

Morrill Hall: 'Instilling investigation and discovery'

By Deb Gray

On a larger scale, the same force that breeds Susie Spotlesses and Sierra Club lobbyists is the same force unifying dinosaur skeletons to glacial rocks.

That force which ties together the potpourri of a natural history museum is ecology, according to Dr. James Gunnerson, director of Morrill Hall. True, he said, the ecology is "implicit rather than explicit," but all these specimens in Morrill Hall, 14th and U Sts., tell something of how that organism related to its environment.

"All these factors are interrelated. The forces that create mineral deposits in rock are the same forces that brought about the end of the dinosaurs or the passing of a civilization."

Gunnerson specializes in natural history through an "anthrocentric viewpoint"—how man coped with his physical environment. He is a UNL graduate, receiving his Ph.D. in anthropology.

1st anthro director

When Gunnerson was hired last summer, he became the first anthropologist/director in several years. Most of the past directors, Gunnerson said, have been paleontologists (specialists in fossil remains).

Gunnerson resembles Burl Ives without the height or width. A soft-spoken scholar in cowboy boots.

This past paleontologists' blitzkrieg mirrors Morrill Hall's



Dr. James Gunnerson, museum curator

forte. The museum has one of the largest vertebrate paleontology collections (fossilized creatures with backbones) in the U.S., Gunnerson said.

Compared to other universities, UNL's exhibit ranks fourth. In the national museum league, which includes such heavies as the Smithsonian Institute and the Museum of Natural History in Chicago, Morrill Hall ranks ninth, Gunnerson said.

Exhibits included in this genre are the skeletons of the world's largest hog and the

largest American rhinoceros, and Elephant Hall, a cavernous room of prehistoric elephant-like animals.

Summer expeditions

The collection of vertebrates grows every year. Each summer, Gunnerson said, two to six field expeditions explore Nebraska for fossils. Their work is not a hit-miss operation, for the researchers usually know before digging what lies beneath the surface.

"By looking at geological deposits, they can give that deposit's age. From this, they know what animals existed

during that particular time.

"They also have an idea of what sort of deposits are conducive to present fossil materials," Gunnerson said. "Some areas in the state are rich in fossils. The conditions at one time were ideal and attracted a large variety of life. If you go there, you expect to find more fossilized materials."

The fossils also come to Lincoln through other channels, Gunnerson said. Like a farmer who finds some bones in his field. Or an amateur who contributes his collection to the museum.

Advance teams also survey potential highway beds before the road graders begin, insurance against tearing up paleontological goldmines.

There are a number of rich areas in the state for exploration because "fossils are found almost anywhere," Gunnerson said. But, he added, the largest chunk of Nebraska paleontology comes from the Panhandle and Niobrara River basin.

Few of the estimated 3 million specimens collected for study ever reach a display case. Only about 1 per cent of museum specimens are on exhibit at any one time, Gunnerson said.

The rest, he said, are stored in two places. Some specimens are kept in the Research and Systemic Collection Center on fourth and fifth floors of Nebraska Hall. The others are stored at Mead in a former World War II-era bombloading plant.

The specimens are filed away because "to a large extent, not all these things are of equal interest to everyone. They are fragmentary specimens of more scientific value than of interest to visitors," Gunnerson said.

Take entomology, the study of insects. Morrill Hall has 1.7 million specimens in its collection, but few on exhibit. Why? The general public doesn't have that great an interest in insects, Gunnerson said.

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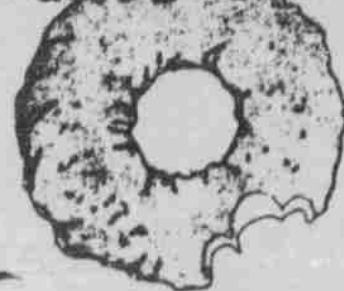
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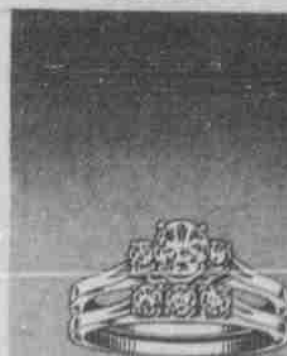
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