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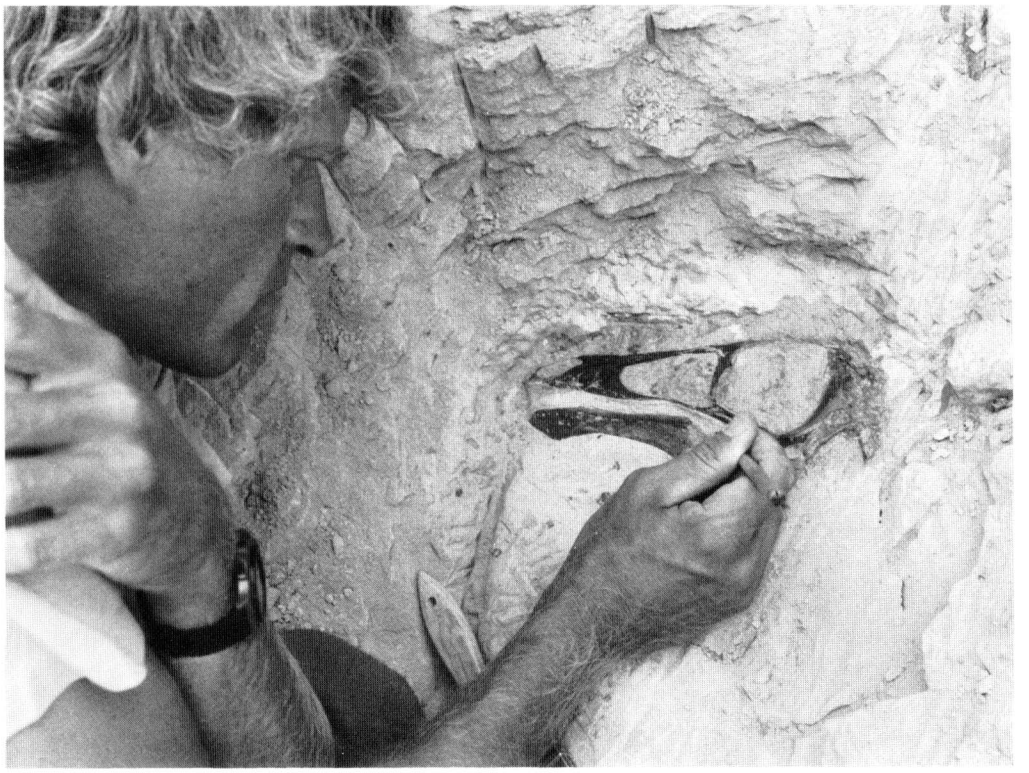
PHIL CURRIE ON OLD BONES AND ERB

(An Interview by "Ye Editor")



Paleontologist Phil Currie digs into the past, hunting for dinosaurs
(Photo by Clive Coy, 1995)

I was born just outside of Toronto in Canada on March 13, 1949. The big events of my early life (they must have been, because they are the only ones I can r e m e m b e r) were getting my head stuck in a pot I was trying to lick out after my mother mixed up some cake batter, and nearly drowning in Lake Ontario.

When I was six years old, I found a plastic dinosaur in a box of Rice Krispies. That turned out to be a pretty momentous discovery, because it sparked my interest in dinosaurs. Five years later, a book on the library shelf caught my eye. ***All About Dinosaurs*** by Roy Chapman Andrews was so great that I couldn't put it down until I finished it. It was the first book I read that described what it was really like to collect and study dinosaurs, and I immediately decided to become a paleontologist. Some say I am stubborn, others that I just never grew up. But I kept at it, got my job, and have never regretted becoming a dinosaur paleontologist.

I was an avid reader as a child, but focused on non-fiction. My interest in dinosaurs was so keen that I read everything, good and bad, I could get on paleontology and related subjects. But it was a bad time for dinosaurs because very little research was being done on them. Not surprisingly, I ran out of books to read. That was when I saw the Ace paperback edition of **At the Earth's Core**. The Roy Krenkel cover art showed a pair of dinosaurs, and I picked it up, hesitantly. But what a surprise I was in for when I started to read it! I was hooked by the words of the Master of Adventure. For a while it seemed like there was more agony than ecstacy as I waited for Ace and Ballantine to re-release the Burroughs titles one or two at a time. Finally I discovered ERB-dom and the Burroughs Bulletin, and they channeled me into the used book market and fandom. At age 16, I went to my first World Con and Dum-Dum, taking a bus to Cleveland. That same year I brought out my first fanzine entitled FANTASTIC WORLDS OF BURROUGHS AND KLINE. Writing articles, editing the work of others, and publishing the magazine certainly gave me a lot of useful experience that served me well when I became a paleontologist.

After the second issue of FWBK, I decided to change the title of the fanzine to ERBivore. It was simpler, a pun on "herbivore" (not necessarily in keeping with the meaty fare that ERB served up), and I published seven issues of the two fanzines, plus a supplement. Publication went into suspension as my workload at the university increased, not to mention the subtle effects of getting married and having three children. I still have enough material to bring out another issue, and will do so just as soon as I find a little time ...

I took my BSc in Zoology at the University of Toronto in 1972. Both the MSc and PhD degrees were acquired from McGill University in Montreal, where I had the good fortune of training under Dr. Robert L. Carroll. Long before I finished my doctorate, however, I took a job at the Provincial Museum of Alberta in Edmonton. It was as if the job had been created for me, and I couldn't believe my good fortune when they offered it to me. I started collecting dinosaurs in Alberta in 1976, but did not get the PhD until 1981 (after a lot of late nights and lost weekends).

On my first day in the field in southern Alberta, I encountered my first rattlesnake. Even though I was looking out for snakes, its coloration was such that I didn't see it until my foot was about to crush it. He couldn't have recognized my coloration either, because by the time he coiled and rattled, I had diverted my foot and leaped over him. That first summer, two of us collected a duckbilled dinosaur. By the autumn we started a series of expeditions into the Peace River Canyon in the foothills of the Rockies, where we collected hundreds of dinosaur footprints. From these humble beginnings, we eventually received the funding necessary to build the Royal Tyrrell Museum of Palaeontology in Drumheller, Alberta.

I have an unbelievably wonderful job, and for almost ten years I felt guilty about taking a pay check! Both my position and I have coevolved over the years, and today I spend most of my time writing scientific and popular articles about dinosaurs, editing, supervising graduate students (I have affiliations with the University of Calgary and Saskatchewan in Canada, and with the University of Copenhagen in Denmark), collecting, preparing and curating fossils, giving public lectures, and so on. For me, fieldwork is always the best, because the reward of finding a significant fossil is an exhilarating feeling that can only be described as a "high." And I have been pretty lucky, having discovered things like the earliest known bird footprints (120 million years old) and three tyrannosaur skeletons. Probably the greatest thrill was when one of my technicians found a nest of eggs with embryonic dinosaurs inside. I had predicted we would find the eggs there, based on geological information, but the embryos went far beyond my expectations. We were like kids as we picked up all the miniature dinosaur bones.

The Royal Tyrrell Museum of Palaeontology is in the badlands at the edge of Drumheller, about one hour and a half from Calgary. We can collect dinosaurs just outside the doors of the museum, and have found more than a dozen skeletons within the city limits. I shouldn't brag about our displays. It should suffice to say that we have more than 50 skeletons on display, and that when the biggest museums want to show that they have the best dinosaur displays, we are the museum they compare themselves with. The museum attracts about half a million people a year, which isn't bad when you consider that there are only 7,000 people in Drumheller.

My contacts with the media have grown slowly over the years. The first encounter was not such a pleasant experience for me, but it was a good lesson in how journalists can manipulate an interview to make it say what they want. Initially media interviews were with local Alberta publications and stations, but the majority now are international. I am still a little mystified as to why I have so much attention, but the three key factors seem to be that everyone loves dinosaurs, I am one of a small group of dinosaurs paleontologists, and I avoid using jargon when I talk about my research.

The three hot spots for dinosaur research are western North America (centered from Alberta down to Utah), central Asia (the Gobi Desert of China and Mongolia) and Patagonia. I have been lucky enough to work in all three areas, but there are a lot of up and coming regions as well. The North Slope of Alaska, Antarctica, Australia and northern Africa are just a few worth mentioning. The truth is that dinosaur research is really in its infancy, and is operating far below potential.

Phil Currie at work on new dinosaur site, 1995 (Photo by Florence Magovern)

Technological advances have helped us a lot in research, and we take advantage of everything from Scanning Electron Microscopes to CT scans to mass spectrometers. Fieldwork has changed little in more than a century, however. Sure, we use GPS (global positioning system) units to pinpoint our sites and helicopters to lift our specimens, but we still spend most of our time walking hour after hour, and move tons of overburden with pick and shovel.

Interesting point ... my fiancée works for the Geological Survey of Greenland. I hope to work there some day because the north still is a frontier, even for dinosaur research. In 1986 and 1989, I worked up on the Canadian arctic islands as part of the Canada-China Dinosaur Project. We did not find much the first time, but I loved the experience so much that it did not take much to convince me to go back the second time, when we had much better success. The ice cap on Greenland is no doubt hiding millions of fossils. Worse than that, the moving ice is grinding them away. Dinosaurs (footprints and bones) have been collected on the east coast of Greenland already, and if we could just melt that ice cap ...

In rereading the stories of ERB, it is not uncommon to run across scientific ideas that initially seem unusual or incorrect. Paleontologically, at least, those ideas need to be put in the context of the time when the books were written. In most cases, it is clear that Burroughs was well aware of the current ideas about dinosaurs and related topics, and that he incorporated them into his stories. I can understand how he was familiar with the popular writings of Roy Chapman Andrews, but I would really like to find out how he knew about the research of Hatcher and Holland, who would not have had any kind of public profile. The books of ERB do not present the kind of detail that would have been available to him in the scientific literature. So I suspect he read what he could when he did his background research, and then used it as he saw fit without referring to his sources again. And like most modern science-

fiction writers, he would sometimes take those ideas and develop them. A great example is the "evolution" of the people in Caspak. Fantastic? Of course! Credible? Not very. But as an extrapolation of a scientific idea, it has a solid base. And extrapolation is a wonderful way to get people to think about something that might otherwise be too dry to capture attention.

Going to Pellucidar would be a worthy goal for any dinosaur paleontologist. Of course, that is totally impossible, so I have had to set my sights on Caspak instead! The truth is that I am already in dinosaur heaven. I can collect dinosaurs less than a mile from my home. I do my research in a big, beautiful museum. I get to travel to exotic places like China, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, and Argentina to collect specimens. And I meet and work with some great people (artists, film-makers, researchers, writers) who share my passion for dinosaurs.

"Ye Editor" has asked me for my advice to budding paleontologists: if you really want to study dinosaurs, go for it! Dinosaur studies are still in their infancy, and there is a bewildering array of options opening up for research and public education. The number of jobs is limited, and there are many other careers that pay higher salaries for less work. But I can't imagine any other job being more exciting, interesting and fun than dinosaurology. Determination and hard work will eventually lead to a position in a museum, university, or elsewhere, although you might just find yourself constantly looking over your shoulder. I was reminded of this recently when a four-year-old looked me in the eye and said: "When I grow up, I am going to take your job."

... Philip Currie