

BONES

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um.

The collection started when pioneer preacher Thomas Condon saved specimens found in the John Day Valley by a U.S. Calvary troop in 1861. He later visited the site himself, a dangerous journey because the area was "infested" with Indians, he wrote at the time. To get fossils from the valley, he would have to "hold a rifle in one hand and my pick in the other," he wrote.

Most of the fossils are from 10 to 50 million years old and come from the John Day Fossil Beds, said Professor Bill Orr, who has been the museum's curator for 10 years.

Oregon's plants and fauna have changed many times throughout its history. About 50 million years ago the state was characterized by tropical forests and volcanoes. As it changed to a warm, temperate forest climate, some animals became extinct and camels, rhinoceroses and three-toed horses roamed the state.

"Oregon is one of the few places in the world with an uninterrupted record of mammalian evolution," Orr said. "In other places, pages have been torn from the book of evolution. But here, the fossil record is complete."

The museum is ranked 12th in the United States in numbers of curated fossil vertebrate specimens. It is used primarily by researchers and scientists. The collection grew during the 1950s and '60s under the direction of Dr. J.A. Shotwell, and it now contains other artifacts, such as historic photographs, notebooks, and also rock and mineral specimens. It also contains the bones of many recent animals.

"It's a very, very valuable collection," said Ruth Greenspan, an archaeologist for Heritage Research Associates, Inc., a private consulting firm in Eugene that does archaeological and historical research.

Greenspan said she usually studies sites less than 10,000 years old, and uses specimens from the museum's collection of more modern mammal bones.

"When we find bones at a site, we can compare them with specimens from the Condon collection that have known identities," Greenspan said. "It helps us discover what people were eating in the prehistoric past, and what animals lived during their lifetimes."

Professor Paul Simonds, head of the anthropology department, has used specimens from the collection when he taught a "bones for archaeolo-

gists" class at the University.

"Usually we have just a bit of a bone, and we compare it to a whole bone borrowed from the collection," Simonds said. "It helps the students distinguish between specimens that are bones and those that are not. If they say, 'Aha! This is a bone.' That's good. But it's even better if they can say, 'This is a fish bone, or a seal bone, or a deer bone.'"

The collection has been moved many times since the first pieces were gathered by Condon. It moved to Oregon State University with the science departments in the 1930s, Orr said, and started coming back piecemeal in the 1950s. It has been shuffled around the University's campus since then. But perhaps the most chaotic move came when Condon was still custodian in 1871.

Representatives from an eastern university tried to buy the collection that year. The men tried to persuade Condon that his wood house in The Dalles could burn down and destroy the fossils.

But Condon wouldn't sell. Three days later, a fire broke out at the old Globe Hotel nearby. It spread quickly, and Condon hurried to save his house. So did many of his neighbors, who let their own property be consumed by the fire while they helped the preacher.

They spread a carpet on the roof and soaked it with water. It worked. The house was saved, but after the fire, Condon returned to find his cabinet shelves empty. Most of the specimens were missing.

Many children stopped by over the next two weeks, bringing the fossils they had carried out while the fire had raged. One brought the skull of an oreodont. Another, rhinoceros teeth. And another child returned a camel bone he had saved from the flames. Soon everything was returned except for a cube of amber which held fossilized insects. But that was found a few days later in the street, where someone had dropped it.

Condon became the University's first professor of natural history in 1876. He brought his collection with him, and after his death in 1907, it was sold to the University by his daughter, Ellen Condon McCornack, for \$2,000. But today, it's worth much more.

"You can't buy a collection like it, it's literally priceless," said geology Professor Greg Retallack.

"Some students are enthusiastic," he said. "We've made some real converts to the study of geology by showing them what has been discovered in this state. But other students are indifferent."



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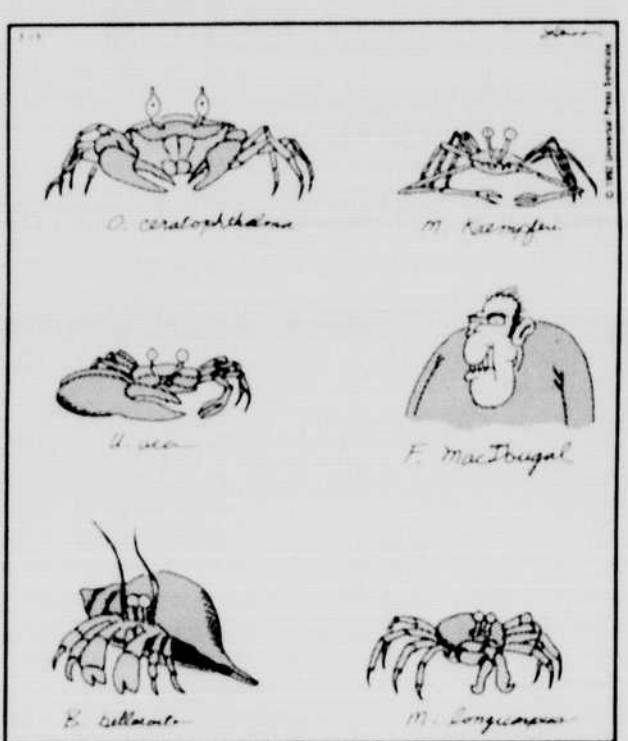
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