

Pioneers in Maya Archaeology:

Raymond Merwin: (1881–1928)

Submitted by Keith Merwin

Most students of Mesoamerican archaeology will not recognize the name Raymond Merwin, but his work provided a number of firsts in the field. The site he is most identified with, Holmul, Guatemala, is often shown on maps of sites in the Petén. His excavation work there in 1910 and 1911 was the first stratigraphical study of a Maya ruin and produced the first ceramic sequence. He located the famous twin tower structure at Río Bec, and at Lubaantun, he found three round carved stones that he called ball court markers, the first such reference. Yet, because of a long illness and early death, little of Merwin's work was published and he remains all but unknown.

Raymond Edwin Merwin, born in Humbolt, Kansas on November 21, 1881, earned undergraduate degrees from the University of Kansas. In 1913, he earned a Ph.D. from Harvard University, where he had worked since 1906 as a graduate student. During his years there, Merwin worked at The Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, which was and is the heart of Harvard's anthropology program. He was appointed to the Hemenway Fellowship for several years while working in the field for The Peabody and was also named The Peabody's Fellow in Central American Archaeology.



Raymond Merwin in 1914 at Rio Grande Ruins, now called Lubaantun, 2004.24.10000. Both images courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, www.peabody.harvard.edu

The Peabody Museum planned an expedition to Guatemala in 1909, naming Dr. Alfred Tozzer field director and Raymond Merwin second officer. The main objective for this trip was to map Tikal and gather the information needed to complete and publish a report on Tikal begun by Teobert Maler.

Merwin performed the surveys and photography at Nakum and Tikal and supervised work done at newly located sites, including Holmul. The expedition produced not only the completion of the Maler report on Tikal but also two other Peabody Museum reports, on Tikal and on Nakum. He returned from this trip with a bad insect bite that would not heal. His health continued to deteriorate for the rest of his life. Dr. Francisco Estrada-Belli, head of the current research at Holmul, has suggested that Merwin suffered from Chagas Disease.

Following the expedition of 1909-1910, Merwin was again named Fellow in Central American Archaeology and appointed as director of the expedition of 1910-1911. His younger brother Bruce, who had worked for The Peabody Museum at other sites, assisted him on this expedition, which focused on Holmul. One building in particular, Building B, Group II, produced much more than anyone would have hoped for.

Jeremy Sabloff in his book *The New Archaeology and the Ancient Maya* writes "When in 1912 R. E. Merwin of the Peabody Museum excavated a pyramid at the site of Holmul, he found for the first time, evidence that a succession of buildings had occupied the same location." The results of this expedition were not published until many years later, as *The Ruins of Holmul, Guatemala*, by



View of the "black doorway," looking from Long Room, Group 2, Ruin 1, Holmul, by Raymond E. Merwin, 1910. Peabody number: 2004.24.3880.

Raymond E. Merwin and George C. Vaillant.

Raymond Merwin again was director of the expedition in 1911-1912, this time joined by chief assistant Clarence L. Hay and zoologist J. L. Peters. They traveled to the southern region of Quintana Roo and the Hondo River. At Río Bec they located groups of ruins undiscovered by Comte Maurice de Perigny. One ruin they located and photographed, a structure that Merwin called Temple B with twin towers and false doorways, is the basis for the so-called "Río Bec" style of Maya architecture. Other sites, including the ruin of Kohunlich best known for its Temple of the Masks, were located on this expedition.

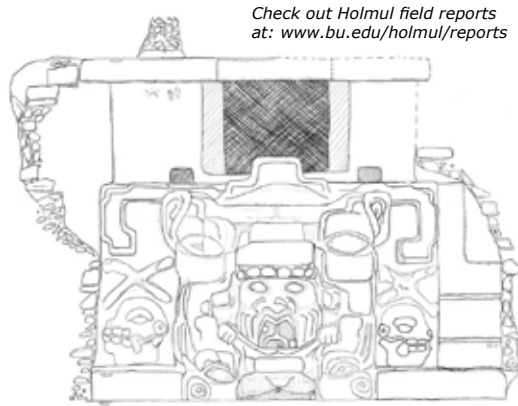
The 1914-1915 season found Merwin and his assistant A. W. Carpenter exploring Guatemala and British Honduras. Much time was spent at Lubaantun, locating many new structures and producing the first photographs and map.

Merwin returned to the Peabody Museum three carved round stones. They were cited in Alfred M. Tozzer's biography of Merwin included with the 1932 publication *The Ruins of Holmul, Guatemala*: "From this site he brought back three circular carved stones which he calls in his notebook 'Ball Game' stones. He has a drawing of a ball-court with the position of the stones carefully noted. This is probably the first definite statement of such a structure in a site, possibly First Empire."

continued on page 5



Comparative view of the "black door" in Holmul, taken by Keith Merwin during his trip in 2009.



The current data suggest that Holmul was a large city in the Late Classic period with settlement extending in a 3 km radius from its center and peripheral large centers located in a ring around it at 5 km distance. The entire Holmul region is the subject of study by Boston University, under the direction of Dr. Francisco Estrada-Belli. There have been amazing discoveries, such as the impressive Preclassic burials at Holmul, the giant mask from the Preclassic at Cival and a mural painting with iconography at La Sufricaya. At Holmul, excavations include an elite residential area adjacent to a ballcourt. It is adorned with giant masks (above) on two façades.



Raymond Merwin

continued from page 4

Raymond Merwin did not return to the field after 1915, but as his health deteriorated, he continued working at The Peabody Museum on his notes from the various expeditions. His untimely death on November 25, 1928, precluded him from publishing the details of his work. As his obituary explained, "In this work he contracted a tropical disease which baffled the skill of many physicians and from which he never recovered."

Sources:

The New Archaeology and the Ancient Maya by Jeremy A. Sabloff; *The Ruins of Holmul, Guatemala* by Raymond E. Merwin and George C. Vaillant; field notes in the archives of The Peabody Museum, Harvard University; personal correspondence in the collection of the author.

Web Resources:

<http://merwinatholmul.com>

About one hundred years ago, Raymond Merwin traveled to Holmul, Guatemala to do a scientific study of the Maya ruins there. Even though many important finds were made, the report on the study was not published until 1932. Much of this website is based on information from his personal journals and a new look at the field notes from his work.

I created *MerwinatHolmul.com* to help document the story of Dr. Raymond E. Merwin. My interest in Raymond and his work dates

from the 1970s when I heard stories about him from his younger brother, Bruce W. Merwin. Bruce had spent his professional life as an Educator but had a lifelong love for archaeology. He had worked for the Peabody Museum at Harvard on several sites and with Raymond at Holmul.

When I tried to find information on Raymond or Holmul I really could not find anything other than references to the 1932 Peabody Museum report *The Ruins of Holmul, Guatemala*. When Bruce passed away he left my family two personal journals Raymond had written while in the field. Many years later while searching the internet for information on Holmul I learned of Francisco Estrada-Belli and his work at Holmul. As we corresponded I learned that Raymond's work at Holmul was important to early Maya studies.

In February 2009 I traveled to the archive at the Peabody to expand my research. The staff was very helpful and the information fascinating. As I have reached out to people for information, I have

found many to be surprised that the journals exist and interested in the picture they contain of what archaeology was like in 1909. During the summer of 2009, my family and I were able to travel to Belize and Guatemala visiting many of the sites Raymond and Dr. Tozzer visited in 1909. At the kind invitation of Francisco Estrada-Belli, we were able to visit the Holmul Project and see the sites of Holmul and Cival.

The website is a work in progress. Many people have provided information that will be available on this site. Any errors in this information are probably mine. Please let me know if you find any so I can correct them.

Keith Merwin

Keith Merwin has 25 years experience developing software and providing training for customer service operations in government and for-profit organizations. He is a principal in a consulting firm providing strategic technology analysis, planning and development. Keith has spoken at conferences in the United States and Europe.

He is currently writing a book on a journal kept by his ancestor Dr. Raymond E. Merwin an early Mayanist for the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University. Keith grew up visiting Raymond's brother Bruce who told him stories of expeditions he worked on in the early part of the twentieth century.



Share Keith Merwin's enthusiasm for the accomplishments made by his ancestor!

June 15, 8 pm
IMS Presentation:

"Holmul: Revisiting an Early Maya Expedition"

See program announcement on page 7.