Skull leads to mammoth finding

SAN MIGUEL TOCUILA, Mexico (AP) — Joel Aviles and some fellow workers were digging a hole for a water tank when their picks struck something hard in the muddy, gray earth.

"We dug some more to see what it was, and that's when we found the skull," he said. "We were stunned."

No ordinary skull, though; it belonged to a mammoth that lived 10,000 to 50,000 years ago. When scientists were called in, they discovered one of central Mexico's biggest mammoth graveyards.

While skulls and bones of mammoths have turned up previously around nearby Lake Texcoco, those finds were nothing like the July 29 discovery in San Miguel Tocuila, which is 20 miles east of Mexico City.

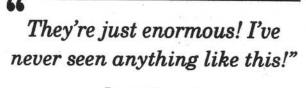
Already, a pit about 15 feet deep beside a cornfield has yielded bones from at least eight mammoths as well as fossilized bones of ancient bison, flamingos and other wildlife.

"The find in San Miguel Tocuila is extraordinary," said Joaquin Arroyo Cabrales of the National Institute of Anthropology and History. "When we first got the call, we thought it would be just one mammoth skull."

Arroyo said the scientists had learned that since 1945, villagers had not reported at least a dozen earlier finds of mammoth bones, mostly bits and pieces.

Mammoths flourished during the Ice Age. For millions of years they roamed the North American continent and southward. Then they died out just as prehistoric hunters were spreading over from what is now Siberia, scientists theorize.

Some scientists think the huge beasts were hunted to extinction.



LAURA ESTRADA visitor to Tocuila mammoth site

Mexican paleontologists hope studies at the site in this high valley will provide new clues about the huge beasts.

A team led by Arroyo and archaeologist Luis Morett of the Autonomous University of Chapingo are seeking to determine when these "Tocuila" mammoths lived, whether humans co-existed and how the mammoths died.

"We are looking for evidence of human activity, though none has been found thus far," said Eduardo Corona, a researcher with Arroyo at the Paleozoology Lab of the National Institute of Anthropology and History.

Daniel Fisher, a University of Michigan paleontologist not involved in the find, said the fact that several mammoths had been found at one site could yield data about their movements, feeding habits and even climate changes.

"Interpreting growth layers in their tusks and teeth can say things about their age at death, their diets, the climates they experienced from year to year," said Fisher, a self-described "mammoth hunter."

Along with the scientists have come tourists.

People stream into town on the weekends to peer at the skulls and giant tusks of what once were beasts weighing four tons or more. "They're just enormous! I've

never seen anything like this!" said Laura Estrada, as her 8-year-old niece Rosa tiptoed to squint through a chain link fence into the pit.

With trunks and lengthy tusks, prehistoric mammoths were closely related to present-day elephants. Some measured more than 14 feet high at the shoulders.

"Oh, it's so much bigger than an elephant!" said Rosa, admiring tusks twice her height and yellowed teeth as big as bowling balls.

Celso Ramirez, the owner of the property, had already built a small restaurant on his land before the discovery.

"It's been fascinating watching the archaeologists. Every day they find something new," said Maria del Carmen Patino, the restaurant's cook, hawking tortillas and soft drinks to passers-by.

Boiling a pot of meaty chicken bones, she watched as a scientist in the pit carefully painted mammoth bones with protective sealant.

"They are taking the soil out by the spoonful so they don't damage the bones. I'm sure they'll find more. They are so beautiful. I never get tired of seeing them," Patino said.



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Exhibit shows U.S. musicals MUSICALS from page 12

Bowers sees the seed of the American musical in the diverse waves of 19th century immigration that centered in New York, which was also a center of musical life.

After them came such names as Lillian Russell, George M. Cohan, Jerome Kern, Oscar Hammerstein, George Kaufman, Alan Jay Lerner, Frederick Loewe, Kurt Weill, Richard Rodgers and Moss Hart — Kitty Carlisle's late husband. The exhibit has something about all of them.

"Red, Hot & Blue" is part of the 150th anniversary celebration of the Smithsonian Institution. The exhibit will be open until July 6, 1997. Admission is free.



