

## OBITUARY

**F. Clark Howell (1925–2007)**

Palaeoanthropologist who defined a discipline.

F. Clark Howell was the principal architect and prime mover of the multidisciplinary study of human evolution in the past half-century. In a career during which he came to personify palaeoanthropology, Howell distinguished himself through his unbounded curiosity, unparalleled scholarship, inspirational leadership, modesty and humanity. He died in Berkeley, California, on 10 March.

Howell was born in Kansas City in 1925. Raised on a small farm, he attended a one-room Kansas schoolhouse until the 1937 recession changed much of the US Midwest to a dust bowl, and Howell's father became a travelling salesman.

After service as a navy signalman in the Pacific during the Second World War, Howell met the palaeontologists George Gaylord Simpson, Franz Weidenreich and Ralph von Koenigswald, then working at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. These meetings proved Howell's inspiration, and he enrolled under the GI Bill of Rights as an undergraduate at the University of Chicago in 1947, completing a PhD in anthropology there in 1953.

Howell went on to teach anatomy at Washington University, St Louis, and in 1954 embarked on his first journey to a mostly still-colonial Africa. During this six-month study tour, Howell became friends with such pioneers of African prehistory as Raymond Dart, and Louis and Mary Leakey. Returning to the University of Chicago as assistant professor in 1955, Howell, together with Sherwood Washburn, helped Africa to emerge as the focus of a new, multifaceted approach to research on human origins and evolution that brought together strands from geology, climatology, ecology, archaeology, evolutionary biology and many other disciplines.

In 1957 and 1958, together with his wife Betty, Howell excavated 'Acheulean' sites containing hand-axes from the Middle Pleistocene at Isimila in the highlands of what was then Tanganyika. In 1959, he made a preliminary survey of fossil-bearing deposits in the lower Omo Valley of southern Ethiopia, and was in Nairobi, Kenya, to receive at first hand the news of Mary Leakey's momentous discovery of the early hominid *Australopithecus* in the Olduvai Gorge.

From the very start of his career, however, Howell's interest in human evolution was not confined to Africa, but spanned all continents and epochs. From the 1950s onwards, he published work bringing together Eurasian palaeobiology, archaeology and geology.

In 1956, he attended the conference marking the centennial anniversary of the Neanderthal fossil discovery in Germany, and last summer was the keynote speaker at the 150th anniversary celebrations in Bonn.

Howell displayed an unparalleled ability to operate effectively at the interface of numerous disciplines. And more than any other biological anthropologist, he was able to maintain a career-long balance that met the demands of substantive and extended fieldwork in the Old World; of professional organization, communication and teaching; and of a commitment to promoting and funding research by young scholars from all over the world.

Although Howell conducted three excavation seasons at Acheulean sites in Spain in the 1960s, his signature work came with his leadership of the American contingent of the International Omo Research Expedition in southern Ethiopia between 1967 and 1973. This project put his philosophy and skills on international display, and set standards for the field as we now know it. Thousands of vertebrate fossils, including dozens of hominid specimens, were recovered from precisely documented stratigraphic and palaeoenvironmental contexts. The era of multidisciplinary, international palaeoanthropology had begun.

Howell worked tirelessly to make the knowledge generated by his science accessible to a general audience, and so attracted new generations of students to it. In the 1960s, with illustrator Jay Matternes and author Maitland Edey, he created the *Early Man* volume for the Time-Life *Nature* series. He was senior scientific adviser to MGM for an Emmy-nominated network-television documentary, *The Man-Hunters*, that featured his Omo fieldwork.

Howell left Chicago in 1970 to join the University of California, Berkeley, founding the Laboratory for Human Evolutionary Studies (now the Human Evolution Research Center), and continuing his multidisciplinary researches there. Berkeley was thus placed at the forefront of human-origins research. On the international front, hard on the heels of US President Richard Nixon's historic trip to the People's Republic of China, Howell led the first National Academy of Sciences anthropological delegation to that country in 1975.

In the early 1980s, Howell returned to Spain for further excavations, moving on at the decade's end to extensive surveys



and excavations in Turkey. His official retirement in 1991 allowed him to become even more active in advising, writing, conducting field and laboratory work, and enjoying life. The Howells travelled abroad almost yearly to visit friends and institutions in dozens of countries across the world. Howell also read voraciously in many languages throughout his career. His knowledge was correspondingly encyclopaedic, covering subjects as diverse as Neogene carnivoran palaeontology, Turkish tectonics, classical jazz, palaeolithic typologies and molecular systematics.

In science, Howell's influence went beyond academia. His indefatigable efforts with the Leakey Foundation over 38 years enabled generations of students to expand and enrich our knowledge of human evolution. In the words of a former student, Howell "made good things happen by putting the right people together in a common cause". During his final four years, he did this again by assembling and steering the largest-ever palaeoanthropological research enterprise, the Revealing Hominid Origins Initiative funded by the National Science Foundation's HOMINID programme, aiming to illuminate the trunk of humanity's family tree.

Howell's achievements and published work, honoured by numerous awards and appointments, were broad, and will be lastingly influential. In a field where transient celebrity is sometimes associated with finding particular hominid fossils, Howell never sought popular adulation. He was a scholar's scholar, as the many tributes paid by colleagues on his death show ([http://herc.berkeley.edu/fc\\_howell\\_memorial](http://herc.berkeley.edu/fc_howell_memorial)). He brought his unique combination of knowledge, wisdom, vision and generosity to bear in steadfast advocacy of the developing science of human evolution. ■

**Tim D. White**

Tim D. White is at the Human Evolution Research Center and the Department of Integrative Biology, University of California at Berkeley, Berkeley, California 94720, USA.  
e-mail: [timwhite@berkeley.edu](mailto:timwhite@berkeley.edu)