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Monday, Mar. 29, 1999

Anthropologists: THE LEAKEY FAMILY

By Donald C. Johanson

Louis Leakey's enthusiasm for Africa and the search for earliest man were infectious. Speaking before a packed lecture hall in his staccato-like voice, punctuated by rapid inhales, he cast a spell, making each listener believe he was speaking only to him or her. His following in America was cultlike. Consumed with devotion and swept up in his charisma, many developed a desire to follow somehow in his footsteps, to please him.

No wonder Leakey became the patriarch of a family that dominated anthropology as no family has dominated a scientific field before or since. Not only did Louis, his wife Mary and their second son Richard make the key discoveries that shaped our understanding of human origins, but they also inspired a generation of researchers (myself included) to pick up where they left off.

I recall with great fondness my first visit to Nairobi in 1970 when Louis ceremoniously led me to the room housing the crown jewels of human evolution. Every fossil took on a mythical cast as he waxed eloquent about how it revealed some magic moment of our origins. Here he was, the grand master, sharing his passion, knowledge and intuition with a new disciple. He was often like that: generous, open, supportive, always trying to win new converts to his way of working, his way of interpreting the past. Born in Kenya of English missionaries, Louis was initiated by tribal elders into the native Kikuyu society. As a young man he was adventurous, impulsive, driven, ruggedly handsome and romantically African. Fresh out of Cambridge, Louis set out to prove Darwin's theory that Africa was humankind's homeland--and to discover evidence for his own belief that true man, Homo, had a very ancient origin.

In 1933, when Louis met and fell in love with 20-year-old Mary Nicol, he already had a family, but in flagrant disregard of the social norms of the time, he divorced. The synergy of Louis and Mary's union was obvious from the outset. In contrast to Louis' charming, gregarious, outgoing nature, Mary was shy, reserved, socially uncomfortable and, in her own words, not very fond of other people. Mary preferred to carefully evaluate scientific evidence before reaching any conclusions; Louis, on the other hand, was often impulsive and cavalier in his proclamations. Rigorous in her approach, intensely focused and remarkably diligent, Mary quickly set new standards in the study of African prehistory, culminating in

her stunning monographs on the archaeology of Olduvai Gorge.

It was Mary's 1959 discovery of the *Zinjanthropus* cranium at Olduvai that captured worldwide attention and made the Leakeys a household name. Building on this find, Louis and Mary attracted a multidisciplinary team of specialists to work at Olduvai and launched the modern science of paleoanthropology, the study of human origins.

It was then, after decades of the Leakeys' working in isolation and operating on shoestring budgets, that the National Geographic Society agreed to support and promote the "Leakey legacy." Louis was, for Geographic, everything it could have wished for in an African adventurer. He was the self-proclaimed white African.

Following the success of *Zinjanthropus*, Louis began spending less and less time at Olduvai, which became Mary's domain. For most of the next 25 years she worked and lived there with her staff, her dogs and selected visitors. Until his death in 1972, Louis visited occasionally but spent most of his time traveling around the world, lecturing and raising funds to support an ever expanding list of research projects. Most notable were the field studies he launched of the living great apes: Jane Goodall's chimps, Dian Fossey's gorillas and Birute Galdikas' oranges.

In 1978 Mary made what may have been her greatest find. Her team was re-exploring a site in Tanzania called Laetoli--40 years after Louis had incorrectly assumed that the absence of tools there implied that hominid fossils would not be found--when they discovered a trail of remarkably clear ancient hominid footprints impressed and preserved in volcanic ash. It was a stunning glimpse of the world 3.6 million years ago. If only Louis had lived to see it.

A detailed scientific study of the Laetoli hominid fossils confirmed that they belonged to a new hominid species, best represented by the 3.2 million-year-old Lucy skeleton I had discovered four years earlier at Hadar, Ethiopia. When I presented these findings in May 1978 at a Nobel symposium in Sweden, Mary had already agreed to be one of the coauthors on the scientific paper defining the new species, *Australopithecus afarensis*. A few months later, however, when the paper was being printed, she cabled me demanding removal of her name. I respected her wishes and had the title page redone. Like Louis, she did not believe *Australopithecus* was our ancestor; if her finds at Laetoli were our ancestors, they had to be *Homo*.

It was a blustery, wintry afternoon in 1970 at the University of Chicago when I first met Louis and Mary's son Richard. He had just completed a preliminary presentation on his new finds from Lake Turkana (then Lake Rudolf). I told him I would be in Nairobi the next summer and wanted to see his exciting hominid fossils. A year younger than I, he had chosen, after becoming disenchanted with the safari business, to follow in his parents' footsteps. It appeared that he too possessed the "Leakey luck" and was well on the way to stardom in paleoanthropology.

Our first meeting in Nairobi was cordial, and Richard dazzled me with remarkable specimens; a

friendship was simmering. Beginning preparations for my research in Ethiopia's Afar region, I was a frequent visitor to Nairobi, and Richard offered suggestions and appeared supportive of my efforts. But our conversation always had a dimension of competition, and even though we offered each other advice, in retrospect it was as if we were looking for chinks in each other's armor.

Both of us were strong in character and ultimately, almost inevitably, this led to our estrangement in 1981. We were the Young Turks of anthropology in those days, staunchly defending our interpretations of human evolution. Perhaps now, with the mellowing of age, it is time to break the silence.

Much like his father, Richard has strong opinions and is often hasty to make pronouncements about his discoveries. This was especially true when he presented, in 1972, a Homo skull that he believed was 2.9 million years old. Adhering to his father's belief in very early Homo, this find, older than all Australopithecus fossils then known, was a welcome and stunning endorsement of Louis' views. Louis and Richard had been feuding over museum matters, and this discovery brought them together again in a final meeting shortly before Louis died. He spent his last days comforted by the knowledge that he had been proved correct. Since then, however, the skull has been correctly dated to 1.8 million years; despite Louis and Richard's objections, most anthropologists today believe Australopithecus is indeed one of our ancestors.

Richard, meanwhile, continued his rise to prominence. Fossil finds such as the astonishingly complete 1.6 million-year-old skeleton of an African Homo erectus (Homo ergaster to some) and the Black Skull have added immeasurably to our knowledge of human origins. His career benefited from best-selling books, a television series on human evolution and popular lecture tours.

Paleoanthropology has not been his only passion, however. He will probably be best remembered in Africa for founding an opposition political party in Kenya in 1995, after which he suffered public humiliation, including being beaten with leather whips. But Richard has proved astonishingly resilient. Even after a life-saving kidney transplant in 1979 (a gift from his estranged brother Philip) and the partial loss of both legs in a 1993 plane crash, he continues to exude confidence.

In 1989 President Daniel arap Moi appointed Richard head of what is now the Kenya Wildlife Service. Richard raised hundreds of millions of dollars and revamped Kenya's approach to wildlife conservation, heavily arming antipoaching units and instituting a controversial edict permitting the shooting of poachers on sight. He resigned in 1994 amid politically motivated accusations of corruption, racism and mismanagement--only to be reinstated by Moi 4 1/2 years later.

Nevertheless, the Leakeys will forever be synonymous with paleoanthropology and even today show all signs of being alive, well and contributing productively to the field. Richard's wife Meave, a trained zoologist, and their eldest daughter Louise are currently leading teams to northern Kenya, where hominids in excess of 4 million years old are being found. The stage is set for the first family of anthropology to continue well into the next century.

Name _____

Date _____

Leakey Questions

Directions: Read the *TIME* article and answer the following questions.

1. Where was Louis Leakey born?
2. What did he want to prove?
3. What did Louis do so he could be with Mary Nicol?
4. How were they different?
5. What did Mary find in 1959?
6. How were they aided by National Geographic?
7. What was Mary Leakey's greatest find?
8. Why was it so important?

9. What did Mary Leakey believe about Australopithecus?

10. What were some of Richard's finds?