

## **Muddy drama became Waco's mammoth dig**

By: John Young, Opinion page editor

When it finally rained, it roared.

Down the dry Bosque riverbed it swept, foaming, raging, killing and burying.

The spring-fed trickle that had drawn beasts to the limestone bottoms suddenly became an inescapable swirl. The mud under hoof was like motor oil. The animals slipped and failed in ascent.

Then came a collapsed river bank and the stamp of history. Instant.

Packed and shipped to a far-off century: 24 Columbian mammoths and one camel, at last count.

Over more than 20 years Baylor University paleontologists have been digging and dusting at a moment in time. The site near Steinbeck Bend between the Brazos and Bosque rivers is considered the largest find portraying a "single dying event" of large mammals.

New remains keep emerging—a handful of new mammoth discoveries in the last 10 years. And a Baylor graduate student recently detected another about 70 feet away from the herd.

One discovery that didn't get much press was a headless camel.

At least a head wasn't attached to the remains when discovered by the Strecker Museum staff. But Gary Haynes, a paleontological ace and frequent consult from the University of Nevada-Reno, ventured a guess.

"I'll tell you what," he said to Strecker chairman Calvin Smith. "If you'll look about 10 feet away you'll find it."

He was right. The necks of feral camels were that long, maybe a manifestation of survival in a post-ice age time. Post-ice age. Pre-flood.

The camel took its last sip from the Bosque 28,000 years ago at a gathering place where a herd of mammoths had congregated. The Strecker teams have found evidence of other animals, like the teeth of horses. But only the mammoths and the one camel are intact.

Recently Baylor announced that two gifts and a property owners' gracious discount will make possible a 50-acre buffer area that is a key piece in making the mammoth dig something that anyone can enjoy. Right now it is closed to the public, for good reason.

Plans are for a sheltered site where visitors could watch paleontologists at work.

Though educators and classes might be interested in the history of a mammoth site, any audience would be intrigued by the matters of life and death on display.

Consider that the positioning of the bones implies that a 45-year-old female mammoth was attempting to hoist a 4-year-old juvenile up above the flood when all was lost.

At the site, writes Karen Gerhardt, one can "almost feel their panic" as the mammoths formed a protective semi-circle around their young. The mind can "hear their trumpeting cries of fright, smell the mud, and see the bank crashing down upon them," she writes.

Said Smith, "The impact of the story is going to be great. I've watched people brought to tears when I've explained it."

### **Scientific bonanza**

Smith talks of a completely enclosed dig area with the actual bones remaining on site. State grants are being sought along with participation by the city of Waco to make an educational and tourist draw almost as compelling as the water's edge was 280 centuries ago.

It certainly interested an audience in Beijing at the International Geological Congress to which Smith made a presentation in 1997. Teams from Sweden and Great Britain are coming soon to the site.

A Baylor symposium 10 years earlier focusing on the mammoth dig drew 500 researchers, an event that some called the "Woodstock of proboscidean research" — meaning it was about ancient tusks and trunks, not rock 'n' roll.

Smith said a dig with so much circumstantial evidence can tell scientists a lot about the Earth's history.

The planet has had more than one glacial age, the most recent followed by a drought 10,000 to 7,000 years ago that killed off two-thirds of the mammals on this continent.

The mammoth dig indicates that something similar, thereby cyclical, may have happened 28,000 years ago—a drought that followed an ice age.

But don't let the ice imagery fool you. Camels and ice don't mix. Neither did the Columbian mammoths of Central Texas. These behemoths, unlike the woolly mammoths of the north, were less hairy and more like African elephants.

As for camels, a layman assumes they couldn't have been indigenous to this land, only misplaced imports. Wrong. This camel was a Native American. We're the imports.

Smith said it's impossible to predict what surprises and discoveries loom in this ancient and sudden graveyard.

"The allure of paleontology is that you never know what the next shovel is going to turn."