



## Bison fossils teach history at new center

By JIM GOODWIN  
Staff Reporter

Near the end of the last great ice age 9,600 years ago, transitional forms of bison larger than today's buffalo lumbered across the Great Plains in the land now called Nebraska.

The buried remains of at least 600 bison mark the site of one herd's demise, 23 miles northwest of present-day Crawford.

The great beasts mysteriously died within a brief period of time, leaving behind fossils in the fine, silty soil.

Samples of their remains discovered 40 years ago, along with two Colombian mammoth skeletons found at nearby Moody Ranch in 1962, will be displayed in a \$6-million educational research center under construction at Fort Robinson State Park.

The Prehistoric Prairies Discovery Center is scheduled to be fully operational in 2000. The 10,000-square-foot center will illuminate the story of the ill-fated creatures. But more than that, its creators are hoping the center will help the area's economy and offer a historical perspective on Great Plains' climatology.

### Footing the bill

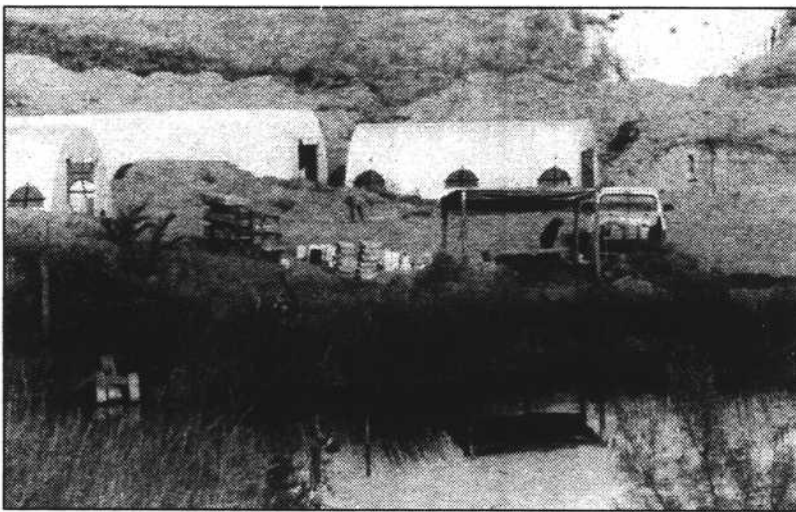
The center's sponsors include the U.S. Forest Service, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, Chadron State College, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the cities of Chadron and Crawford and Sioux and Dawes counties.

Karen Liebenritt, project development coordinator, said the U.S. Forest Service will provide half the center's \$6-million cost. Private, corporate and in-kind donations and grants will cover the remaining cost.

Ralene Suchor is president of a nonprofit group called Friends of the Prehistoric Prairies Discovery Center that is accepting donations. The group has collected about \$37,500 and received an additional \$23,000 toward a display mural, she said.

The center's museum will combine the contents of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Trailside Museum in Fort Robinson State Park, and finds from three archeological and paleontological sites in northwest Nebraska — one of the most fossil-rich regions in the western hemisphere, said Trailside Museum Superintendent David Nixon.

"Clash of the Titans," the center's flagship display, will include the



**ABOVE: WORK AT THE Hudson-Meng bonebed, as these Colorado State students found this summer, is tedious, backbreaking and exact. Students have to uncover individual bones and then meticulously document where the bones were found.**

**Right: The site, which sits just outside of Toadstool State Park near Crawford, was covered this summer by quonset huts to protect it from the elements. A \$6-million project will build an education center over the site by 2000.**

10,000-year-old skeletons of two mammoths whose tusks were interlocked in combat when they died. They are the only mammoth skeletons with interlocked tusks found in the world, Nixon said.

A fossil preparation laboratory will allow scientists to stabilize, catalog and pack fragile specimens to move them from the sites to a permanent collection, Nixon said.

### Diggin' in the dirt

The sites contributing to the center's displays and scientists' research are: the Hudson-Meng Bison bonebed on the Oglala National Grassland, 23 miles northwest of Crawford; the Crawford mammoth site, 15 miles outside of Crawford; and Toadstool Geologic Park, 25 miles northwest of Crawford.

The latter site contains tracks made 31 million years ago in the mud flats of a recessed stream. The tracks are evidence of three-toed horses, saber-toothed cats, shorebirds and other creatures. The discovery center will display as-yet undetermined specimens and casts created from the tracks, Nixon said.

The bison died about 9,600 years ago, near the end of the Pleistocene Epoch. Their deaths remain a mystery and scientific speculations vary.

Some think the creatures may have been the victims of mass electrocution caused when a lightning bolt hit the water where the herd stood. Another theory suggests the beasts suffocated from a prairie fire surrounding them.

Scientists also disagree or are uncertain about the mammoths' cause of

death.

Whatever the causes of the bison's and Colombian mammoths' deaths, the creatures' lives need to be studied on-site more before archeologists and paleontologists carry the remains away, Nixon said.

### Teaming with tourism

Suchor said the Prehistoric Prairies Discovery Center will benefit both science and the communities of Chadron and Crawford.

According to a 1991 U.S. Forest Service study based on the area's tourist draws that year, the center will increase the regional annual economy by \$2 million, with Crawford and Dawes counties benefiting most.

Suchor said her group plans to market the attraction with a string of about 19 related sites in Nebraska, South Dakota and Wyoming.

Known as the Cultural Heritage Corridor, the sites are between Interstate 80 in Nebraska and Interstate 90 in South Dakota.

The corridor begins with the High Plains Archeological Project in southeast Wyoming. It crosses into Nebraska, jumping northeast to Chimney Rock before running north through 10 Panhandle and five western South Dakota sites. The trail then crosses back into Wyoming, ending at the Vore Buffalo Jump.

Seeing the cooperation between the project's various sponsors was fulfilling, Liebenritt said. She said she hopes the completed center's results would be just as successful.

"This will have a major impact on tourism, education and scientific research in the area."

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