

## **We want our bones back**

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By Aaron Bichard

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In the back of the Black Nugget Museum in Ladysmith, the bones of somebody's child are on display for paying customers to see.

They, along with the skull of an adult, a mandible and two large cranial fragments have been on exhibition since the private museum opened in 1980.

Just recently, members of the Chemainus First Nation became aware of the presence of what are likely their ancestors.

Now they want the bones back.

"It's kind of saddening that someone would think it is alright to take someone's ancient family member and do this to them," Chief Terry Sampson said. "I just think that could be my ancient relative. I'd like them repatriated and to give them a proper burial."

Eric McLay, researcher for the Hul'qumi'num Treaty Group confirmed the remains were of a small child in a cedar burial box estimated to be from the early-to-mid 19th century.

"The story about how the owner received the box is that his great-grandfather was a reverend in Chemainus and was given the box, which contained the bones of a slave, as a gift and it has been in the family ever since," McLay said. "I'd guess from the size the child is six to 10 years old. I think the story is highly unlikely, but that's not really the issue.

"You can't have bones and human remains in your possession. The idea that it's OK to display human remains is just not on."

Sampson also questions the validity of the story.

"I can't imagine a chief giving away a burial box to anyone," he said. "There seems to be a fairly big cultural awareness issue at play here and a misunderstanding.

"There are people out there holding onto pieces of our culture, of our traditions. That these things can be looked at as family heirlooms doesn't seem right." Sampson said the Chemainus First Nation sent a letter to owner Kurt Guilbride asking to speak with him and decide how to work out a positive resolution for everyone. A meeting has been arranged for Monday afternoon.

"He seems like he's willing to talk and listen," Sampson said.

Guilbride couldn't be reached for comment.

McLay believes there is an opportunity to provide public education as well as give the human remains the respect their culture deems they deserve.

"Maybe we could help set up a display that explains First Nations culture in an appropriate way, and help teach people about the local culture," McLay said.

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