of jade. There were jade beads, beautiful embossed rings, and scores of small bells, also of gold. In one day two hundred of these specimens of Maya workmanship were brought to the surface. There were two golden tiaras representing feathered serpents, emblematic figures, and what appear to have been golden tops of official wands. There were also many articles of copper, or copper and gold alloy; copper circlets and copper chisels. Through Thompson's efforts, the first intact examples of the hul-che or throwing-sticks of the Mayas were found.

The story of the well of Chichen-Itza is a story to thrill every professional or amateur archaeologist. Not only did the many objects recovered add to our knowledge of the Mayan Culture, but the story of Thompson's work proved that the determined and resourceful archaeologist can succeed even under the most difficult and adverse conditions.

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Our T. V. programs for January will consist of:

- January 9 - Mr. Bill McLoughlin telling us about the Inca Indians
- January 16 - Joe Dale and Lewis Larsen covering the Copena Period
- January 23 - Emma Lila Fundaburk, who will review her book,
"Sun Symbols in Human Hands"
- January 30 - Randy Gray and Floyd Taylor are going to show a group of models and tell how they work.

Tell your friends to tune Channels 2, 7 or 10 at 8:30 every Thursday night and we feel sure they will have an enjoyable half-hour.

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GUESTS ARE ALWAYS WELCOME !