

1. OBITUARY AND EULOGY

Albert A. Dahlberg, 1908-1993

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As participants in the enterprise of dental anthropology, to pause for a moment and contemplate the career of Albert A. Dahlberg is appropriate. "Celebrate," would almost be a better word than "contemplate," since, without his efforts, we would not likely have an entity that could be called dental anthropology. If he were not the actual convener of our Dental Anthropology Association, he was certainly its "godfather." Without his lifetime of contributions in the field and his efforts as mentor, colleague, role model, and friend to so many of us, I really doubt that the coalescence of interest that resulted in the generation of our Association would actually have taken place.

If ever a man were more than the sum of his parts, he was Al Dahlberg. The basic facts of his origins and profession are worthy but modest as Al Dahlberg in person was a modest but worthy man. He was born in Chicago in 1908; he graduated with his D.D.S. from Loyola University in Chicago in 1932; he practiced dentistry and taught in Chicago for the next sixty years; and he died near Chicago in 1993. While this is the basic core of the story, an individual must be more than being a worthy Chicago dentist to rate a prominent place on the obituary page of the *New York Times* (August 4, 1993).

Even when one fills out the details of the rest of his story, they do not fully account for the creative influence he has exerted. Yet, some of that fleshing-out is instructive. Immediately after earning his dental degree, he began the association with the University of Chicago that was to last for the next sixty years. He started with the University of Chicago Clinics in 1932 and nominally retired in 1979 as Professor *emeritus* at the Zoller Memorial Clinic and Professor *emeritus* in the University of Chicago Department of Anthropology. During his years of active service, he supervised the graduate training of nearly two dozen degree candidates plus several times that number of others who spent periods of time with him in the clinic, in the laboratory, and in the field.

Perhaps, if one key to understand the phenomenon that was Al Dahlberg can be found, it is indicated by the phrase "in the field." Field work made him an anthropologist in the fullest sense of the word. Starting immediately after the conclusion of World War II, Al spent part of nearly every one of the next forty years pursuing research work on the teeth of people in various parts of the world, ably assisted by Thelma Dahlberg, his serene and lovely partner for more than half a century.

He began his field forays in Arizona in 1946. The American Southwest and adjacent Mexico remained the most persistent of his foci for the rest of his career, although it was nearly matched by his attention to Alaska and the Aleutians. Expeditions to Greenland, the Canary Islands, Scandinavia, and



Fig. 1. Albert Dahlberg at the Ninth International Symposium on Dental Morphology, Florence Italy, September 1992.

Photo by A.M. Hacussler

Iran added parts of another hemisphere to his scope.

Yet, the record of persistence and span, while impressive, does not fully capture the measure of the dental anthropologist at work. All those years in the field have generated a host of delicious Al Dahlberg stories, and I would like to add one that Al himself told. The tale not only contains an important insight into the relationship between the dentition and the forces of natural selection, but unconsciously illustrates the thoroughly human anthropologist that Al Dahlberg was.

At the 39th Annual Meeting of the American Association of Physical Anthropologists in Washington, D.C., early in the spring of 1970, our current Dental Anthropology Association President, Steve Molnar, had just presented a paper on tooth wear relating to the use of the dentition as a tool. Al stood up to add

corroboration from his own fund of field knowledge. He told the story of one of his visits to the Eskimos in Wainwright, Alaska, and the discussion he had with an old friend in the town, Emily. As he put it, every anthropologist is brought up on the old truism that Eskimo women prepare their husbands boots with their teeth. So he asked her. "Emily, as I understand it, an Eskimo woman is supposed to chew her husband's boots. Now I know you have been happily married for years, but as a dentist I also know that you don't have any teeth. What's your secret?" At that point, Emily broke into a broad, edentulous grin, reached into the recesses of her parka, and pulled out a large pair of pliers. "These work just as well," she said, "and they don't wear out!"

That little anecdote epitomizes the basic rapport that Al had with the people among whom he worked. Al, as a completely unpretentious man and a dentist, could be so completely at ease with his subjects that he could ask a question that might be interpreted as embarrassingly personal. As a consequence, we have a vivid illustration of the value of the dentition as an anatomical basic survival tool in the pre-industrial world.

Al Dahlberg's entree into the field was facilitated by the donation of his skills as a practicing dentist for the well being of the people among whom he was working. A successful dentist, of course, lives by personal contact with people, and Al absolutely personified the successful dentist. He liked people, and people invariably liked him. He made friends wherever he went.

Another aspect of Al Dahlberg, that expresses his influence in our field so very much more than a perusal of his *vita* alone would convey, was his extraordinary cosmopolitan perspective. Certainly one of the factors that contributed to his international outlook was his Swedish heritage. Although he was born in Chicago, his parents had both come from Sweden and spoke only Swedish at home. Although Al counted as a "native" English speaker, he learned that native language in a hurry once he started public school. He continued to treasure his Swedish roots, however, and an international leavening conditioned the way he looked at the world for the rest of his life.

Actually, a list of his professional memberships contains hints of this cosmopolitan perspective. In addition to the expectable local and national societies, he also belonged to a roster of European and international organizations. Most of us in the profession of anthropology perhaps remember him best for his organizing efforts in promoting the repeated convening of the International Symposium on Dental Morphology. He was one of the principal movers in the establishment of the first such International Symposium at Fredensborg, Denmark in the fall of 1965. Al continued in an active role in subsequent symposia, most recently chairing a session at the Ninth Symposium in Florence, Italy, in September of 1992 (Fig. 1).

We shall miss being able to ask his advice and to share our findings with him, but his genuine benevolence, his gentle humor, and his happy commitment to dental anthropology have rubbed off on all of those who knew him. To that extent, he truly lives on in the vital core of our enterprise.

Eulogy: Hyde Park Union Church, October 8, 1993, 3:30 pm

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Death is quintessentially a personal adventure, both for the principal and for those who grieve her or his loss. Like pregnancy and taxes, it is seldom convenient and we must accept the fact that we have little or no control over when it will occur.

I pray that for those closest to Al Dahlberg, the shock and greater period of grief have passed, and that we can move on to celebrate his life, indeed all of life, as he would have wished.

Al was always mentally or physically engaged or, more often, both. His interests were myriad. He participated in play readings, sang in the local choir, rebuilt organs, attended the theater, symphony, lectures, and opera, and personally maintained a busy home and farm. In addition to serving an active dental practice, Al achieved card-catalogue immortality early in his academic career through a prolific series of landmark papers on human dental variations and on facial and dental anomalies and pathologies that are relevant to a staggering variety of anthropological puzzles and medical conditions. Soon his name was synonymous with dental anthropology, a subfield of the human sciences that has burgeoned in large