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## SUMMARY

There's an old Wrangell legend that dead Chinese cannery workers were left in barrels on Deadmans Island. The legend has been printed, quoted, and repeated. But there are reasons to doubt it is true. To find some answers, we dig into the burial traditions of Chinese, European, and Tlingit residents of southeast Alaska.

# Introduction

Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. We're about to begin our descent into Wrangell. I've asked the flight crew to pass through the cabin and collect any loose items.

For those of you on the left side of the plane, you can see the Wrangell Airport. On the other side, you can see a local landmark, just off the coast: Deadmans Island.

There's a local legend here about Deadmans Island: this is where the bodies of Chinese cannery workers were left in barrels of salt-brine. Not a pretty story, is it?

But lately, there's reason to question this story. In fact, there's a lot of reason doubt where it began.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is your warning. Fasten your seatbelt. It's going to get very, very bumpy.

Today, on Wrangell History Unlocked, it's The Mystery of Deadmans Island.

# Chapter 1. The Legend

## Landing in Wrangell

The first landmark you'll see when you land at the Wrangell Airport is Deadmans Island.

Deadmans Island sits half a mile from the runway, against a backdrop of the mainland and the mouth of the Stikine River. On a foggy morning, Deadmans Island is the first figure to emerge from the mist.

Deadmans Island is small. It's a little bit bigger than a football field, oval in shape, and rising to a ridge. It's home to a few trees, some birds, and crawling wildlife in the thick underbrush. Nobody lives here. But a legend does.

I can say, without a doubt, I've told this legend before. Where did I learn it? It's just part of Wrangell. I don't know. And once you hear it, you'll never forget it.

## Examples

Here's some examples. In 1991, David Wharton wrote in *They Don't Speak Russian in Sitka*:

A special burial ground was set aside at Deadman's Island near Wrangell. The remains of Chinese who died were salted down and buried in the special cemetery. Their preserved bodies were picked up in 1900 and returned to their homeland to be interred with their ancestors.<sup>1</sup>

In 2000, Jim DuFresne, writing in *Alaska*, says that dead Chinese cannery workers:

...were often placed in pickled barrels and stored at Simonof Island until a ship from their native land arrived to take them home. Eventually the spot became known locally as Dead Man's Island.<sup>2</sup>

For the past decade, Insights Guide to Alaska includes this passage:

Deadman Island, next to the Wrangell airport, is said to be where the Chinese preserved their dead in salt-brine barrels until they could be sent home for burial.<sup>3</sup>

When I was in college, I worked a summer job taking tourists around Wrangell. It was always a challenge to find something to capture their interest, and this story never failed. Some tourists have written about hearing the legend from locals. In 2010, kayakers Yannick and Shirley wrote about spending a night on Deadmans Island:

The locals tell us some spooky stories about the ghosts and people that were buried there. Apparently, they used to leave men in pickled barrels along the beach during low tide to await their fate. Another story is about a bunch of Chinese men that were "temporarily" buried here after a cannery fire to await being shipped back home.<sup>4</sup>

In 2019, Howard and Linda visited Wrangell and wrote about hearing the story from a local guide:

Heading over near the airport, Spencer showed us Deadman Island and told us the story of it. Apparently, Chinese cannery workers used to store the bodies of their countrymen in a brine solution in barrels

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<sup>1</sup> David S. Wharton, *They Don't Speak Russian in Sitka*, p. 64.

<sup>2</sup> *Alaska*, by Jim DuFresne, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Insights Guide 2013.

<sup>4</sup> <http://v2.travelark.org/travel-blog-entry/hobos/1/1272547708>

until they could be shipped back to China for burial. Well, that's interesting... and a bit creepy.<sup>5</sup>

## Can't Find Proof

Like I said, I've told this legend countless times. And yet, now that I look for proof, I can't find it. I've looked in old newspapers, government reports, memoirs, photographs, and videos. I can't find anything from the time the cannery was operating that supports this story about Chinese people being left on Deadmans Island.

Despite this, the legend has taken a new status. The United States Geological Survey, which makes the maps for the United States, declares the official description of Deadmans Island:

The island was used as a burial place by Chinese cannery workers around the turn of the century.<sup>6</sup>

Like everyone else who writes about Deadmans Island, the US Geological Survey tells the legend, but doesn't cite an original, primary source to back it up. It's an often repeated, but never substantiated, piece of local lore.

## Oldest Published Version

The Alaska Packers Association cannery in the story shut down in 1927. The oldest published version of the legend I could find is from nearly 40 years later. In 1966, travel-writer Edward Hoagland visited Wrangell and collected local stories. In 1969, he published *Notes from the Century Before*. His version of the legend is very brief, but goes:

We pass Dead Man's Island, where the early Chinese cannery workers were buried...<sup>7</sup>

Close to the same time, Wrangell author Art Clark published a book of his newspaper columns, *A Touch of Wrangellitis*. He wrote:

ARK CLARK: Dead Man's Island was used as a burial ground for Chinese laborers who died while they were working in the fish cannery that stood near the present location of the airport.<sup>8</sup>

The most in-depth piece on Deadmans Island was written in July 2008 by Alaska historian, and Wrangell local, Pat Roppel, in her monthly Wrangell history newsletter:

PAT ROPPEL: Local tradition places this as a site for the Alaska Packers Association management to hold deceased Chinese workers for transport to their motherland at the end of the season... When salmon were salted in barrels, the superintendent realized that a Chinese who wished to be returned home could be preserved with salt in the barrel. The barrels were specially marked and put aboard ships at the end of the season. California and Oregon company personnel could easily arrange for the barrel to be shipped to the Orient. It is said the Alaska Packers Association at Wrangell put many such barrels on Deadman Island. This would guarantee the barrels would not be mixed in with those of salted salmon.<sup>9</sup>

While I can't confirm this story, there's one piece of Pat's story I can confirm. She wrote:

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<sup>5</sup> [https://rv-dreams.typepad.com/rvdreams\\_journal/2019/05/2019-alaska-trip-day-24-morning-beach-combing-afternoon-boat-tour-to-leconte-glacier-wrangell-alaska.html](https://rv-dreams.typepad.com/rvdreams_journal/2019/05/2019-alaska-trip-day-24-morning-beach-combing-afternoon-boat-tour-to-leconte-glacier-wrangell-alaska.html)

<sup>6</sup> USGS GeoNames. Accessed 10.27.2022. <https://edits.nationalmap.gov/apps/gaz-domestic/public/summary/1424952>

<sup>7</sup> Edward Hoagland, David Quammen & Jon Krakauer. "Notes from The Century Before." Apple Books. <https://books.apple.com/us/book/notes-from-the-century-before/id601922195>

<sup>8</sup> *A Touch of Wrangellitis*, p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> Pat Roppel, *Wrangell History*, vol. 4, no. 7, July 2008

PAT ROPPEL: Archeologists found many paths on the island... Archeologists located a marble monument on the west side of the island at the southern end with an inscription and statue monument to R. Shadesty. I have never been ashore, so a report of what is there today will have to come from a reader...

## Visiting Deadmans Island

It's August 2007. It's a beautiful day, the sky is clear, and I'm in a small skiff going out to the north end of Wrangell Island. I'm with my friends David, Marc, and Chase. We're racing to watch a detonation in the side of Point Highfield, a planned blast that will level part of the mountain. I've got a digital camera with me to catch the whole thing. We get there too late, just in time to see a cloud of dust settling down the hillside.

We're disappointed, but we can at least make the trip interesting. We point the bow toward Deadmans Island.

Deadmans Island sits at a busy intersection of waterways. It's where the Zimovia Strait, Bradfield Canal, and Stikine River meet. The island sits alone, with no nearby neighbors. You can see for miles in all directions.

We pull up to the south side of Deadmans Island, inside a natural bight, created by a ridge of rocks sticking out like a breakwater. We tie a line ashore and jump out of the skiff.

The first thing you'll notice about Deadmans Island is how dense it is. It's a world of life, clinging together on this rocky outcropping, surrounded swirling, silty saltwater.

Life doesn't just begin above the tideline. The island is surrounded by seaweed and kelp, and shattered shells speckle the beach.

Above us, through this dense forest, a hill rises to a ridge. It calls to us, and we start to climb. There are clearly trails here, pathways that weave up the side of this island, over roots and around downed trees. As we near the top, sunlight streams through the canopy and illuminates our path.

Up ahead, a figure emerges, laying on the soft, mossy earth. It's a statue of a bear. It's a little hard to make out. Its chiseled features are soft, and moss grows in its crevasses. But it's clearly a bear, with long snout, claws, and ears like a bear. The statue is around 4 feet long, laying on its left side. The name etched at the bottom is hard to read. I take photos with my digital camera, hoping to learn more, someday. We disturb nothing, and leave.

Back on the boat, heading to Wrangell, I flip through my pictures. I zoom into this strange figure, looking for clues.

Are people buried on Deadmans Island, I wonder? Is the legend true?

What I've found is a mystery that crosses continents, cultures, and this life into the next one.

# Chapter 2. The Island

## The Name

In the United States alone, there are 13 places called Deadman Island.<sup>10</sup> Four are in Alaska. And the nearest one to Wrangell is just a few miles away, by Etolin Island.<sup>11</sup>

In Alaska, there's Deadman Bay, Deadman Glacier, Deadman Mountain, Deadman Reach, Deadman Sands. There are multiple Deadman Creek, Deadman Lake, and Deadman Riffle.

A quick web search shows that many places called Deadman Island have creepy local stories attached to them. In Puget Sound, bodies were exhumed on Deadman Island in 2004.<sup>12</sup> In Vancouver, BC, a tour offers:

The Haunting History of Deadman's Island... one of the most haunted islands in North America... home to ghostly lore centuries old."<sup>13</sup>

Wrangell's Deadmans Island sits near the mouth of the busy Stikine river, an ancient passageway for Indigenous people. In this high-traffic area, Deadmans Island's first name was probably in Tlingit. But I failed to find it in the record. The earliest map-makers in Alaska, who assigned many of the names we still use today, often refused to observe Indigenous place names, finding them too difficult to pronounce for their Western audiences.

In 1834, the Russian America Company built a trading post two miles from the north end of Wrangell Island. A Russian map identifies Deadmans Island by the name Observation Island.<sup>14</sup>

The Russians would not last long, and by 1840, the Russians leased the fort to the Hudson Bay Company. The Brits changed Observation Island to Simonoff Island.<sup>15</sup> Who is Simonoff? It's another mystery. But the name stuck for decades. As late as 1916, the U.S. Navy was using it in official notices to mariners.<sup>16</sup>

But in 1915, in the September 2nd issue of the Wrangell Sentinel, the name we all know it by today appeared in print for likely the very first time:

The second drowning in Wrangell the past week happened yesterday when the body of E. Jossila was found in a small pool of water just below the falls of Fall Creek on the mainland about five miles from Wrangell. According to the statement of Herman Esterlund, who found the body and was also the last man to see him alive... They separated to go fishing and then saw his boat the next morning anchored near Dead Man Island, then about six o'clock in the evening as he was returning up the channel he saw the boat anchored at the falls...<sup>17</sup>

This name for the island occasionally appeared in print. In 1935, the Wrangell Sentinel published a story about Dewey Churchill watching five killer whales attack a sperm whale:

Churchill was out in a skiff with an outboard motor when he first sighted the whales three or four miles down the channel drifting with the tide. He was an excited spectator for almost four hours while the battle raged in the channel between the former APA cannery site, and

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<sup>10</sup> [geonames.usgs.gov](https://geonames.usgs.gov). Accessed August 2021.

<sup>11</sup> 1967 Dictionary of Alaska Place Names. p. 260.

<sup>12</sup> 2004 Journal of Northwest Anthropology - Volume 39 Number 2 edited by Roderick Sprague

<sup>13</sup> The haunted history of Deadman's Island -.pdf

<sup>14</sup> 1891 Pacific Coast Pilot Alaska. Dixon Entrance to Yakutat Bay, with the inland passage, Part 1, 91.

<sup>15</sup> 1891 Pacific Coast Pilot Alaska. Dixon Entrance to Yakutat Bay, with the inland passage, Part 1, 91.

<sup>16</sup> 1916 Notices of Mariners by US Navy clipping

<sup>17</sup> 1915.09.02 Wrangell Sentinel

Dead Man's Island... The killers were attacking the big whale from underneath for they would sink out of sight and a moment afterwards the whale would shoot out of the water in convulsive movements and roll over from side to side as though trying to free himself from agonizing agent... The scene was heightened by a flock of seagulls which dived into the water constantly as though picking up chunks of blubber...<sup>18</sup>

## **Wrangell's APA Cannery**

By 1935, the cannery buildings were a shadow of their former selves.

In its heyday, the cannery building lit up with activity during the summer. From 1889 until 1927, the Alaska Packers Association sent men from San Francisco every summer. Fishermen dumped fresh salmon at the docks, which was cleaned, canned, boxed, and stacked inside the hold of a great sailing ship.

The APA was wildly successful, and it built its business on the bedrock foundation of Asian labor — mostly Chinese men. They were contracted in cities, put inside sailing ships, and sent to canneries around Alaska every summer.

But some would not make it home alive.

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<sup>18</sup> 1935.02.22 Wrangell Sentinel clipping

# Chapter 3. The Chinese

## Immigration

Chinese immigrants helped to build the American West, in the mountains, the cities, and up and down the coast.

Chinese men came to America to fill the demand for labor created by American industry. By the middle of the 1800s, a steady stream of typically young, Chinese men from the eastern regions of China was coming to America. Quoting from “Urns, bones and burners: overseas Chinese cemeteries,” by Terry Abraham and Priscilla Wegars:

The big dream was to be able to return as ‘a Gold Mountain Man,’ one who had grown wealthy in the gold fields. Unfortunately for many, the dreams of riches remained dreams. Hard work in often appalling conditions was more likely the norm. Many died under these circumstances.<sup>19</sup>

These immigrants gave up a lot to come to America, but they kept their deeply held, spiritual belief in being buried in China with their ancestors. An organization, the Chinese in Northwest America Research Committee, explains why this belief was so important.

The ostensible reasons, first, the need to ensure that one’s family—ideally one’s sons and grandsons—would be able to make sacrifices at one’s family altar and to maintain one’s grave in the family cemetery, and, second, the belief among Chinese that one had to be buried in the homeland, whether or not one’s family would or could care for the grave.<sup>20</sup>

The importance of reburial extended to Chinese men who signed on as contractors for the Alaska Packers Association. These contractors held little power, but the shared belief in reburial united them. For example, in 1900, Chinese men nearly stopped the salmon season, when they refused to board ships to Alaska until their demands were met. The San Francisco Call wrote:

The Chinese claimed that for a number of years they have been obliged to bury their dead at the place where death occurs, and in many instances the bodies of Chinese are weighted and sunk in the sea. Before the Chinese would depart this year they insisted that a specification be placed in each contract to the effect that should any deaths occur while the Chinese are out of the State the bones of the dead shall be shipped to China at the expense of the commercial companies.<sup>21</sup>

In 1889, while on route to Fort Wrangel, a traveler named E.S. Walker stopped and visited some Chinese graves. He wrote:

On the hillside just in the rear of the village, we visited the grave of a lately deceased Chinese man. At the head was a painted board a couple of feet in height, upon which was inscribed in Chinese characters an epitaph reciting, as we doubt not, the many virtues of the dead celestial, as well as his age and lineage. Just in front of the grave we saw the charred embers of a funeral pyre, upon which it was manifest an offering had been made to the deity whom the deceased or his surviving friends worshiped. Among these were the steel rim of a money purse, the iron frame of a hand satchel, the remnants of a pair of good solid shoes, and a bunch of keys, as also remnants of the

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<sup>19</sup> Terry Abraham and Priscilla Wegars. Urns, bones and burners: overseas Chinese cemeteries. *Australasian Historical Archeology*. Vol. 21 (2003) , p. 59.

<sup>20</sup> CINARC Reburial page, accessed Dec 30, 2020. [http://www.cinarc.org/Death-2.html#anchor\\_119](http://www.cinarc.org/Death-2.html#anchor_119)

<sup>21</sup> 1900.03.26 San Francisco Call.pdf



wearing apparel of the deceased... The soul of the dead celestial, now left to sleep on a foreign shore, as in theory this dead Chinese man must, until his body shall be taken back to China, must indeed be lonesome. Farewell to his grave.<sup>22</sup>

The Western landscape is dotted with Chinese cemeteries, typically on gently-sloping hills per the Chinese tradition. When a Chinese man died, the ritual held that he should be wrapped in cloth and buried in the soil. It's a somber, mournful process, but one that shows respect for the body and prepares it for the next step.

After anywhere from 5 to 10 years in the ground, other Chinese people dug up the remains, carefully cleaned the bones, and placed the bones inside a small container with a lid, such as a ceramic cask. The container could be marked, or information placed inside, and it was sent with other similar remains across the sea for China.

The process was expensive, from the unearthing through the changing hands along the way to China. The process became a substantial business, with ships crossing the Pacific to China carrying hundreds of boxes of remains in cargo.

To pay for it, Chinese immigrants formed societies in the United States and collected dues.<sup>23</sup> This shared belief unified Chinese immigrants, and connected them to their ancestral homeland.

Societies like this succeeded in transporting many remains back to China, but they did not get them all. In fact, some Chinese men were buried and never exhumed. In 2015, archeologists on Kodiak Island, Alaska unearthed the remains of 42 Chinese men buried near a former cannery site. The archeologists concluded their paper by stating:

Literature describing the custom of "secondary burial" in which eventually exhumation of the skeletal remains that are sent back to China, is at odds with the individuals that were left behind at the Karluk cannery. It is unclear why these individuals' remains were never recovered... There were burial bricks in several of the graves suggesting that an eventual return to China was expected.<sup>24</sup>

## Tossed Overboard

In 1900, the striking Chinese cannery workers also complained about their bodies being thrown overboard when they died. Burial at sea, against the express wishes of the dead, was a well-documented practice in the APA. Iris Chang, writing in *The Chinese in America: A Narrative History*, discusses the longevity of this practice:

In 1854, the Libertad arrived in San Francisco after eighty days at sea with 180 Chinese—one-fifth of all those who had set out—dead from fever or scurvy. Ship captains routinely threw the dead overboard, and it was not unusual for Chinese passengers to take up collections to prevent this practice and to ensure that the bones of the dead would be returned to their ancestral land.<sup>25</sup>

The APA's most glaring disregard for human remains was likely the wreck of the Star of Bengal in 1908. 111 men died, most of them Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino cannery workers. For months, work crews visited the site of the disaster. Bodies washed ashore, often in pieces, creating a gruesome sight. The crew collected the remains of any White men for return south. They buried the bodies of the Asian cannery workers on the island. Eyewitness Patrick Loftus testified to what he saw:

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<sup>22</sup> 1889.09.22 Daily Illinois State Register.pdf

<sup>23</sup> 1870. William Speer, *The Oldest and the Newest Empire: China and the United States*. p. 614

<sup>24</sup> 2015 Osteobiography of 19th Century Chinese Salmon Cannery Workers.pdf

<sup>25</sup> Chang Iris. - *The Chinese in America\_ a narrative history*.pdf, p. 45.

Patrick Loftus: I was doing the cooking, the others buried them.

Q: Was everything done you think to give those people a decent burial afterwards?

PATRICK LOFTUS: I don't know about that. They made stretchers and dug a hole in a long trench, and threw the bodies in there, in this long trench.

Q: Piled them up?

PATRICK LOFTUS: Yes, on top of one another, any old way.

Q: Did he have any coffins with him?

PATRICK LOFTUS: No, sir. I was there and I didn't see them.<sup>26</sup>

In fact, the wreck of the Star of Bengal is a true example of Chinese bodies being left behind on a cold, remote Alaskan island. As the mass grave suggests, there was no intention of exhuming and repatriating these bodies. Unlike the Deadmans Island legend about Chinese bodies, this story about the Star of Bengal has multiple corroborating eyewitness statements and newspaper accounts from the time that it happened.

## Chinese Exclusion

As the number of Chinese immigrants swelled in the 1800s, so too did anti-Chinese rhetoric. It was an issue that united both Democrats and Republicans. The Philadelphia Inquirer noted how how Chinese immigrants were:

...placed between two fires, and are likely to come to grief no matter which party wins.<sup>27</sup>

The shipment of remains aboard vessels bound for China drew attention. The west coast shipping news often included the exact number of boxes<sup>28</sup> containing Chinese remains.<sup>29</sup> Newspapers wrote lurid pieces about shadowy places in the cities where Chinese men and women cleaned human bones.

American politicians zeroed in on the Chinese burial process, as a way to discourage immigration. In 1869, Nevada's Elko Independent newspaper wrote:

...A single statute, which would prevent the removal of their dead bodies from our country, would be more effectual in excluding them than a Chinese wall. Let it be made a penal offense by statute to disturb the remains of the dead after burial, or to attempt to carry away from our shores the mortal remains of one of that people, and the good work of excluding them is accomplished.... Let the law be so framed that every man who gets a dead Chinese man mixed with his soil will have a clear fee simple title to his carcass, bones and all, and provide a heavy penalty for all attempts to rob him of this class of property.<sup>30</sup>

In 1880, Mark Twain sarcastically called this "an ingenious refinement of Christian cruelty" and a "neat underhanded way of deterring Chinese immigration."<sup>31</sup>

In Oregon, the state legislature complained bitterly about Chinese labor, they failed to ban it whenever it came up for a vote, because they all benefited from it. In 1870, The Albany Register wrote:

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<sup>26</sup> Whitney-Newhall, p. 135.

<sup>27</sup> 1873.07.28 Philadelphia\_Inquirer\_1873-07-28\_4.pdf

<sup>28</sup> 1881.12.10 Daily Evening Herald.pdf

<sup>29</sup> 1897.05.11 Seattle\_Daily\_Times.pdf

<sup>30</sup> 1869.09.25 Elko\_Independent\_1869-09-25\_2.pdf

<sup>31</sup> Mark Twain, Roughing It, CHAPTER 54. <https://twain.lib.virginia.edu/roughingit/bufexlet7a.html>

Every effort to legislate against Chinese men has failed, and the champions of such efforts have been made the butt of ridicule... To make the Chinese question more ridiculous, and entirely kill off any further effort to legislate against Chinese men, last week Mr. Hendershott introduced a bill:

Any dead Chinese man who shall attempt to dig up his own bones without giving notice to the Secretary of State, shall be fined \$100... Any Chinese man who shall be born without bones for the purpose of willfully and feloniously evading the provisions of this Act, shall be fined \$500.<sup>32</sup>

## Pickled Meme

Americans were fascinated, and revolted, by Chinese reburial. It became a political hot button topic. The American media began using the term “pickled” for the preservation of Chinese remains.<sup>33</sup>

Here it is in 1889, in the San Francisco Chronicle:

The body of a Chinese who committed suicide at Kayak Island, Alaska, was brought to this city in a fishing schooner yesterday and turned over to the Coroner... The remains were carefully pickled in brine and packed in an air-tight box with large quantities of salt.<sup>34</sup>

The same year, in the Daily Alta California:

Among yesterday’s arrivals was the schooner W. Renton... sixteen and a half days from Kodat, Alaska. On board was a pickled Chinese man... As his countrymen wished to send him back to China the body was salted down and sent here on the Renton.<sup>35</sup>

Everyone knew about pickling as a way to preserve foods. But this was not true pickling.

Pickled foods are preserved in either vinegar or saltwater brine. In order to prevent food from rotting, pickling must be done in airtight containers, or else oxygen gets in feeds bacteria. Meat is typically cooked before pickling. Done correctly, pickled foods can last for years.

Since canneries carried large quantities of salt for canning, and ships often had barrels for storage, in a pinch, they could be used together when someone died. Here’s an example from the 1890 Dallas Times Mountaineer:

Taking the bodies and disemboweling them, Bill salted them thoroughly with salt. He then filled a couple of barrels with strong brine and inserted a Chinese man in each barrel.<sup>36</sup>

Another example from the November 30, 1890 San Francisco Examiner:

The pair in pickle died on the trip down, one of pneumonia and the other of some other sudden ailment. On account of the heavy bond in the contract it would have been an expensive matter to heave the bodies overboard with anchor-chain links attached for sinkers, so the heads of two barrels were knocked out, some salted fish deprived of enough of their salt to make a good brine and the cadavers put in.

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<sup>32</sup> 1870.10.29 Albany\_register\_1870-10-29\_3.pdf

<sup>33</sup> 1890.07.18 San Francisco Chronicle.pdf

<sup>34</sup> 1889.09.23 San Francisco Chronicle.pdf

<sup>35</sup> 1889.09.23 Daily Alta California p1.pdf

<sup>36</sup> 1890.06.21 Dalles Times-Mountaineer.pdf

They were resurrected on the wharf this afternoon and after a short soak in fresh water will be buried in the City Cemetery.<sup>37</sup>

The pattern here is that human remains inside saltwater barrels was always an imperfect, improvised solution at sea. Not ideal, but sufficient to last until arriving at port.

Newspapers certainly had their biases and ability to embellish. But these types of stories appeared as serious news, often in passing, with little comment. It was not told for laughs or to entertain. There's enough evidence here to suggest that this really was a true practice, and the public became aware of it.

## Accidental Cannibal Trope

Once it entered the public's imagination, it gave way to a cultural meme that would last for over a century.

Along with the news, papers also published adventure stories, designed to entertain readers more than to inform. They were set in exotic locations, pitting life versus death, and pitched as true but always stretching believability.

Around the 1880s, these types of stories began featuring a new, disgusting trope.

Here's the earliest example I could find, from the March 29, 1885 New York Dispatch:

...We commenced hauling up a lot of ginger jars, some large and some small... I put my fingers in and pulled out a piece which I hastily crammed in my mouth. I chewed it, but found it salt, so I spat it out. Really it wasn't ginger, but what was it? I went below to the forehold, where I found the bo'swain stowing the other jars away. He was standing beside a large jar. Reaching toward this, he unfastened the lid, and, taking it off, ran his arm down into it. He pulled out the head of a Chinese man by the queue and held it up to my view. I fell back on the deck in a dead faint.... You can rest assured that never after that have I had any hankering after preserved ginger.<sup>38</sup>

Shocking, disturbing, and hard to believe. But it fit a pattern, one going back a long time.

According to Snopes.com, an 1893 book tells the story of 13th century physician and philosopher Abd el-Latif:

An Egyptian worthy of belief told him that once when he and several others were occupied in exploring the graves and seeking for treasure near the Pyramids, they came across a sealed jar, and having opened it and found that it contained honey, they began to eat it. Some one in the party remarked that a hair in the honey turned round one of the fingers of the man who was dipping his bread in it, and as they drew it out the body... appeared with all its limbs complete and in a good state of preservation...<sup>39</sup>

Snopes describes why we tell these stories:

We tell "deceased worker" tales for a couple of reasons. They speak to our ongoing mistrust of food and beverage companies and to our fear of ending up an unnoticed death. Both are powerful deeply-internalized themes which cause us to to at least somewhat believe

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<sup>37</sup> 1890.11.30 San Francisco Examiner.pdf

<sup>38</sup> 1885.03.29 New York Dispatch.pdf

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/honey-child/>

stories of this nature (especially when they are passed along to us by folks we trust) and to further spread them ourselves.<sup>40</sup>

Authors who wrote outlandish sea stories for the papers had a morbid, eye-popping twist in their toolbelt.

In 1904, Basil Lubbock wrote *The Pickled Chinaman*, which was widely reprinted around the country, about a Chinese man preserved in a barrel, who is dumped overboard after developing a powerful odor:

Sadly and in silence the meat cask was lifted to the rail and dropped overboard and went bobbing astern floating half out of the water. Scattered about on the still water were several becalmed coasting junks. These craft are always on the lookout for floating derelict; and without doubt the pickled Chinese man was picked up by one of them. The consternation of the long-tails on discovering the contents of their salvaged beef cask must have been well worth seeing.<sup>41</sup>

In 1924, Cappy Ricks wrote a piece also called *The Pickled Chinaman* for the *Atlanta Journal*:

...He had the mate empty a barrel of salmon bellies overboard, stow the corpse in the brine and head up the barrel containing him, Skelly made a cross mark on it in blue chalk. But alas! When the ship commenced discharging her cargo at San Francisco every one of those hundreds of barrels had a cross mark on it in blue chalk and before old man Skelly could get down to the dock some wholesale provision house had carted the pickled Chinese man away and the corpse was absolutely lost.<sup>42</sup>

In 1948, Martha Ferguson McKeown wrote *The Trail Led North*, including a story about a Chinese man preserved in a barrel being tossed overboard:

[Captain Hank's wife] told me that two Swedes found the barrel on the beach after a storm. Captain Hank helped them carry it up and open it. They could see it was full of salt meat. The side meat on top looked good. So they started to divide it into three piles. Then they come to them two hands with the long fingers and fingernails.<sup>43</sup>

In 1967, Thomas Crowley told a story about thieves accidentally stealing barrels containing human remains:

These two fellows went out there and managed to get two big barrels over the side into their boat. They brought them ashore down at Meiggs Wharf. They got them up on the dock and knocked the head in. Instead of being the fish, it was the dead Chinese man.<sup>44</sup>

This story by Thomas Crowley was re-told in 1971 by William J. McGillivray:

And a story Mr. Crowley told—it isn't a very nice story—you shouldn't tell it at the dinner table, maybe, but a fellow down at Meiggs Wharf, a fellow named Charlie Barlow, got a barrel of salmon off the ship, and he brought it in, and it seemed that a Chinese man died up there, and they crushed him in the barrel and nailed the barrel up and everything and mixed it up with the salmon barrels, and when he opened it he saw the dead Chinese man. [Laughter] Isn't that

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<sup>40</sup> Snopes beer vat.pdf

<sup>41</sup> 1904.07.17 Baltimore American.pdf

<sup>42</sup> 1924.06.08 Atlanta Journal.pdf

<sup>43</sup> *The Trail Led North*, Mont Hawthorne's Story, by Martha Ferguson McKeown, 1948. p. 72.

<sup>44</sup> 1968 Thomas Crowley Oral History Berkeley.pdf

terrible? Crowley told me that. Of course I didn't see it. He always told the truth. He never lied about anything.<sup>45</sup>

In her July 2008 newsletter, Pat Roppel shared a version of the story, where a Chinese man is hand-packed in cans. She wrote:

They stacked the subsequent cases in a locker where they kept the special hand-pack... A horrible, unexpected event occurred. Someone broke into the locker and stole several cases. One case came from the Chinese workers' stack. I hope the superintendent felt the necessity to leave out this detail when the rest of the cans were shipped to China....

The Alaska Historical Quarterly picked up and repeated this story in its newsletter.<sup>46</sup>

## Problems with the Legend

It's hard to believe any of these stories, and there are many.

It's objectively difficult to see how anyone would mistake a rotting corpse for food. A dead body dumped in brine would be absolutely disgusting, because brine is not enough to stop a body from decaying. As C. Claiborne Ray wrote in 2002 for the New York Times about the human body in saltwater:

...its own enzymes and internal organisms, especially anaerobic ones in the intestinal tract, gradually break down the soft tissues into liquids, salts and gases, including hydrogen sulfide, methane, carbon dioxide, ammonia and hydrogen.<sup>47</sup>

These outlandish sea stories of the accidental cannibals survived for so long, because of the American fascination with Chinese reburial. From the beginning, the process shocked and amazed Americans, who held deep cultural taboos about handling decayed human remains.

The fact the process existed at all is a testament to the Chinese immigrant community. This shared belief unified them, at a time when their economic and social power was most precarious. Chinese workers put their bodies on the line for temporary jobs and suffered insults and indignities just to be able to work in America. And they never gave up on the idea of being buried in China. It didn't work out for everyone, but for many, their community of peers pulled together made it happen.

Honoring the dead is a deeply felt Chinese tradition. In 1921, the Wrangell Sentinel wrote about local business-owner and Chinese immigrant Captain Jinks, tending to the graves of two Chinese men.

Captain Jinks closed his place of business for half a day last week and gave his time and attention to the repairing of the fences that enclose two Chinese graves outside the Redmen cemetery, and the general improvement of the graves. Traces of some Chinese ceremony were apparent, slips of paper, held down by a stone having been placed at the head and a bundle of burned joss sticks at the foot of each mound.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> William J. McGillivray. Tugboats and boatmen of California. 1906-1970. p. 97.

<sup>46</sup> Alaska History News, Fall 2008. p. 3

<sup>47</sup> 2012 NY Times Q&A Bodies in Water.pdf

<sup>48</sup> 1921.08.18 Wrangell Sentinel Captain Jinks.pdf

It's difficult to see how any Chinese worker at the cannery would be happy, looking out over the water towards Deadmans Island, where their comrade sits in a barrel. If the cannery was trying to keep the cannery workers happy, this wouldn't do it.

There's also problems with Deadmans Island itself. The APA had free reign over miles of the north end of Wrangell Island, with plenty of easier spots to wheel away barrels by hand truck. It's difficult to imagine a small, shallow-bottomed boat taking trips to Deadmans Island just to deposit a big, heavy barrel of sloshing human remains. Deadmans Island is no shelter, either. Anything left here would be pounded by wind, rain, sea spray, and curious critters.

In her piece on Deadmans Island, historian Pat Roppel left the door open to questioning the legend. She wrote:

PAT ROPPEL: One wonders if the name Deadman Island came from the burials of locals or from the stories about the deceased Chinese who wanted to return home.

# Chapter 4. Tlingit

Dr. Rosita Worl of Sealaska Heritage Institute wrote about death in the Tlingit worldview:

The Tlingit believe that we have spirits or duality of spirits – one aspect remains at the burial site, which is why we work so diligently to protect our burial sites... When an individual dies, we say they “Walked Into the Forest,” a liminal space for us.<sup>49</sup>

In 1996, the oldest human remains ever discovered in Alaska or Canada were found inside a cave on Prince of Wales Island, not far from Wrangell. Tests date the remains around 10,300 years old, and confirm the man as a Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian, and Nisga’a ancestor. The tribe in Alaska gave the dead man the name Shuká Kaa. After extensive study, his remains were placed in a box, and buried on a secret island.<sup>50</sup>

Tlingit culture is woven from the earth, seas, and life of southeast Alaska. Centuries of Tlingit existence are imprinted upon the islands of southeast Alaska.

Islands have always played an important role in Tlingit burial. In the 1880s, naval officer George Thornton Emmons visited Wrangell and observed:

The shaman’s body was never burned, but was laid away intact in a small house on a prominent headland or island...<sup>51</sup> Often they were on some distant island or bluff point.<sup>52</sup>

The same year Shuká Kaa was discovered, Tlingit anthropologist Dawn Skee’ Jackson published a thesis on the important questions posed by what to do with repatriated human remains. In Jackson’s community of Kake, the local cemetery is on two nearby islands, Big Grave Island and Little Grave Island. One of the options Jackson discussed for the remains was reburial here. She wrote:

The reburial of the Killerwhale chest is inevitable, but moral and ethical questions arise when discussing all the options available to the community. The ramifications of the return of the burial chest have yet to be seen, therefore I can only speculate what the result will be.<sup>53</sup>

Small islands crop up all throughout southeast Alaska. They are often out of the way and hard to reach. By virtue of their isolation and size, they become sanctuaries. They are places for quiet and contemplation. They are small worlds unto themselves, with ancient memories.

## Missionary Influence

Until Christian missionaries arrived in the 1870s, cremation was the chief form of caring for dead bodies among Tlingit people. The Reverend S. Hall Young, Fort Wrangel’s first minister, was mortified after watching a Tlingit cremation. He wrote:

It was a most revolting sight, and it continued for over an hour before the body was reduced to ashes. That cremation settled the matter for me! I took a stand against this horrid heathen ceremony and persuaded the people to adopt Christian burial.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Sealaska Heritage, Q&A with Rosita Worl. Tlingit views on death.

<sup>50</sup> Mim Dixon, “Shuká Kaa is Given a Final Resting Place after 10,300 Years.” [https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE\\_DOCUMENTS/fseprd506870.pdf](https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/fseprd506870.pdf). Accessed 2022.10.10.

<sup>51</sup> George Thornton Emmons, *The Tlingit Indians*, edited with additions by Frederica de Laguna. 1991. p. 278.

<sup>52</sup> George Thornton Emmons, *The Tlingit Indians*, edited with additions by Frederica de Laguna. 1991. p. 280.

<sup>53</sup> Dawn Skee Jackson, p. 31

<sup>54</sup> Hall Young of Alaska, *the Mushing Parson*. p. 135.



One of Reverend Young's first converts was a young Tlingit girl named Matilda Kinnon. Years later, her son, William Paul, wrote:

Those Christian forerunners of Anglo-Saxon civilization had an irresistible desire to impregnate Native Alaskans with their own culture that had been handed down to them through the centuries - until it was in their very blood and bone... It was because of this prejudice against "old customs" that so much of our Tlingit life was a closed book to me...<sup>55</sup>

Through the 1870s and 1890s, Reverend Young and others gained Tlingit converts, who adopted the tradition of Christian burial, but added Tlingit elements to it. George Thornton Emmons observed:

...The carved post was superseded by the family gravehouse. Later tombstones, some of which were carved in crest designs at great expense, were used to mark the graves.<sup>56</sup>

Writing in *Memory Eternal*, anthropologist Dr. Sergei Kan says:

Around the turn of the century, the Tlingit discovered that stone was a much more durable material for grave markers. Throughout southeastern Alaska, Indians began ordering expensive gravestones from Seattle and other urban centers. The first gravestones, especially those of the aristocracy, were surmounted with or represented the crest of the deceased...<sup>57</sup>

For one man in Seattle, the business of carving marble was a goldmine. Civil War veteran Andrew Chester Thompson found a new life after the war, carving marble monuments for southeast Alaska's rich Tlingit families. He carved animals like bears, wolves, and others into marble statues.<sup>58</sup>

## Shadesty Monument

One of Thompson's clients was the family of Shadesty, who died in 1903 at the age of 61. In 1905, this newspaper article appeared across the country:

A stone carving of a grizzly bear in the attitude of defending her cubs has been carved by Andrew Chester Thompson of Seattle and will be immediately shipped to Alaska to be placed over the grave of R. Shadesty, one of the most prominent Indians in the North when alive. He died December 17, 1903, leaving \$600 to defray the cost of the monument. The big piece of stone carving, weighing 3,600 pounds, will be shipped from Seattle to Wrangell and from that point will be carried about 150 miles overland to the home of the Bear family Indians. Mr. Thompson has been carving images for Alaska Indians for the past twenty-five years, but this is the largest monument he has shipped to Alaska, carved from a single piece of marble... the work done for Shadesty is novel in conception.<sup>59</sup>

A photo accompanying the story confirms it: it's the same exact monument laying on top of Deadmans Island today.

When the Shadesty monument arrived in Wrangell, the *Alaska Sentinel* wrote:

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<sup>55</sup> William Paul, *The Alaska Tlingit*, section "21 - A Woman Drives Them Again"

<sup>56</sup> George Thornton Emmons, *The Tlingit Indians*, edited with additions by Frederica de Laguna. 1991. p. 286.

<sup>57</sup> Sergei Kan, *Memory Eternal: Orthodox Christianity and the Tlingit Mortuary Complex*, *Arctic Anthropology*, vol 24, no. 1, 1987. p. 41.

<sup>58</sup> 1905.08.27 *Seattle Daily Times*\_1905-08-27\_3.pdf

<sup>59</sup> 1905.08.27 *Seattle Daily Times*\_1905-08-27\_3.pdf

A granite monument weight 2,800 lbs., was recently shipped to this place from below, to be placed at the grave of Shadesty, step-father to Mrs. Fred Wigg. It is a perfect image of a huge bear, sitting up on his haunches, indicating that Shadesty was a prominent member of the Bear tribe.<sup>60</sup>

In the decade following Shadesty's death, Wrangell began work on a community cemetery, which quickly became the popular spot for burial. Shadesty's monument takes us to a unique window in time, a transition from the old ways to the new.

## Haa Aaní Testimony

By the middle of the twentieth century, it became clear a vital generation of Tlingit and Haida elders were dying. This was the generation that learned from their elders about traditional land use going back before settlers.

In order to capture these stories, the US federal government authorized Walter Goldschmidt and Theodore Haas to interview Tlingit elders. In 1946, the men visited southeast Alaska. They published a report Haa Aaní, which translates to Our Land.

James Bradley was a 64 year old Tlingit man from Wrangell. He explained exactly what Deadmans Island is:

Another Stikine Indian doctor was buried in the mouth of the Stikine River, on an island called Deadman Island, northeast of Point Highfield. There were other Stikine Indians buried on this island. One of these Indians was called Kuckshu. There is a stone for him on the island. I have seen all these graves, and have been told, when a boy, by elderly persons now dead, that these graveyards were burial places of Stikine Indians.<sup>61</sup>

Charles Borch, a 57 year-old Tlingit man from Wrangell,<sup>62</sup> confirmed it, too. Borch added that a marble monument was placed on the island as a marker.<sup>63</sup>

Their testimony is clear, detailed, and serious. It's backed up by the Shadesty monument.

Whether you believe the Chinese bodies legend of Deadmans Island or not, one thing is clear: the Tlingit are the first word on Deadmans Island.

Death is necessarily a sensitive subject. It reminds us of the pain of our losses, and evokes our most spiritual and sacred thoughts.

In 1968, during a memorial for Tlingit elder Jim Marks, a speaker from Hoonah, Jesse Dalton, stood over a table of sacred items, evoking the power the symbols carried, and began with these words:

Does death take pity on us too  
my brothers' children,  
my fathers?  
All my fathers.  
It doesn't take pity on us either,  
this thing that happens.  
Which is why you hear their voices like this,

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<sup>60</sup> 1905.09.14 Alaska Sentinel.png

<sup>61</sup> 1946 Haa Aani Goldschmidt Haas. p.155.

<sup>62</sup> 1950 Census

<sup>63</sup> 1946 Haa Aani Goldschmidt Haas. p. 75.

your fathers,  
lest your tears fall without honor  
that flowed from your faces.  
For them  
they have all come out at this moment,  
your fathers  
have all come out.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> 2003. Arctic Anthropology. Vol. 40, No. 2, p. 36.

# Chapter 5. Epilogue

So, where do we go from here? Do I keep digging for the truth? Or is the legend dead?

Can we bury it? Or is it still alive? I'm going to let you decide.

For the longest time, I resisted taking this story, because the legend of Deadmans Island one of the very few connections Wrangell has to its cannery past. For better or worse, when people tell the story, they pass along the kernel of truth: Hundreds of Chinese men came here, they worked a hard job, and some of them died.

Just like any good legend is a mixture of fact and fiction, the legend of Deadmans Island contains true pieces from the past, reinvented into something new. Legends survive because they're memorable, and they're meaningful.

I don't claim to know everything, and there's a lot I haven't seen. But the mystery of Deadmans Island is still waiting to be solved.

I hate to leave it like this, but I've got a flight to catch.

That's all for the Mystery of Deadmans Island. I'm your host, Ronan Rooney. Thanks for listening.

## Credits

Sound effects and music from [epidemicsound.com](http://epidemicsound.com).

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You can learn more about Deadmans Island, see photos, and read an episode transcript, at [wrangellhistoryunlocked.com/deadman](http://wrangellhistoryunlocked.com/deadman)

By no means is this mystery settled. If you think you have some piece of the story, we'd love to hear it! Email us at [wrangellpod@gmail.com](mailto:wrangellpod@gmail.com).

I'm your host, Ronan Rooney. Thanks for listening.