

Stories in Stone: Theodoor de Booy

By Bryan S. Bush & Alex Luken, Contributing Editor

Almost everyone has seen the Indiana Jones movies, which feature a university professor-turned-adventurer. Theodoor de Booy was very much cut from the same cloth - he was an adventurer and archeologist, whose explorations and writing contributed to modern knowledge of pre-Columbian native cultures of the Americas, and promoted a disciplined approach to field expeditions.

Born at Hellevoetsluis, Netherlands on December 5, 1882, to a prominent Dutch family, his father was Vice-Admiral J. C. G. de Booy of the Royal Dutch Navy and senior member of the Netherlands court of military justice. After receiving his education from the Royal Naval Institute in Holland, followed by a tour of duty, Theodoor immigrated to the United States in 1906.



Theodoor de Booy. Photo courtesy of The National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (N04834)

On March 29, 1909, he married Elizabeth Hamilton Smith, daughter of Rogers Morris Smith and Jane Hamilton Smith, in Louisville, Kentucky. The couple met aboard the steamer New York while Elizabeth Smith was en route to Europe. Following their marriage, the couple traveled extensively throughout the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico, while de Booy conducted his research on the indigenous people of the islands and coastal countries with his wife's assistance. While staying in the Bahamas, he became interested in the antiquities of the Caicos island chain, exploring many of the caves and mounds on the islands. On his return to the United States, he published the first result of his archeological research in a paper entitled "Lucayan Remains of the Caicos Islands." It was well-received in the academic community; and, from that point on, he devoted his life to archeological endeavors.

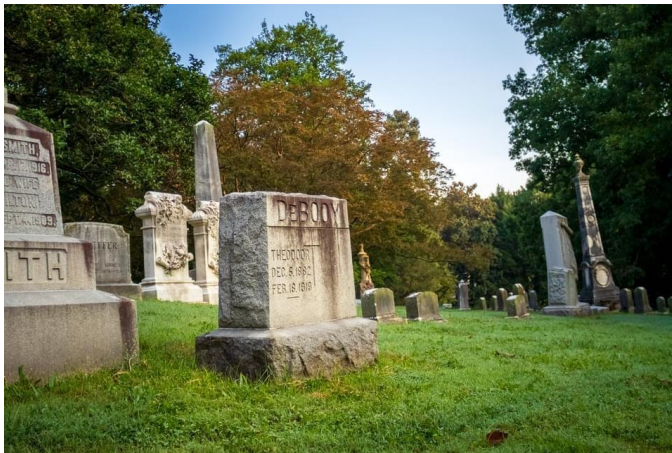
De Booy was quickly appointed by the Heye Museum in New York City as a field explorer for West Indian work and spent another six months in the Bahamas. An important early discovery of his was a pre-Columbian wooden paddle found on the cay of Mores Island. The shape of the paddle was

identical to that portrayed in earlier petroglyphs, indicative of earlier travel between islands in the Caribbean.

Between 1913 and 1918, his exploration took him to various islands throughout the Caribbean, where he devoted his research primarily to the exploration of island caves and excavation. In 1917, with the outbreak of WWI, he was recruited by the US Office of Naval Intelligence to work as an operative with other field researchers in South American countries.

In 1918, he severed ties with the Heye Museum, and on behalf of the American Geological Society of New York and the University Museum of Philadelphia, began exploring the unknown region of Venezuela in the Sierra de Perija range. He won great acclaim for his investigation of the ethnology of the Motilone and Macoa Indians. Eventually, de Booy joined the Bureau of Inquiry, a division of the Department of the State, and was one of the country's leading experts on South America.

De Booy was regarded as one of the most active and prolific investigators in archeological and geographical research of his time, making immense contributions to the knowledge of the ancient history of the Antilles. After each expedition, he wrote articles for a variety of anthropological or geographical publications. He was a member of the American Archeological Association, a commander of the Order of Liberator of Venezuela, a member of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and a member of the Explorers Club of New York.



Theodoor de Booy died on February 18, 1919, at the age of thirty-seven years, in Yonkers, New York. He had undergone surgery for appendicitis, which left him in a weakened condition and was unable to recover from influenza. In addition to his wife, he left a young daughter, Mary, and infant son, George. He was laid to rest at Cave Hill Cemetery, Section B, Lot 28, in his wife's family's lot.

de Booy family gravesite in Cave Hill Cemetery. Photo courtesy of Kayla Wessling, Cave Hill Cemetery.