Museum hands over bones display: Natives seek remains, cedar box for burial

Ethan Baron, The Vancouver Province
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An archeologist and a native elder yesterday drove a box of bones to Victoria from Chemainus, after a private museum was found to be exhibiting the remains.

The Black Nugget Museum in Chemainus had been displaying the bones, with a cedar burial box, since 1980, but natives only became aware of the exhibit last month.

"We just wanted to get the bones out of the museum," said Stephen Olsen, administrator of the Chemainus First Nation.

"It's culturally inappropriate and it's socially inappropriate, and it caused, to some people I know, a sense of unease because the person whose remains those are may not be at rest."

The Black Nugget display said the bones belonged to a woman in her 30s, but the native band believes they're the remains of a Coast Salish boy aged six to 10.

Museum owner Kurt Guilbride willingly handed over the remains and the burial box, but has indicated he wants the box back, Olson said.

"I believe our position will be that we want it," Olson said. "That is still up for negotiation."

Yesterday, archeologist Eric McLay and a Chemainus band elder drove the bones and box to the Royal B.C. Museum in Victoria. There, the material will be photographed and tested. Band members hope the tests will reveal the sex and gender of the dead person, as well as how long ago he or she died.

The Black Nugget display said the bones came from a slave who died in the late 1800s.

Guilbride told the Chemainus band that his great-great-grandfather, an Anglican priest, had received the remains as a gift from a Chemainus chief.

"That raised some eyebrows in the community here because there is no precedent for someone giving bones or remains," Olson said.

The band will likely seek to bury the remains with the box once the Royal B.C. Museum finishes its work on them, Olson said.

Guilbride could not be reached for comment.