As of 2014, Bass is a professor emeritus at Texas A&M University. But in 1960, when he was only 28 and pursuing his Ph.D. in archaeology at the University of Pennsylvania, he was tapped to lead the investigation of the ancient Bronze Age ship Cape Gelidonya, which rested under 90 feet of water off the coast of Turkey. His first order of business was to learn to dive, a skill he acquired thanks to a few lessons at a YMCA. That done, he attacked the first such complete underwater investigation of its kind with both energy and imagination—and in the process launched an entirely new branch of archaeology. He also developed a whole new suite of techniques and a whole new inventory of hardware to aid his research: an underwater decompression chamber, new methods of stereoscopic photography, a tiny two-person submersible.

Bass’s most celebrated discovery came in 1984, in Uluburun, Turkey, where he discovered a ship that founded 3,500 years ago, carrying ivory, ebony logs and more. The discovery, a treasure in itself, also helped support existing theories of Near East trade routes during the Bronze Age.

Bass remained in the Mediterranean region for years after that, leading explorations along the coasts of Turkey, Italy and Greece. In 1973 he formalized the field with the founding of the Institute of Nautical Archaeology, turning over its directorship only in 2000. There has never been a time that ships weren’t lost at sea, but it’s only recently that their stories need not vanish along with them.

Leonard Woolley
1880–1960
Amidst the deserts of Iraq, he explored the life and culture of one of history’s great riverside cities

It is a measure of how ancient the Mesopotamian city of Ur is that it was already more than 5,000 years old when the first modern Westerners to poke around it did their exploring in the decidedly unmodern year 1925. A great coastal capital that sat on the banks of the Euphrates River before the water changed course, Ur is now a landlocked site within contemporary Iraq. History has always rested beneath its sands, but it wasn’t until 1922 that that history was understood, thanks to Leonard Woolley, a British archaeologist working with the British Museum and the University of Pennsylvania.

Over the course of a dozen years in Ur, Woolley excavated more than 1,950 tombs, including the one thought to hold the ancient Mesopotamian ruler Queen Puabi—along with other bodies assumed to be servants sacrificed to spend eternity with her. Woolley also excavated the Ziggurat of Ur, one of the city’s administrative buildings and parts of its temple complex, as well as whole neighborhoods of modest homes and larger, more lavish ones where the elite of Ur dwelled.

How much fascination did the publication of the Ur discoveries spark in the public imagination? Agatha Christie based her 1939 Hercule Poirot novel Murder in Mesopotamia on the artifacts Woolley unearthed, and later married one of the great archaeologist’s assistants.

The Leakey Family
Louis, 1903–1972; Mary, 1913–1996; Richard, 1944–
At the Great Rift Valley in eastern Africa, generations of a science-minded family unraveled clues to the human past

Few people consider the age at which they found their first fossil a routine part of childhood, but in the Leakey clan, such discoveries became part of family tradition. For Richard Leakey, the magic happened in 1960, when he was 6 years old and growing up with his parents in Kenya. As he discovered the bones of an ancient ancestor, he thought about his own origins, pondering what his own family, their own ancestors had done to help unveil the secrets of humanity’s evolution. Louis Leakey’s excavations were always a family undertaking, with his wife, Mary, working alongside him. In addition to their own son Richard, who in later life became a paleoanthropologist and conservationist, Richard’s wife, Meave and her daughter Lizzie, their own contributions. Louise too made her bones at age 6, discovering hominid fossils in 1959.

The Leakey’s discoveries—from the Proconsul africanus, believed to have lived as much as 23 million years ago, to Homo habilis, an ancestor of Homo sapiens that people say have lived 1.4 million years ago—did more than shape the field of paleoanthropology but also many ways their findings defined the field, at least as a hard and rigorous science. In the case of Homo habilis, a certain richness in the fact that a single, closely related family would write so much of the vastly larger human one and pave the way for research today on many evolutionary tree whose branches appear ever clearer, but ever more complex.

Dusting Off the Past
Woolley clarity of purpose at Ur

DING IN 1939 Mary Leakey found portions of the skull of a hominid she determined to be Australopithecus boisei. The creature, which lived 2.5 million to 3 million years ago, is now known as Paranthropus boisei.

At top, the Leakeys—from left, Richard, Mary and Louis—hunt for mankind’s earliest ancestors at Olduvai Gorge in 1961.