



The Leakey Foundation Oral History of Human Origins Research: Koobi Fora

A conversation with Kay Behrensmeyer, Thure Cerling, and Bernard Wood

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Bernard Wood (00:00:01):

Welcome to Kay Behrensmeyer and Thure Cerling. My name is Bernard Wood, and I am the University Professor of Human Origins at George Washington University. This is being recorded at George Washington University. The point of this is to have a conversation among three people who worked in the early days when Richard Leakey was exploring the potential for paleontology and archeology of the eastern shore of what was then called Lake Rudolf. We all went there in the early days. My suggestion is that each of us spend a few minutes explaining why we went there, when we went there, why that particular year, how we got there, and once we've all done that, then perhaps the three of us can explain what the impact on our careers was of the opportunities that were offered. Is that okay?

Thure Cerling (00:01:30):

Sounds okay.

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:01:32):

Sounds fine.

Bernard Wood (00:01:33):

Who would like to start?

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:01:37):

You're looking at me, so...

Thure Cerling (00:01:40):

Yeah, alphabetically. It makes sense.

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:01:45):

I started working in the Turkana Basin before I met Richard Leakey. In 1968 I was a new graduate student at Harvard University, and another graduate student, Vince Maglio who was studying fossil elephants, needed someone to go with them to Lothagam and help with the geology. I got the very fortunate invitation to go over there. I had to raise my own money, but in the course of that, and that's another part of history, I met Richard Leakey who was setting up his expedition on the east side of Lake Rudolf. I think Bernard, you were part of the 1967 or 1968 expedition?

Bernard Wood (00:02:32):

1968.

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:02:32):

Yes.

Bernard Wood (00:02:33):

You and I were both in Northern Kenya but were unaware of each other's existence.

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:02:36):

Right, and we were on different sides of the lake and at different times of the year, I think, too, but in any case, I met Richard who was newly installed as the Acting Director of the Coryndon Museum [now the National Museums of Kenya]. He was, I believe, 23 years old. I was 22 years old, and somehow he decided that he needed me as a geologist, so he asked me on the spot. I was very flattered, but of course I was also a beginning graduate student who had to have a PhD project that would be approved of by my advisor, so I didn't agree instantly there and then

Bernard Wood (00:03:18):

Your advisor was?

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:03:19):

Brian Patterson, the person who had discovered a hominid at Lothagam Hill, which was the first field site I went to on the southwest side of the lake, but in any case, my friend, Vince Maglio, who was studying the elephant, said, "Oh. That's a great opportunity." But when I got back to Harvard, not very many people were impressed with that as an opportunity. I actually started another PhD project with Steven J. Gould, but Richard wrote to me in the spring of 1969, and said, "Well, are you coming or are you not?" I had to make up my mind at that point, and Patterson actually had a complicated relationship with Richard Leakey's father, Louis.

Bernard Wood (00:04:15):

That's a long line of people!

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:04:17):

Yes. No doubt, but in any case, Patterson had decided he was not going back to Kenya to do the work he had started there, and so he was very gracious in not letting that sort of feeling stand in the way, because he saw this as an opportunity for me. I was able to make up my own mind, and I got a lot of advice to the contrary, but I thought this can't be as bad as they say it is! There must be more opportunities. It's not really the Hollywood of paleontology or paleoanthropology, which is one of the labels that were put on Richard and his expeditions. It was just a wonderful adventure opportunity to be part of this. I raised my own funds and managed to get to Kenya

Bernard Wood (00:05:20):

But Kay, when you say you had to raise your own funds, you needed to raise the money for the airfare?

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:05:25):

Yes.

Bernard Wood (00:05:27):

How did you do that?

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:05:28):

I don't even recall. I'm sure Brian Patterson had something to do with it, and they found enough money. In those days, \$400 or \$500 would get you to Kenya, and from there on Richard was picking up my expenses. In any case, when I arrived in Nairobi, I went to the Ainsworth Hotel and got the word that Richard was going to pick me up at 4:00 AM. I maybe had one or two days to acclimate, then we drove up the west side of the Rift Valley, just the two of us in a Land Rover, and got to Ferguson's Gulf.

Bernard Wood (00:06:07):

It was just the two of you?

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:06:08):

Yes. At one point the Land Rover stopped. I don't remember a lot of the details, and I didn't know much about Richard, except he was very charming and inclusive and gallant, and of course had all the field experience. I'd had some myself, but he just got out the rock hammer from the Land Rover, tapped on the engine or the battery, and the Land Rover was going again. He was clearly able to take on all kinds of challenges, including that. I imagine we had lots of conversations on the way up, but I don't recall the details. The boat was waiting to take us across the lake, and the lake was pretty rough, and I remember I was a little bit seasick.

Bernard Wood (00:07:05):

Was it Hassan on the boat? 00:07:06]?

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:07:06):

Yes, it was Hassan, and I remember the the green waters of the beautiful Jade Sea. It took us about two and a half hours to get to the camp on the east side, just a line of tents along the shoreline, and about as remote as you can imagine with the animals around. The crew welcomed Richard back. That's how I got installed at East Rudolf [now Koobi Fora].

Bernard Wood (00:07:37):

That was the second time Richard went there. Was Meave there?

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:07:50):

She came on a later boat.

Bernard Wood (00:07:53):

Who else was there?

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:07:56):

Paul and Sue Abell.

Bernard Wood (00:08:01):

Can you explain why Paul Abell was there? I mean, I know he had worked with Richard at Baringo, and he was a geochemist?

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:08:12):

He was a geochemist, and also a geologist and a real adventure-oriented, outdoor person and a professor at the University of Rhode Island, and he had a student with him. I will think of his name in a minute. I almost had it. I think, maybe he was an undergraduate. Libby Nesbitt Evans was also there, and Kamoya and Nzube and the rest of the 'Hominid Gang'.

Bernard Wood (00:08:51):

Can you remember why Libby was there?

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:08:55):

Well, she was married to Rodney Elliot.

Thure Cerling (00:09:04):

Who was the warden of the Sibiloi Park.

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:09:05):

Libby was studying maybe waterbuck or kudu. I think she was working on her PhD, and Richard invited her to join. She was lively and fun to be with.

Bernard Wood (00:09:32):

Tell us about the field season. Where were you working? When and where was 406 [KNM-ER 406] found? Tell us about the camels.

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:09:46):

Oh, my!. Well, My first morning I went out with one of the Kenyan crew, I think David was his name, and we just walked from the camp over to Area 101. There were no geological maps. There were no maps of any kind.

Bernard Wood (00:10:08):

And these areas were demarcated by streams or some physical feature?

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:10:15):

Richard had said, "Just walk that way, and you'll find some outcrops." He also said, "Well, you don't need to take any water. You can just come back when you are thirsty."

Bernard Wood (00:10:28):

But it's hot!

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:10:28):

It's *very* hot. At first, the wind's blowing, and then the wind stops blowing and you begin to heat up, but we kept going, and I guess I'm not affected too much by the hot weather when

there's geology to be seen! So we found the outcrops in 101 and I got an idea of what they were like.

Bernard Wood (00:10:57):

And for people who were listening to this, just explain what an 'outcrop' is.

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:11:01):

A ridge of rocks and sediment that are standing up in a way that allows you to see the layers.

Bernard Wood (00:11:11):

They're being eroded?

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:11:12):

They're being eroded. They are usually a couple of kilometers back from the shoreline, which then was a lot lower than it is now. At those times, I wasn't thinking in kilometers. I was thinking in miles. We had to walk for probably an hour to get to the layers, and there were fossils lying around on the ground, and it didn't look that different from Lothagam, except for the color of the sediments. There were lots of eroding exposures, where the layers are exposed, and you can see where the fossils are coming from. The white-colored layers may be volcanic ashes, lake beds, or river beds. I knew how to recognize those, so I wrote and sketched some things in my notebook. It got to be about noon, and David was under a thorn bush. I thought, "Well, there's a good reason for that." We made our way back to camp, and Richard was waiting for a report. The morning was partly a test, "Can this person stay out in the heat without water?" I guess he got the report from David that I was okay. I mean, I passed the test, at least that one! Richard was taking a gamble on me. This was someone that was recommended, that had been at Lothagam, who had apparently done a good job on the geology there. This was some of the backstory I got later. Richard was looking for a geologist to join him because he couldn't get any of the more established ones. Dick Hay was involved at Olduvai, and folk like Karl Butzer had other things to do, plus there were wary of an upstart doing paleoanthropology with no credentials, other than his family experience. But Richard had great leadership abilities and charisma. He was the amazing force that brought all of us together in that year and probably the year before as well, demonstrating that he *could* lead an expedition like this and find things. Richard decided we needed to have camels for a camel safari, and I think he hired them from the Samburu at Marsabit. These were registered as 'police vehicles.' We always thought that was funny. They didn't have little license plates on their tails, but they were registered police vehicles, and they came with people who managed them.

Bernard Wood (00:14:23):

They came in a truck?

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:14:25):

No, they walked.

Bernard Wood (00:14:27):

From Marsabit?

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:14:29):

Or wherever, from north of Marsabit, probably.

Bernard Wood (00:14:33):

North Horr?

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:14:35):

Yes.

Bernard Wood (00:14:37):

What's the distance from North Horr to Koobi Fora?

Thure Cerling (00:14:42):

Well, I think Stigen took about four or five days walking with a large group.

Bernard Wood (00:14:48):

So, it's not an insignificant distance.

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:14:50):

I'm sure it was early June. It was the beginning of a three-month field season, so at some point, probably in later June, the camels arrived. They had to build a boma to keep away the lions. There were quite a lot of lions around at the time, as well as topi, zebra, gazelles and hippos. It had an almost 'Garden of Eden' feeling, because the area had been vacated by the local tribesmen due to warring factions, so the animals had not been impacted by humans for years. That made it particularly wonderful.

Bernard Wood (00:15:40):

When did Meave join?

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:15:47):

Well, it was when Mary Leakey came up, because I have pictures of her. Richard and Meave went off on one expedition with the camels (I was not involved) and that's when they found '406'. Paul Abell was in the camp when they returned. He was the only one with a gun, and although he knew they were out there, there was no communication, so when they returned we did not know it was them! There were no roads, which is why the camels were something that Richard wanted to try. They also looked really good on film, and he had Gordon Gahan, a National Geographic photographer, film them.

Bernard Wood (00:16:29):

So, this field season was partly or wholly supported by the National Geographic? They wanted pictures for the magazine.

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:16:39):

Yes.

Bernard Wood (00:16:39):

You should realize that in those days whenever you went to the dentist, there was a pile of National Geographic magazines and it was a big deal. If you wanted to find out anything about the rest of the world, it was *the* place to look. This guy was taking pictures and making a film?

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:17:04):

When the first camel expedition went out they were supposed to be gone for four or five days. They came back in three days, so when Paul saw these people racing back into camp with the headdresses, he thought there was an invasion! Anyway, he went and got his firearm, but it turned out that they came back early because they had found '406'!

Thure Cerling (00:17:34):

What is '406' for the audience?

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:17:38):

'406' is a robust australopith skull [KNM-ER 406]. At the time, it had sandstone around it, but it was just a perfect skull.

Bernard Wood (00:17:47):

Amazingly well-preserved, except for the teeth; it's the sort of thing that is obviously a fossil.

Thure Cerling (00:17:56):

Recognizable as a fossil hominin?

Cerling (00:18:01):

Something that was human-like.

Bernard Wood (00:18:03):

Yes, something they were there to find.

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:18:06):

Yes. It was fantastic.

Bernard Wood (00:18:10):

So, tell us what happened that night?

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:18:14):

Well, it's on the table. Everybody paid homage. Meave was there, and Kamoya, but they didn't have a lot of other people. So then, somehow Richard brings Mary up so she can see it. Louis came later. Mary and all of us wanted me to see the site where it had been found. So, we set off on another camel safari, and I have quite a few photographs of that, and it was a bigger safari with more camels, but the camels were problematic. I hadn't ridden a camel. I'd ridden lots of horses, but they gave me one that was pretty nice. They gave Gordon, the photographer, one - and this is Richard, again, having fun - that wasn't quite so cooperative! Gordon, who maybe had six Nikons around his shoulders and neck, was on a camel that sat down in a thorn bush. Gordon was a really, really, good sport about it all, which means also kind of passed the test for Richard. Gordon was a phenomenal photographer and was kind too; he gave me several of his photographs when we got together back here in Washington. Then we were eating topi jerky and roast potatoes, really roughing it. Again, nobody should complain. This is how we lived. I have a great picture of Don Siegel, Paul's student, eating topi jerky, or trying to.

Bernard Wood (00:20:31):

Was the archeology discovered by Richard or by Kamoya?

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:20:42):

The site that my initials are attached to was found before the camels arrived..I had gone out with Kamoya along the Karari Ridge. It was probably, in those days, an hour and a half to two hours, to what we later called Area 105, a series of well-exposed sediments with fossils.

Bernard Wood (00:21:11):

Can you tell me why the areas start with 1 or 0, and not just 1 or 2?

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:21:27):

That was later. I tried to make up some names. We built cairns in places where fossils were found, and then suddenly there were so many cairns. We didn't have GPS and there was no map. Richard realized there was a problem, so he and Bob Campbell got together and took pictures from Richard's plane. They used a Hasselblad camera and took photos through the hole in the bottom of his plane. They took sequential aerial photos, so we'd have some record and some way to designate where these fossil and archeological sites were.

Bernard Wood ([00:22:12](#)):

My understanding/memory was that you used a pin to locate where the fossil was, and then on the back of the picture, which was white, you wrote its number?

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:22:24):

Yes. That became the process, but in the early days, it was just a matter of getting these photos and putting them together, and then being able to look at the photo, and work out where you were by landmarks on the ground. They had me in the plane, saying, "Fly here." Bob was flying the plane, and Richard was trying to take the pictures, and he admitted later that all these movements going on, that he felt a bit queasy

Thure Cerling (00:23:03):

Even Richard. Wow!

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:23:04):

Even Richard! Imagine looking down through the camera, but he got the photos. He somehow got them printed in this large format in Nairobi, then he brought them back up, and then we sat in the tent and put them together with sticky tape, and then I got to take them out with me and use them to try to help understand the geology., I don't think I had the photos yet at this point, so it was Kamoya who took me to see the outcrops.

Bernard Wood (00:23:45):

We should explain that Kamoya was a Kenyan who had worked with Richard's parents at Olduvai and was 'on loan' to help Richard.

Thure Cerling (00:24:02):

By this time he was on permanent loan.

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:24:03):

Kamoya was a wonderful person to go out with and to talk to. He was a man of few words, but what he said made tremendous sense. We were walking over the outcrops [at 105] and Kamoya and his crew were looking for fossils; Nzube was also there, I'm not sure who else. They were looking for fossils when I noticed this white outcrop up on a little hill, on a ledge terrace. So I went up and it turned out to be volcanic ash, which was white; it often weathers that way. In the red sediments under the white layer there were scatters of basalt flakes. And I had really never seen archeological stone tools before.

Bernard Wood (00:24:56): But you thought they were exotic to that location?

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:25:00):

They didn't fit the geology unless something brought them there, so it *must* be an archeological site. I called Kamoya over because I needed him to see what was going on. And I'll always remember he just said, "Hmm, I think Richard would be interested in this."

Bernard Wood (00:25:26):

Kay, let's stop there and go to Thure. Thure, when did your story begin?

Thure Cerling (00:25:35):

My story begins a few years later. In 1969, I went to the Iowa State Geological Field Camp, and that experience convinced me to become a geologist and I discovered I really liked being outdoors. At the end of that summer, I stayed to collect fossils with Elwyn Simon's Yale crew, which came out to the Bighorn Basin every summer to collect fossils. The following summer, I'd also mapped out there, so that gets us to 1970. I was somewhat slow as an undergraduate, encouraged by the Vietnam War to take an extra year, which meant I had to also get a degree in chemistry. I had a job in the geology department, as a

draftsperson. I was drafting away when one day, I think it was in March 1971, Carl Vondra came in. Carl had attended an NSF meeting where Richard had announced some of these interesting fossils, and he made it known he was looking for a geological team to be involved. Carl had an NSF grant to begin doing some geology and he was looking for graduate students to go with him. One of the graduate students who was going was named Bruce Bowen, who happened to be married to my sister!

Bernard Wood (00:27:22):

Is that called contingency?

Thure Cerling (00:27:23):

It's called contingency, yes. And a second student named Jim Richardson was also scheduled to go, but at the last-minute Jim Richardson decided that he wanted to do something else, so Carl needed another person to go to the field. I distinctly remember him coming into the lab looking for another student he'd identified and calling out the student's name. Carl explained that "Jim Richardson can't go to the field, so I need somebody to go map in Africa this summer." The student looked up and said, "Dr. Vondra, I want a paying job this summer because I want to buy a car." And so I said, "I'll go." So that's how I got chosen.

Bernard Wood (00:28:15):

This is 1971?

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:28:18):

This is wonderful, Thure.

Thure Cerling (00:28:19):

I had to get all sorts of shots to be able to go to places where yellow fever and other things were endemic. And my first airplane ride was from Chicago to London, and then London to, eventually Nairobi. I arrived in Nairobi and we stayed in a little cottage that was on the museum grounds, right there at the entrance. for a few days.

Bernard Wood (00:28:57):

We being you and Bruce.

Thure Cerling (00:28:58):

We, that is Bruce Bowen, and my sister Penny Cerling Bowen had gone along, we took a Land Rover from the National Museum and it may have just been the three of us driving up to the lake. I don't recall if there were any others, so we set out in a Land Rover going north past Mount Kenya, which sticks its finger up into the sky when it can be seen through the clouds.

Bernard Wood (00:29:26):

And the Land Rover goes slower and slower.

Thure Cerling (00:29:30):

The Land Rover goes slower and slower as you go up. And then down the other side to Isiolo, which is a rather dusty town. There's a police post there; you must sign a big fat book that has the vehicle numbers of every vehicle coming in or going out. And there are very few vehicles doing that. And then we took off on this road that just got more washboard and dustier. And finally about an hour or two north, I remember we stopped. It was dark and we camped out overnight, and I remember hearing lions and hyenas and they said, yes. I said, "What are those noises?" "Oh, those are hyenas." I was a little nervous.

Bernard Wood (00:30:18):

Where was the camp?

Thure Cerling (00:30:25):

Well, we just camped. That was our first evening camp by the side of the road. Then we go up to Marsabit, the last place to get fuel, so we fill up with fuel, and then I think it was another 8-hour drive through the Chalbi Desert, and then through to the oasis at North Horr. And then, on two strips of stones with a little grass growing in between. And eventually, about eight hours later, we got to Koobi Fora. I don't really recall too much about getting there. We were basically exhausted from the driving and quite dusty, and there's a nice lake there to get clean in. A lot of reeds grow by the side of the lake, so Richard had built some reed huts for this main camp, which was the supply camp for any research projects working in the region. The project that we were supposed to do that year was to start mapping the geology around the Ileret Ridge, which is 30 or so miles north, 45 kilometers or so north, but there is no way to get there directly. You have to drive inland a long way. And so, it was about four to five hours drive inland, and we finally arrived at a camp. There Richard had kindly built some reed huts on the shore. Among other people there were Kay Behrensmeyer, Vince Maglio with a student, Tony Rica and Kelly Stewart.

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:32:20):

And Andrew Hill.

Thure Cerling ([00:32:21](#)):

Andrew Hill. And Kamoya and Nzube, and about six of the hominid team.

Bernard Wood (00:32:30):

And the hominid team, they... I'm trying to remember, they belonged to a group that lived not that far from Nairobi. What was their ethnicity? Were they all Kamba?

Thure Cerling (00:32:45):

They're Kamba, but especially from a little tiny town called Nunguni. And that's where many museum people came from.

Thure Cerling (00:32:55):

They were all people of the Kamba tribe, and they were relatives and friends. Most of Mary and Louis' group excavating at Olduvai were Kamba. We arrived at the camp on the shores of Lake Rudolf with these beautiful looking reed huts with a large window that was open to the east

Bernard Wood (00:33:29):

They looked wonderful!

Thure Cerling (00:33:31):

With a tiny door

Bernard Wood (00:33:32):

And a nice view!

Thure Cerling (00:33:33):

They faced the lake. The view was nice, but every night, the wind would come up and that very strong wind would come through the open window and out the tiny door so you're in this wind tunnel! We ended up covering up the doors with burlap that just flapped in the wind.

Bernard Wood (00:33:58):

But you have a sort of love-hate relationship with the wind because without the wind it is so bloody hot.

Thure Cerling (00:34:03):

Very, very hot. But the wind also is very good. In 1969, Richard had contracted with a group called Hunting Survey Ltd. They had taken a series of 1:24,000 overlapping photographs. So, we had these photographs, which could easily be launched into the air anytime until the wind died down, but we had excellent photographs to map on the geology. We put acetate over the top of the photos so we could see through them and use them to draw our geological maps, and-

Bernard Wood (00:34:51):

So these are interpretations of what a geologist thinks is going on.

Thure Cerling (00:34:58):

To get back to the numbering system. The numbers from zero to 100 were north of a river called the Laga Tulu Bor, the ones from 100 to 200 were in a geographic area outlined by bush and streams that went down to a river called the Laga Bura Hasuma, then 200 to 300 were from the Laga Bura Hasuma down to the south end of the valley. The scheme was meant to be logical.

Bernard Wood (00:35:32):

So, from 'no maps', to 'Hasselblad' maps, to the Hunting Survey.

Thure Cerling (00:35:44):

In a few years. The Hunting Survey maps were fantastic. We had one almost complete set of photos at The University of Utah, but there are very few sets of photos because by some tragic set of circumstances they were deliberately destroyed for some unknown reason by the Hunting Survey people. You can't get original prints any longer, so we can only make prints from prints, but those still exist, Frank Brown had many of them, and they're now at the Smithsonian where Kay is, dutifully being cataloged and hopefully being available. These are all ones that had been used in the field, where people have pinpricks in the backs of them and sometimes the acetate overlays are still present. That was my introduction., and that summer we were mapping mostly along the Ileret Ridge in the northern areas. We were bounded on the north by a small stream called the Il Ileret, but we were told we were not allowed to go north of that because that basically ran almost parallel to the Ethiopian border. Only the police and local people were up there; we could look at those outcrops but not touch them!

Bernard Wood (00:37:25):

Was the GSU around in 1971?

Thure Cerling (00:37:32):

GSU is the...

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:37:34):

Government Service unit.

Bernard Wood (00:37:35):

They're essentially military.

Thure Cerling (00:37:39):

There was a police post at Ileret. In 1972 there was a large attack on the local Daasanach people.

Bernard Wood (00:37:54):

I think that meant the GSU had to be around.

Thure Cerling (00:37:58):

They had to be around because two local groups were at odds with each other, the Gabra and the Daasanach. There was another group related to the Daasanach known as the El Molo. They were dominantly a fishing group who wandered up and down the side of the lake. They were predominantly a fish-based economy.

Bernard Wood (00:38:24):

Richard's father had worked in that area during the Second World War. The Italians, who were on the side of the Germans were in Ethiopia. Kenya was a British colony. There were roads, it's just they hadn't been used for a long time. STOPPED HERE

Thure Cerling (00:38:46):

They had not been used for a *very* long time. Outcrops are uncomfortable places to put roads so most roads avoided them. Richard, very sternly, told us we were never ever allowed to drive across outcrops in case we destroyed a fossil! That meant we had to crash through thorn bushes in a Land Rover with the windshield folded down, but that was also good because we could get underneath the thorn bushes! As Kay has said, it was a wonderful period for wildlife, it really was. Andrew Hill's thesis advisor was a memorable person named Bill Bishop, and Bill came to visit us one time. I remember that night because we had this marvelous full moon rising over our outhouse. I remember taking a picture and thinking, why this is marvelous. it gets dark at six, so after dinner we went out and the moon was gone. We were having a total eclipse. It was wonderful to see the rest of this eclipse with no city lights, nothing. The next night, two lions came into our camp and made a lot of noise. And we had another visiting geologist from Iowa State, Gary Johnson, and he decided he could chase off the lions in a long wheelbase Land Rover, which has a very large turning radius. The lions very quickly learned that they could avoid the Land Rover very easily. They came back into our camp to play this game, I guess. I think they just wanted water. And the third night, Bill Bishop said "Well, what do you have on for me tonight?" And he looked at the volcano and the lake hoping that nothing happened.

Bernard Wood (00:41:02):

Quite some entertainment! Bill Bishop was at Bedford College, and I'm trying to think who was the professor at Bedford who was older than Bill, Basil King?

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:41:18):

Basil King.

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:41:22):

I think Andrew Hill was working on one of Basil King's projects in the southern rift area.

Thure Cerling (00:41:32):

That was a very memorable summer for me, mapping an area that had never been mapped and...

Bernard Wood (00:41:44):

We'll come back to where all this led. You guys were useful. I was of no use at all. My story is that I was a medical student who had never had any particular interest in natural history. My mother's family were farmers, so it was a sort of strange connection with natural history. My father's family lived in London, and my grandfather had a garden in a place called Stoke Newington where he had a grocery store. His aim was to keep anything to do with natural history *away* from his garden! There was nothing natural in his garden at all. I was a medical student who knew nothing about human evolution, but I was quite good at

anatomy. I was reasonably good at seeing things in three dimensions, and anatomy is essentially three-dimensional. I'm not sure about geology.

Thure Cerling (00:43:04):

Geology is very three-dimensional.

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:43:05):

Very.

Thure Cerling (00:43:07):

We have to see what isn't there.

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:43:09):

It's four dimensional.

Bernard Wood (00:43:10):

It's four dimensional, with time. Okay. So, I did an extra degree in anatomy. I stopped my medical course. I went into the faculty of science for 18 months and I did a Bachelor of Science. One of the courses was with Michael Day, who was at my medical school, and it was on human evolution. And another course was in primatology with John Napier. So I went back into the medical course, and then in the last year (in the UK medicine is an undergraduate degree) you had a two-month elective period. Most of my colleagues went to India to work in hospitals, or they went to places like the Groote Schure Hospital in Cape Town, or the like. I'm not sure how the idea came up, but Michael Day said, "Would you be interested in going to Kenya?" I said, "Yes, I'd be interested in going to Kenya." Michael Day's wife was a general practitioner called Micky Day, who was friends with Mary Leakey who used to stay with the Days when she was in London. According to Richard, Mary went back from London and said, "I think you should invite this medical student to go with you when you go up to Lake Rudolf." Richard and I had never met! I got a grant of 50 pounds from the Middlesex Hospital Club, which enabled me to buy the airfare that cost 48 pounds. The airfare was with a discount airline at a time when discounted flights were not strictly legal. I gave this guy my 48 pounds, thinking I would never see the money or an air ticket. We were due to fly from Gatwick in the UK, but a week before, they got in touch with me and said, "The airplane wasn't going from Gatwick, it was going from Zurich, but they would meet me at Victoria station, and they would give me a rail ticket to Zurich." I thought, "This is not going to work." But there was a guy with a rolled-up newspaper who gave me the train ticket. And so I got the overnight train to Zurich. The ticket was for an airline called African Safari Airways. I'd never been on a plane before, and I'd only been out of the UK to go skiing with the school. I went to the passenger terminal at Zurich and said, "Where do I check in for African Safari Airways?" They said, "We've never heard of African Safari Airways." I thought, "Well, that's a good start." And then somebody said, "Why don't you try the cargo terminal?" It's quite difficult to get to the cargo terminal if you don't have a truck, but I somehow managed to get there where there was this Bristol Britannia airplane that used to transport British troops. It was painted with black and white stripes on the top! We flew from Zurich to Benghazi, which was the hottest place I've ever been in my life (but

probably not as hot as the Suguta). From Benghazi we flew to Entebbe, from Entebbe we flew to the coast

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:47:52):
Mombasa?

Bernard Wood (00:47:55):

Mombasa. There was nothing to eat or drink on the plane, but when we got to Mombasa, they bought some bananas and came down the plane and gave out bananas. Then we flew from Mombasa to Nairobi. Exactly why we flew *over* Nairobi to get to Nairobi, I have no idea. I got to Nairobi, but Richard and Margaret, his first wife, were already up at the lake. I had no idea what to do, no information about where to go. I went to the museum from the airport, but nobody really knew what was going on. So I wandered around the museum grounds. In a hut behind the museum there was a woman smoking a pipe that had been mended with a piece of bunsen burner tubing dissecting the facial muscles of a warthog. This was Griff Ewer. She demanded "What do you want?" so I tried to explain. She was staying with Basil and Dorette Cook, so she said, "Well, you'd better come and have lunch with us." Griff Ewer retired to the UK, and was a patient at The Middlesex, so I managed to try and repay my debt to her. They said, "Well, where are you staying?" I said, "I have no idea." so they said "You had better stay at the Plums Hotel," which was a small hotel not far from the museum. So, I stayed at the Plums Hotel. I was in this room at the back, and when I woke up there was these banging noises, and then the sound of a distressed chicken, and then another sound of a distressed chicken, and then another bang. They were cutting the heads off chickens on a wooden block outside my bedroom! I was told I needed to go to Wilson Airport because I was going to fly up to the camp on a charter flight with Keith Mousley. We flew from Wilson to Ferguson's Gulf, where we refueled using fuel in cans stored under a tree. While this was going on we went to Keith's friend who was looking after a Norwegian project to encourage fishing in Lake Rudolf. He was an albino, which was not terribly sensible because he could never go out during the day! We had a beer with him, and then we flew over the lake I think to the Derati Oasis, which where Richard was at that time. So that's how I got there. I'd never met Richard and I was not an 'outdoor' person - I think it was the third time in my life I'd ever slept in a tent. That was my introduction. I think Frank was there for some reason.

Thure Cerling (00:52:02):
Frank Brown?

Bernard Wood (00:52:03):

Richard soon worked out that I was hopeless at putting up tents, so my job when we moved camp was to fill in the old choo [latrine], and when we got to the new place my job was to dig the new one!

Thure Cerling (00:52:33):
But choos are really important. They're probably the most important!

Bernard Wood (00:52:37):

It's basically a hole in the ground. So that was my introduction. I was there for the latter half of the 1968 field season, and then we drove back down to Nairobi with the boat. We used to go and look for potential fossil sites. I remember Richard, Nzube and I went down for three or four days down to the south. Richard had a yellow four-wheel drive car; I can't remember its name.

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:53:26):
Bronco.

Bernard Wood (00:53:26):
A Ford Bronco.

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:53:27):
Which had been given to him by some American.

Bernard Wood (00:53:30):
Otherwise, all the vehicles were Land Rovers. It was a completely 'Land Rover' expedition. Richard and I got on together, and he thought that I wasn't a pain in the ass. And you learned when to say something and when not to say something.

Thure Cerling (00:53:57):
And never complain!

Bernard Wood (00:53:59):
And never complain about anything.

Thure Cerling (00:54:01):
Such as the taste of the water.

Bernard Wood (00:54:02):
And never complain about the taste of the water!

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:54:05):
Whether it has petrol in it or not?

Thure Cerling (00:54:05):
Especially not that.

Bernard Wood (00:54:07):
I remember when we were at the main camp at Koobi Fora, at the end of every other day we would join the men and catch Nile perch in a net so we could have fresh fish for dinner. The following morning, we would have fish cakes for breakfast. And I distinctly remember, well, maybe this is wrong, Kay, that you used to turn your nose up at these fish cakes, and would put Tate and Lyle's Golden Syrup.

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:54:44):

Lyle's Golden Syrup.

Bernard Wood (00:54:45):

On the fish cake to make them palatable.

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:54:47):

Why not?

Bernard Wood (00:54:48):

And every time Richard would say, "Kay, I don't know why we go to the trouble to catch fresh fish, if you just cover them in Golden Syrup." And this was every time.

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:55:01):

Well, we had to have a little resistance!

Bernard Wood (00:55:05):

It was interesting how the camp was run. Richard was responsible for a bunch of people in one of the most inhospitable places in the world. He was responsible for making sure we had water to drink and food to eat. He was responsible for the vehicles and for the fuel.

Thure Cerling (00:55:35):

And that we got along.

Thure Cerling (00:55:38):

One of the things I think was important is that Richard did not allow anyone to play music. He didn't want to listen to anyone else's music, and I think he assumed no one else wanted to listen to someone else's music. So, no music.

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:55:52):

Mary Leakey also refused to have any music in her camp!

Bernard Wood (00:55:57):

You've mentioned Bob Campbell who was a National Geographic photographer. I *think* he had worked at Olduvai, and he'd been to Baringo with Richard. He used to own a Jaguar dealership; I think it was in Nakuru, but I'm not sure. He was a wizard with anything mechanical. Bob was there to take pictures in the way that your guy did. What was his name?

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:56:37):

Gordon Gahan.

Bernard Wood (00:56:38):

Bob was Gordon's replacement. Every night, the men would bake bread, and if you were a newbie, you would be asked to cut the bread. The secret of cutting new bread is to apply as little pressure as possible to the knife. Of course, every time somebody was new, they'd be asked to cut the bread, they'd squash the bread and Richard would say, "Oh, we go to all this trouble to make fresh bread and look at it." So there was a slight public school sort of ... You had to pass the test.

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:57:29):
Hazing?

Bernard Wood (00:57:30):
Yes. there was a slight element of that.

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:57:33):
And there was music occasionally, but it was

Thure Cerling (00:57:38):
When Richard was gone.

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:57:41):
... on the sly. We had cassette players in those days. We took it down on the shoreline where Richard couldn't hear it. But we appreciated everything Richard was doing, but we also saw the humor and ... Yeah, we needed to assert ourselves.

Bernard Wood (00:58:03):
Yes, we needed buck the system in a tiny way.

Bernard Wood (00:58:09):
So Kay, how did going to East Rudolf affect your life?

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:58:12):
It set everything up for my dream to do field geology and then field paleontology. Like Thure, I was at the same field camp in Montana, the Iowa State ... I mean, the Indiana State?

Thure Cerling (00:58:33):
Mine was Iowa State.

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:58:35):
You were Iowa State. Okay. It wasn't the same.

Thure Cerling (00:58:37):
But not far away.

Kay Behrensmeyer (00:58:38):

There was where I just fell in love with field geology. But at Harvard, when I came back and I said, "Oh, I'd really like to keep working out in Kenya" they said, "Well, you can't just do a mapping project. That's not worthy of a degree here. You have to be answering questions. You have to have hypotheses." It took me a couple of years to figure out the kind of project that was acceptable, at least to Brian Patterson, but some of the others were detractors right till the end. I ended up looking at how the fossil assemblages relate to the different kinds of environments that are preserved in the sediments of that area that included channel, floodplain, lake margin, and even deeper lake deposits. You could see what those were in the outcrops and the exposures. You could identify them from their geology. And the crew from Iowa State was working on that too, we had a lot of discussions, and we were learning as we went as well, because no one had seen these kinds of sediments before.

Bernard Wood (01:00:01):

We should explain, and I guess this will come up with Thure's experience, that the sediments on the east side of the lake are more complicated than those in the north along the Omo River, where even I can appreciate the relatively simple 'layer cake' geology of the Shungura Formation.

Kay Behrensmeyer (01:00:37):

Very much more complicated. There were patches of outcrops, and then bush, and then more patches of outcrops and bush. Various people, including Ian Findlater, who was brought in to look at the correlations and try to work out the volcanic tuffs. Although I started in the geology, I realized I couldn't do that and get my PhD at Harvard, so I had to find another project, which was paleoecology and then taphonomy. Taphonomy is figuring out how the samples of ancient animals, including the hominins, that are buried and coming out of these environments, how they might relate to the animals who lived there. The 'dead' don't necessarily tell you everything you want to know about the once-living communities they represent. They're a tiny sample. So that became the theme for my PhD thesis.

Bernard Wood (01:01:32):

They're not only a tiny sample, they're also a biased sample.

Kay Behrensmeyer (01:01:35):

They're biased by all kinds of influences. Larger creatures are more likely to fossilize, and the parts of the body, like the jaws and teeth, are much more durable. Working all that out is what I was forced to do by the circumstances and what I was encouraged to do by Patterson and my other Harvard advisors. That set me up for questions I'm still trying to answer about how organisms are preserved in the fossil record.

Bernard Wood (01:02:11):

You and I have had a longer conversation. \When did you first earn a salary?

Kay Behrensmeyer (01:02:24):

When I was an undergrad, I was a teaching assistant at Washington University in St. Louis. After that I was on fellowships. I went to Berkeley on a Miller fellowship, then I became a lecturer at the University of California at Santa Cruz. That's when I was first paid to teach.

Bernard Wood (01:02:47):

Was that a faculty position?

Kay Behrensmeyer (01:02:49):

A temporary faculty position filling in for Leila Laporte who became a Dean temporarily. Later we had a project together out in Turkana.

Bernard Wood (01:03:03):

When did you go to the Museum?

Kay Behrensmeyer (01:03:07):

To the Natural History Museum here at the Smithsonian? In 1981, but that was after seven years as a postdoctoral fellow and a temporary faculty position.

Bernard Wood (01:03:19):

So you were living on your wits, on grants, for a decade?

Kay Behrensmeyer (01:03:28):

I could always help people out with geology while following my own interests. In 1975 when I was still a research fellow I started looking at how bones get buried in a modern ecosystem at Amboseli.

Bernard Wood (01:03:50):

I was interviewing Robert Seyfarth the other day, and there was this community of people who were working at Amboseli. They were all working out of Nairobi, with some were doing living things, some were doing very dead things. It was a really interesting time. I never felt part of the community that included Andrew Hill, Phyllis Lee, and others, but it was an amazing time in Nairobi.

Kay Behrensmeyer (01:04:26):

It was. Everybody was helping each other, enjoying each other's company and different areas of expertise. What a time to be inspired to keep doing, finding, pursuing your curiosity.

Bernard Wood (01:04:47):

It was really question-driven research. You just didn't go out and find things.

Kay Behrensmeyer (01:04:57):

No.

Bernard Wood (01:05:01):

There was a plan. You're not quite sure what the plan was, but-

Kay Behrensmeyer (01:05:05):

Well, you had to always work it out as you were going along.

Kay Behrensmeyer (01:05:08):

Thure has contributed so much on a whole different arena, also part of this larger kind of question-driven research.

Bernard Wood (01:05:21):

You are a member of the National Academy, and you are off later this week to the American Philosophical Society, so you're one of the 'great and the good', but it's interesting how careers you're your start.

Kay Behrensmeyer (01:05:38):

Bernard, Glynn Isaac was an important influence.

Bernard Wood (01:05:42):

We haven't talked about Glynn.

Kay Behrensmeyer (01:05:44):

He was never recognized as an advisor, but he was a 'shadow' mentor for me by offering support and having confidence in what I was trying to do. I know he reported back to my advisors because none of them were ever in the field with me. I think he was also instrumental in my getting the fellowship at Berkeley. We stayed in very close touch. I admired his work and got a lot of support from Glynn.

Bernard Wood (01:06:21):

I think all three of us did. Thure. what happened to you after your introduction to East Rudolf that was?

Thure Cerling (01:06:34):

A lot of things. It turned out there were quite a lot of people who were interested in trying to work out the strategy of how to date rocks and thus fossils.

Bernard Wood (01:06:48):

How did this work? There are the Iowa State people, and Gary Johnson?

Thure Cerling (01:06:57):

Gary Johnson just came out between his PhD and getting a job at Dartmouth, then he went off and did other things. Ian Findlater, a student at Birkbeck College, also got involved.

Bernard Wood (01:07:15):

Birkbeck was where Frank Fitch was a professor. Do we know how Richard became aware of Frank and Birkbeck? Do you have any sense how that came about?

Thure Cerling (01:07:32):

Frank Fitch worked with Jack Miller at Cambridge, who had a dating lab. So Kay, who's right over there, had found this tuff [a layer of volcanic ash].

Thure Cerling (01:07:49):

Kay recognized it as being something that could be dated with the then relatively new potassium/argon method. We use radioactive elements that decay into what we call daughter products. If you know the amount of the parent, the decay rate, and the amount of the daughter, you can determine the age. You get a unique solution. Garniss Curtis, along with Jack Evernden, and with Bob Reynolds who invented a wonderful mass spectrometer at Berkeley, had, in the early 1960s, worked to date the hominin fossils at Olduvai Gorge that were being discovered by Mary and Louis Leakey. People didn't really have any notion of how old they could be, but Garniss et al showed the Olduvai hominins were up to 1.8 million years old. That put a stake in the ground.

Bernard Wood (01:09:10):

I think we should explain that Olduvai is on a much smaller scale than East Rudolf.

Thure Cerling (01:09:15):

Very smaller scale.

Bernard Wood (01:09:17):

All the sedimentary rocks are younger than the basalt. Even I can walk down Olduvai Gorge and see the faults. Curtiss et al provided an absolute age for OH5, which was discovered in 1959.

Thure Cerling (01:09:47):

Their dates were published in either 1962 or 1963, only one graduate student lifetime before now. I'm not really sure why Richard worked with Fitch and Miller?

Bernard Wood (01:10:07):

Frank and Jack were an 'odd couple' in any case.

Thure Cerling (01:10:10):

They were an odd couple.

Bernard Wood (01:10:11):

Jack was a blunt Yorkshireman.

Thure Cerling (01:10:19):

He was in the physics department. He was not a geologist. A very likable guy who had developed a new way of measuring isotopes.

Bernard Wood (01:10:36):

This was the step heating?

Thure Cerling (01:10:38):

Not the step heating, but something called an Omegatron, which has never been used before or since!

Kay Behrensmeyer (01:10:45):

I remember now. The Omegatron.

Bernard Wood (01:10:55):

Jack was in the Cambridge department.

Thure Cerling (01:11:02):

He was very convincing, and Frank is a good talker as well. Anyway, they did this dating of the KBS [aka the 'Kay Behrensmeyer Site'] tuff and came up with a date of 2.6 million years.

Kay Behrensmeyer (01:11:15):

There were pumices with crystals in it.

Thure Cerling (01:11:17):

You take the crystals from those pumices. In those days we had to separate up to two grams of crystals to get enough to do the dating date whereas today when we can date a single crystal. If it's a pure volcanic tuff, straight out of the volcano, it's easy. We know that the river tumbled the pumices for 150 kilometers, and they picked up old basement rock, and we know now there's a potential that they didn't have a good mineral separation.

Bernard Wood (01:12:03):

When a volcano erupts and these ashes spew out, presumably they can collect some older ash or some older rock on the way out. Is that a problem?

Thure Cerling ([01:12:22](#)):

That's not really a problem. The ash is so hot that all the argon has gone from the crystals. The crystals start out at time zero when the eruption occurs.

Bernard Wood (01:12:29):

They just get reset.

Thure Cerling (01:12:32):

But when the Fitch/Miller dates first came out, they said the KBS Tuff and the tools were 2.6 million years old. This was almost a million years older than the oldest stone tools at Olduvai. This was a very important discovery.

Bernard Wood (01:12:47):

A big deal, as we say.

Kay Behrensmeyer (01:12:48):

Big news. Yeah.

Thure Cerling (01:12:50):

Big deal. The paleontologists working in both the Omo sequence, which is really nicely stacked as Bernard described at Olduvai, that Frank Brown and Garniss Curtis had dated, and at Koobi Fora started to match the fossil records at both places. This comes back to why Richard chose another lab to date the East Rudolf sequence. Richard had split himself off from the Omo to go to look for fossils at East Rudolf and I think he wanted to be independent of the Omo researchers and the Omo dates.

Bernard Wood (01:13:35):

Do you think he also wanted to be independent of the lab his parents were using?

Thure Cerling (01:13:38):

He's only 23, and at 23 you want to show you are your own person. The pig molars that were growing longer and taller over time didn't quite match in the Omo and East Rudolf.

Bernard Wood (01:14:16):

So the pig clock in the Shungura Formation in the Omo sequence gave you a different time than the pig clock at East Rudolf?

Thure Cerling (01:14:22):

Yes. I got involved in the dating dispute because Glynn asked Garniss if he could date the layers that Fitch and Miller had dated. Garniss asked me, "Well, can you get the samples?" and I said "Well, yes, of course, but I'm going to ask Jack and Frank because I'm not going to go stepping on their toes because I learned in the Willwood days long ago that paleontologists are very protective and don't step on each other's territory. I visited both Frank and Jack and they said, "Sure, go collect whatever you want" so I collected the ashes and brought them back to Berkeley, where by then I was a graduate student. Meanwhile, before I'd left the field camp Frank Fitch said, "Please have Garniss write me to ask for formal written permission." Garniss kept writing letters, but nothing came back. When you're doing potassium argon dating you have to measure two things. You need to measure the argon that's been created by this radioactive decay process, and you need to measure the potassium. The potassium is easy to measure; the argon is more of a struggle. In those days, even if everything goes absolutely right, we could do one argon measurement a day. And a lot of times things didn't go right! We thought we're going to try to respect this agreement or request. So, we made all the argon measurements, but none

of the easier potassium measurements before a meeting in Nairobi. We hadn't strictly "dated" the ashes because you must have *both* argon and potassium measurements to date them. About a week before a big meeting in London, we get a letter from Frank Fitch saying, "Okay, date it." Maybe he was thinking we couldn't produce dates that quickly.

Bernard Wood (01:16:47):

I'm trying to think who funded that meeting in Nairobi when we went to both Koobi Fora and then to the Omo.

Thure Cerling (01:16:57):

This was a meeting in London.

Bernard Wood (01:16:59):

The meeting in Nairobi preceded the London meeting organized at the Geological Society of London by Bill Bishop. It was clear to those of us who were on the edge of this controversy that there was going to be a bust up. There were the pig people, and there was Richard and Glynn, who I think for very good reasons felt that we needed to go beyond using fossils to date rocks; we needed absolute ages. That was Glynn's motive, and I think it was also Richard's motive. They just happened to back the wrong horse (i.e., the Omegatron). As you say, it had a very short life, and it was the source of all...

Thure Cerling (01:18:17):

Garniss went to the meeting with these newly-calculated ages that were just 48 or so hours old. And of course, all this is before there were easy ways of communication. When Garniss arrived, he had a completely different date. And the dates, by the way, for the people on the other side of the camera, came out to be 1.8 million years old. Instead of being a million years older than those at Olduvai, the KBS tools were the same age.

Bernard Wood (01:18:55):

The same age as Olduvai.

Thure Cerling (01:18:56):

... as Olduvai. It set off a big controversy and certainly put my career in a different direction because somehow, I got blamed for the secrecy of things, but I wasn't even there to defend myself. I wasn't that keen on things, but the consequence for me is that I finished my PhD on lakes because nobody else was interested in lake deposits.

Bernard Wood (01:19:34):

Because they had no fossils-

Thure Cerling (01:19:36):

They had no fossils of the kind you guys would be interested in, but it was very good training for other things. After my PhD, I ended up going to work on nuclear waste for a few years. But in the meantime, and I guess one other thing that happened that year that plays an important role in the whole story is that the year I collected the samples, 1974,

there'd been a student of Paul Abell's named Jeffrey Hammock had gotten lost in the field three days before I arrived in Nairobi. So I arrive in Nairobi, there's a person lost, I wait there, they find someone, they find this person a few days later, very badly dehydrated. They flew him to Nairobi, where I visited him in the hospital for the few days before he died.

Bernard Wood (01:20:50):

We should say that the rule was that if somebody relatively inexperienced like me didn't go out on your own, and you should always try and make sure you were in eyesight of somebody else. I'm sure the exposures all look different if you're a geologist, but for the rest of us they all look the same, and in the middle of the day if you're in the exposures it's very easy to get lost.

Thure Cerling (01:21:34):

You get into the bush. The bush is taller than you are and there are no mountains to orient you.

Bernard Wood (01:21:40):

I don't know what the detailed story was, but I think he got dehydrated and kept walking backwards and forwards across the road. We were all out looking for him in the middle of the night. It was a tragedy that had a profound effect on that field season.

Thure Cerling (01:22:11):

That field season Frank Fitch came out to the field. I took him to where I'd collected samples. He said, "Oh, these are wonderful. They're much better than what we had. And why don't you just give them to me and I'll take them to Cambridge and we'll send little bits to you." And I said, "No, no, Frank, do it the other way." I may never have seen Richard that field season because he was worried about the aftermath of the student who died on his expedition. Plus, Richard had only recently taken charge of the museum even though he's barely 30 years old. As for asking what have you done and how did this influence you? I've been very interested in human evolution, but not as an anthropologist. I decided my contribution could be developing methods to answer questions important to paleoanthropology, like how hot was it? How arid was it? And then in geology in those days, how hot was it? Well, you'd say, "Well, if you have glacial deposits, it's really cold. And if you have sand dunes, it's really hot. And other than that, good luck." And so my work has been in trying to develop other methods. Kay had a big influence on me as 15 years after I met her at Ileret that season, she asked me would I like to go to the Siwaliks to work on soils, fossil soils in Pakistan. And I had been working on developing fossil soils using isotopes to quantify the sort of vegetation on the landscape. And it turned out that the soils in Pakistan were absolutely ideal. There were so many of them we could be very choosy and take only stuff that we knew was absolutely good. And so that had a big influence on my career. And then a second person that sort of enters this story here is a paleontologist named John Harris. And I'd met John up at the Koobi Fora and I liked John and saw him on occasion.

Bernard Wood (01:24:52):

Who in the spirit of the connections married Meave Leakey's sister.

Thure Cerling (01:24:57):

Yes. And worked on the fossil pigs.

Bernard Wood (01:25:00):

And was the one who had done a lot of the pig sort of clock work.

Thure Cerling (01:25:04):

But in the early 1990s, I was using isotopes to try to use them to develop a method by which we could look at the amount of grazing by fossil mammals. And John was very helpful because I needed an entry card into museums because I'm a isotope geochemist and museums don't like people who take drills to their fossils. John was very incredibly influential in helping me get the samples that I needed to do things. Richard was also extremely helpful because when he became Director of Kenya Wildlife Service, I told him, "There are no modern analogs. People haven't done the modern stuff." And I'm finding stuff in the fossil record that is a real problem.

Bernard Wood (01:26:02):

That you can't interpret?

Thure Cerling (01:26:03):

It just doesn't look like what I expect animals are eating. So Richard helped me get access to skeletons that were just lying around the national parks. He helped me talk to this and that guy, who can be very helpful both in the field and for permitting. Meave was also helpful by saying, "I won't let you bash away at the good fossils, but I'll give you the fossil-collecting team for three days and we'll collect stuff that isn't even good enough to put into bags, but we know we can identify them well enough for this preliminary project." So people I met early on turned out to be incredibly helpful and influential in developing new methods for understanding past environments.

Bernard Wood (01:27:13):

I think that's what distinguishes both of you. It's not the fossils; it's the questions generated by the fossils. You need to go to other places to provide the background. I mean, you can't just go to a fossil and get that information. My opportunity was that Richard asked me if I would help describe the hominids because I knew some anatomy. And that led to me doing a PhD trying to work out how many sorts of hominids there were because at that time we had no idea about intraspecific variation versus interspecific variation. The conventional wisdom was that if you differed in shape, then it was likely to be interspecific, but if you differed just in size, it was likely to be in intraspecific. It turned out that size influences shape, so you had to work out what sort of shape it was.

I think we're coming to the end of the battery life in the camera. Is there anything you guys would like to add that we haven't covered?

Kay Behrensmeyer (01:28:37):

Oh, many things, I'm afraid.

Bernard Wood (01:28:40):

I think we should re-emphasize the role of Glynn Isaac because although he was an archeologist, he was as interested in what I was doing as he was in the archeology.

Kay Behrensmeyer (01:28:59):

And what I was doing.

Bernard Wood (01:29:00):

And I suspect what you were doing too.

Thure Cerling (01:29:02):

Yes.

Kay Behrensmeyer (01:29:03):

He had a mind that could pull it together and ask questions and inspire all of us, support us and advocate for us.

Thure Cerling (01:29:13):

And certainly in my field work, I was going around place to place to place doing things and it was very nice having field camps to drop in on. And Glynn's was one that was always full of enthusiasm. Glynn was enthusiastic about new ideas and for trying new things.

Kay Behrensmeyer (01:29:36):

And humor. A lot of-

Thure Cerling (01:29:38):

Yes. With a lot of humor.

Kay Behrensmeyer (01:29:39):

A lot of fun.

Bernard Wood (01:29:40):

Let me end with a story. We were looking for hominids and Kamoya and Nzube and the usual suspects were in the camp. The archeologists were excavating not that far away. Glynn's wife, Barbara, ran the archeology camp, but Barbara never really appreciated that you couldn't wait until you didn't have anything before you told them that you needed it! Ordered supplies were purchased in Nairobi, the lorry only came up once every two weeks. So, you needed to anticipate that in three or four weeks' time you will run out of something. Barbara, bless her heart, never really got this. And so we were in Kamoya's camp on the rest day when you didn't go out in the field, but you washed your clothes and generally recovered. We could hear a Land Rover and it was the archeologists, with Glynn driving and there were archeologists hanging off the Land Rover. I think it was the old KKK Land Rover. There was lots of archeologists, "Oh, we just thought we'd come over and see how you were." And Kamoya said under his breath "they want food!" I think they left with a

dozen eggs and various things, and you've never seen more happy people. They had food! it was an interesting place because everybody was focused on the work they were doing, but somebody like Richard had to be focused on making sure that it could all happen. And somebody had to make sure the shopping was done in Nairobi. Somebody had to make sure the lorry was packed. You had to have a driver to drive the lorry. There was this extraordinary mixture of the intellectual and the academic and the very practical.

Thure Cerling (01:32:32):

And if you take the fossil-hunting crew and all the archeologists and the geologists, that amounted to a lot of people. Probably, depending on the year, between 40 to 60 people. And the lorry would take four to five days. Even 10 days if the weather was bad and it got stuck. All the fuel, all the food, and of course we actually had to go out and get our own water. We would have to go to water holes, and that's why occasionally a petrol drum got used for water and we just weren't supposed to complain.

Kay Behrensmeyer (01:33:15):

When Richard would fly back and forth, sometimes he would bring fresh strawberries and cream. Can you imagine? You've been out for two or three months, and you haven't had any fresh fruit.

Bernard Wood (01:33:32):

Oh, don't talk to me about... Yeah, he would arrive with strawberries and you could smell them. You could smell them. But when was the matumbo year?

Thure Cerling (01:33:41):

Matumbo year was either 1972 or 1974.

Kay Behrensmeyer (01:33:45):

it was '72, the year when it rained so much, I think.

Thure Cerling (01:33:53):

It was the year the Fray Bentos factory caught fire.

Bernard Wood (01:33:55)

We should explain that one of the staples in the field was corned beef, and it was made in the Fray Bentos factory outside Nairobi. There was a fire, and so you couldn't obtain corned beef. And so Richard decided that a substitute for corned beef would be something called matumbo.

Kay Behrensmeyer (01:34:19):

Yeah. Canned.

Bernard Wood (01:34:20):

... which was essentially pieces of offal.

Thure Cerling (01:34:24):

It was awful offal.

Kay Behrensmeyer (01:34:25):

It was pieces of stomach.

Bernard Wood (01:34:28):

Exactly

Kay Behrensmeyer (01:34:29):

Cow stomach.

Thure Cerling (01:34:30):

And other things. Other things.

Kay Behrensmeyer (01:34:31):

And tomato sauce.

Bernard Wood (01:34:33):

Pieces of duodenum, stomach, and large bowel.

Kay Behrensmeyer (01:34:35):

Rumen.

Bernard Wood (01:34:37):

And of course, for me, it was interesting because I thought, "Well, that's a bit of duodenum and that's a bit of large bowel."

Thure Cerling (01:34:40):

For me, it was not interesting learning which piece was in the spaghetti! Because some of it looked like spaghetti, but that's not spaghetti. That's not a noodle. That's-

Kay Behrensmeyer (01:34:59):

Protein.

Thure Cerling (01:35:00):

Thank you. Thank you.

Bernard Wood (01:35:00):

It was a difficult season for many, but because I'm British and we used to eat offal it wasn't so bad, but my American colleagues were probably not quite as used to eating bits. There were times when it was a bit sort of touch and go, because Richard, "Well, just get on and eat it."

Kay Behrensmeyer (01:35:31):
Just eat it. Yeah.

Thure Cerling (01:35:34):
But he wasn't eating it either!

Bernard Wood (01:35:38):
That's what he didn't tell you!

Thure Cerling (01:35:43):
Yes.

Bernard Wood (01:35:44):
Well, thank you very much the two of you.

Kay Behrensmeyer (01:35:48):
Thank you.

Thure Cerling (01:35:49):
And thank you.

Bernard Wood ([01:35:49](#)):
Thank you for the conversation.