

# SU's dinosaur fossil collection relocates to Discovery Museum

By Teresa Dunham  
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**Winchester** — Local man John Happ spent 15 summers of his life unearthing dinosaur fossils from the Hell Creek Formation in eastern Montana.

The dirt, sweat, and meticulous searching has yielded more than 700 fossils over the years, including finds like a *Tyrannosaurus rex* jaw bone, a huge *Triceratops* horn, and a partial baby *Triceratops* skull.

"That's unique in itself. There are very few specimens of juvenile skulls," said Happ, a retired paleontology professor from Shenandoah University.

Before Happ's retirement, these fossils were housed at Shenandoah University — but the university recently transferred the collection to the Shenandoah Valley Discovery Museum on the Loudoun Street Mall in Winchester.

Eventually, when the Discovery Museum moves from Loudoun Street to its planned facility at Jim Barnett Park in Winchester a few of these fossils will go public.

"We do plan to have some of the fossils out on display," said Geb Bennett, museum paleontologist.

Happ's large fossils will be added to a collection of 2,000 smaller microinvertebrate specimens that Bennett also uncovered at the Hell Creek Formation.

Bennett's collection includes fossils of frogs, salamanders, lizards, and snakes from the same time period as Happ's dinosaur fossils. Bits of a baby dinosaur egg are also among the vials.



John Happ (right), professor emeritus at Shenandoah University, whose specialty is paleontology, goes over the fossils he transferred to the Shenandoah Valley Discovery Museum in Winchester with Geb Bennett, collections manager at the museum on the Loudoun Street Mall.  
*(Rick Foster)*

"Montana is especially rich in dinosaur fossils," said Happ, adding that these particular fossils are approximately 65 million years old.

A Triceratops horn in the collection is of particular interest because it shows signs of a Tyrannosaurus Rex bite that was starting to heal, he said.

"There's been debate whether the T-Rex was a scavenger or a predator," said Happ, whose discovery seems to indicate that the T-Rex did take on a predatory role in that instance.

This same specimen of Triceratops was spotlighted in Newsweek magazine and on several television documentaries, he said.



At left is a jaw fragment from a Tyrannosaurus Rex and at right is a horn from a Triceratops. The teeth of a Tyrannosaurus Rex made their mark on the horn of the Triceratops. The black teeth in the jaw are made from molds of actual teeth.  
*(Rick Foster)*

The Discovery Museum never intended to be a fossil-collecting institution in the beginning, said executive director Peggy McKee.

That all changed when Shenandoah University invited the museum to help prepare the fossils Happ found. The museum then decided to hire a paleontologist in the late 1990s and build a fossil prep lab, she said.

When the large fossils first come back from the field, they're wrapped in plaster field jackets that need to be removed. The fossils then require specific care and preservative

treatment.

"It's unusual for a town and a museum of this size to have a paleontology project," said McKee.

Yet cooperation between Shenandoah University and the Discovery Museum for dinosaur projects was planned in a written agreement early-on.

"This is a continuation of that project," said Happ.

Currently, the fossil lab is open for public view at the Discovery Museum, and volunteer opportunities are available for a few meticulous individuals who would like to assist in preparations.

For more information, call Geb Bennett at 722-2020. The museum at 54 S. Loudoun St. is open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday to Saturday and from 1 to

5 p.m. Sunday.

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