

## Minnesota Now (MPR) | Minnesota Now How a Rochester, Minn. archaeologist became a go-to expert in Herculaneum 01GK2CSZTCWMR3V16MHCQH7AHH

INTERVIEWER: It is time for a Minnesota Now and Then segment. This is when we look at the history of our state and the people who have called it home.

Today, we're going back 40 years to November 16, 1982. Reporters were crowded in a room at the National Geographic Society in Washington, DC. They were being briefed about skeletons, but not just any skeletons. Those were nearly 2,000 years old, found in a suburb of Naples, Italy.

The reporters' eyes were on Sara Bisel. She was a 50-year-old former housewife from Rochester, Minnesota. But there at the National Geographic Society, she was the archaeologist called in to preserve the fast-deteriorating bones. As reporters took notes, she talked about the skeletons she called the Soldier.

Who was the Soldier? And how did Bisel become the go to expert to care for these remains? We're going to ask Jane Bisel that. She's the daughter of archaeologist Sara Bisel.

Jane, welcome to the program.

**JANE BISEL:** Thank you. And it's a pleasure to be here.

**INTERVIEWER:** It's truly a pleasure having you here. What a story.

Now, for folks who do not remember this story, what's the background about these human remains?

**JANE BISEL:** Well, in 1982, the summer of 1982, my mother had recently obtained a doctoral degree in physical anthropology. And she had completed a fellowship at the Smithsonian Institution, and had sort of begun coming into her own as an expert on human remains in ancient burial situations.

She was working in Athens at the time and had received a call from National Geographic saying that there was an urgent need for someone with her qualifications to come immediately to Ercolano, where they had just uncovered some skeletons. And they were the first real human remains to be found in Herculaneum. It was something totally unexpected.

It was an incidental finding when some municipal workers were putting in a new water system for the town, the modern town of Ercolano, which is very near the ancient Mount Vesuvius.

My mother came, presumably, for a five-day consultation job with 12 skeletons. And her job was really to talk about preserving them. And just over a very short period of time, lots more skeletons started to turn up. And they were very compelling.

This was something unexpected. The Romans cremated their dead. It was a potential treasure trove of information about ancient Roman life and nutrition, which was my mother's area of interest and expertise.

**INTERVIEWER:** And we should say these remains were considered one of the great archaeological finds of the 20th century.

**JANE BISEL:** Yes, not only because of their rarity and for the things that my mother would have excelled in, but because there were a variety of artifacts found with the skeletons and in the ancient town itself once excavations proceeded.

Because of the nature of the volcanic flow, which was different from what they saw at Pompeii, there were lots of carbonized, fragile and-- carbonized wood and food found at the site, which was not something you would ever have expected, or in the past, would ever have found.

So it was quite a life-changing moment for my mother, and someone who kind of came late to the field, late in terms of her own life. As you pointed out, had been a mother, and had been very sort of established in Rochester as a housewife, if you will, but who was exceedingly bright and wanted to pursue her passion, which was ancient civilizations.

**INTERVIEWER:** And it sounds like she was quite affected by these skeletons. Because I know she talked about they were found with keys in their hands. She found that very touching.

**JANE BISEL:** Mm-hmm. I think everyone was very affected. And I, myself, went to visit twice and was very moved to see this tangle of human skeletons preserved for 2,000 years in their final moment of life.

And there was a concerted effort on the part of the staff at the dig to come up with a way to preserve that particular scene so that people could appreciate the pathos that was experienced by the people who actually found the skeletons.

**INTERVIEWER:** I am absolutely fascinated by your mother's transformation of her life. You obviously mentioned she was a housewife in Rochester and a mom. But this transformation that she took on to become an archaeologist, I just find that fascinating. And I'm sure it was very difficult.

**JANE BISEL:** It was very difficult. This was the 70s. This was a time when women, especially women of a certain age and, if you will, a social position, were not necessarily expected to be part of the workforce, were certainly not expected to pursue this very rarefied academic career that my mother was passionate about.

And I think my mother, through the force of her own-- her creativity, her intellect, her drive, her determination, she made this happen for herself. But yes, it was not very easy for her.

**INTERVIEWER:** Was she associated with a college or university?

**JANE BISEL:** She was associated with the University of Minnesota as a graduate student and worked with the American School in Athens, Greece as a PhD candidate. Did not get an academic appointment after getting her PhD which, at the time, I think, was something that she would have liked because it represented security. It represented sort of an endorsement by her peers. And it would have given her access to a very collegial lifestyle that she would have found very rewarding. So yes and no. She was someone who went her own way, I think.

**INTERVIEWER:** Now, I understand in 1991, you co-authored a book about your mom.

**JANE BISEL:** Yes, I did. At the time, my mother was very ill and was prevented from pursuing her career after the very end of 1988. But she had really made an interesting niche for herself and had been part of a very important discovery, as you said earlier.

And I was contacted by a book packaging company out of Toronto, Canada. And they were interested in-- they were developing a series of children's books for sort of middle readers that focused on discovery, and science, and people who were doing interesting things. And they really wanted to tell my mother's story as part of this.

So in collaboration with a very talented and experienced team, I helped to co-write and develop a book that went on to become quite successful. It was published by Scholastic Press, which is a well-known children's publisher in the US, and was picked up in, I think, seven or eight other foreign editions, and received a number of awards, and is unfortunately out of print. But it was something that I hear from people still, that they enjoyed it as kids. And so I very much appreciate that.

**INTERVIEWER:** I actually remember that book.

**JANE BISEL:** You do?

**INTERVIEWER:** so It's been-- yes, I do. I do, yes. So I'm really thrilled to be able to talk to you about your mom. She was really an amazing woman. Thank you so much. I appreciate it. Jane, take care of yourself.

**JANE BISEL:** Thank you Thank you. Thanks for your interest. Bye-bye.

**INTERVIEWER:** Jane Bisel-- bye-bye. Jane Bisel is the daughter of famed archaeologist Sara Bisel, who is from Rochester, Minnesota. That's Minnesota Now and Then. We love that segment.