

Chicago Natural History Museum

FOUNDED BY MARSHALL FIELD, 1893

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BRASS BAND SALUTES SCIENTIST AT WORK

By GEORGE LANGFORD
CURATOR OF FOSSIL PLANTS

ANYONE who has spent much of his life in the pursuit of natural-history material amasses a rich variety of experiences, ranging from the comical to the dramatic and even dangerous. I have had my share of those, and the most amusing one seems well worth the telling.

In the winter of 1901-2, the late John Bamford, a farmer residing near White-willow in the southeastern corner of Kendall County, Illinois, decided to convert a boggy spring in his pasture into an open well for stock. At a depth of about five feet he began to find bones in abundance, including many of the American mastodon. With the aid of enthusiastic neighbors, all as inexperienced as he in handling such material, a great quantity of bones was excavated, much of it irreparably ruined by rough handling. Further, since interest of the unskilled excavators naturally centered on the larger mastodon bones, remains of smaller animals were for the most part simply thrown into the dump.

Under the delusion, unfortunately rather common, that the material was immensely valuable, Bamford declined to co-operate

with any scientific institution, deciding instead to make a small fortune by exhibiting the bones for a fee at his farm and at county fairs. This he tried for several years, the expected fortune failing to materialize and the specimens suffering further damage.

My own connection with this discovery dates from 1910. By that time the local excitement had long since died down and Bamford had ceased his exhibiting. On my first visit to his farm, I found him away for a two-week absence. His wife was on the premises, however, and it did not take me long to learn that she had become thoroughly tired of the bones, which so filled her cellar that access to it from the kitchen was blocked. Permission to make an examination was readily granted.

A DIPLOMATIC MISSION

The only way to the cellar was through a hole under the front porch, through which I had to crawl on hands and knees. The cellar was packed to the ceiling with vertebrae and limb bones, jaws, teeth, and tusks. On emerging I began the delicate task of obtaining permission to remove the material. Mrs. Bamford demurred at first, but finally consented after I had agreed to give the bones the best of care and to acknowledge her husband as the lawful owner.

Thinking it best to move rapidly lest there be a change of heart, I set about preparing to take the first load then and there. This proved to be no small undertaking in my open-top automobile of 1910 vintage. I had, of course, no packing material with me and was forced to do the best I could with long grass pulled from a field near by. When I had placed everything aboard that could safely be carried, the pile of bones in the back of the automobile extended a good three feet above the top of my head. After a difficult sixteen miles over black dirt roads I finally reached the west side of Joliet, the town in which I then lived. I thought my troubles were about over, but in reality they were just be-



WHITEWILLOW MASTODON TUSK

Photo made in 1912 of Curator George Langford with specimen found on farm in Kendall County, Illinois. The tusk is about 9 feet long measured along the triple curves from base to tip, and is now in the collections of the Museum.

THIS MONTH'S COVER

The Hopi Indian weaver on this month's cover is one of a family group in the life-size model room of a Hopi apartment-house on exhibition in Hall 7. The exhibit has recently been reinstalled, as have many others in the hall. Among them is an Antelope altar of the type that members of the Antelope Secret Society build during their annual Snake-Antelope ceremonial. An article about this ceremonial appears on page 3.

ginning. My office was on the east side of town, and much was to happen before I got there. Heads turned as I went by, and first one person, then another, and yet another began to follow me, all keeping up without difficulty since I had to drive as slowly as possible to avoid jolting the fragile cargo.

Nothing grows like a crowd. Within a few blocks I was completely surrounded and could move neither forward nor backward. This attracted one policeman after another until no less than six had gathered. With this reinforcement, the way was cleared and the procession resumed, police in the van, the load of bones in the place of honor, and the crowd bringing up the flanks and rear.

BAND JOINS PROCESSION

Only one thing was lacking, and this was soon supplied. As we neared the Township High School, we encountered the band engaged in marching practice. The boys took in the situation at a glance, wheeled into line at our front and struck up a lively march. Like a circus parade we passed through the center of town and onto the east side, where we finally reached my office and unloaded the bones.

Four more trips were required to complete the transfer, but these were uneventful. With the bones adequately packed and covered by a tarpaulin, I was able to sneak through town without attracting attention. There was, to be sure, an interesting interview a few days later when Bamford appeared with fire in his eye, but I succeeded in mollifying him, and his collection passed into my possession and, later, into that of Chicago Natural History Museum.

With the subsequent donation of a second smaller collection from the same place made by the late Judge George Bedford of Morris, Illinois, one of the original excavators in 1902, the Museum acquired nearly all specimens that had been salvaged from this interesting discovery. The American mastodon is represented by remains of at least nine individuals ranging in age from calves to adults. Other animals encountered include the musk sheep, Virginia deer, wapiti, an extinct type of moose, and bison.



Langford, George. 1954. "Brass Band Salutes Scientist at Work." *Bulletin* 25(8), 2-2.

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