

FIRST DRAFT

Mesa County home to early giants of major dinosaur-fossil discoveries

The Field Museum in Chicago announced Aug. 30 that, beginning early next year, it will display “the biggest dinosaur ever discovered,” Patagotitan mayorum, found in Argentina in 2008.



BOB SILBERNAGEL

More than a century ago, the Field Museum began displaying another giant replica of a dinosaur, an Apatosaurus that was uncovered at a site now called Dinosaur Hill, south of the Colorado River near Fruita.

Elmer Riggs, a paleontologist working for the Field Museum at the turn of the last century, spent two seasons working in the Grand Valley — in 1900 and 1901.

He made his first big discovery at the site now called Riggs Hill, near the intersection of South Broadway and South Camp Road on the Redlands. There, he and his assistant, H.W. Menke, recovered the shoulder, ribs, vertebrae and leg bones of a Brachiosaurus.

“This fellow was a record breaker for size for that time,” Riggs told an interviewer during the 1930s. “It was a jim-dandy. I only wish I had the whole skeleton of him.”

A Chicago newspaper of the time bragged that as a result of Riggs’ discovery, the city was home to “the largest land animal that ever lived.” And a Boston newspaper in late 1900 declared the creature that Riggs found “The Monster of All Ages.”

That wasn’t just hyperbole. “When Riggs named and described Brachiosaurus, it became the new largest dinosaur ... and it remained the largest dinosaur for decades,” said William Simpson, fossil vertebrates collections manager for the Field Museum today. “Riggs was always frustrated that Brachiosaurus wasn’t on display more.”

It was his Apatosaurus that received the most prominent display because the skeleton was more complete. That giant fossil has been on continuous display at the Field Museum since December 1908, in two different buildings and in three different exhibit halls, the spokesman said.

Riggs found the Apatosaurus late in the season in 1900. But he didn’t have time or money to excavate it then. Instead, he returned the following year with a crew, and discovered a much more complete skeleton than he had imagined.

But there was no bridge over the Colorado River at Fruita then, so Riggs had to improvise to get the fossils across the river and onto railroad cars to be sent back to the museum in Chicago.

“I went to a lumber dealer and gave him a sketch of a flat boat that was to be 24 feet long



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE FIELD MUSEUM

The two-thirds complete skeleton of the Apatosaurus that Elmer Riggs discovered south of Fruita, as it appeared at the Field Museum in Chicago in 1909.

and 10 feet wide,” he recalled in that 1930s interview. He planned to use a cable from an old ferry that once crossed the river nearby.

The lumber was delivered, Riggs said, “And I fell to it and in two days I had nailed up that ferry boat.” It took much of that summer to excavate, crate and ship the dinosaur, two-thirds of an entire Apatosaurus.



Elmer Riggs as he appeared later in his life. Photo courtesy of the Field Museum.

Riggs’ research took him to Wyoming the following year, and eventually to Argentina. He didn’t return to Mesa County until 1938, when he participated in ceremonies commemorating his earlier discoveries. He dedicated plaques at both Dinosaur Hill and Riggs Hill that year.

Both the Brachiosaurus and the Apatosaurus that Riggs unearthed near Fruita in 1901 were members of a group of long-necked, plant-eating dinosaurs called sauropods. But neither of them was believed to be more than 75 feet long. The Apatosaurus was roughly 72 feet long.

In contrast, Patagotitan mayorum is 122 feet long from nose to tail, according to information provided by the Field Museum. It is part of a group of dinosaurs known as titanosaurs.

New specimens of dinosaurs have been discovered regularly over the past century, and new claimants for the title of the world’s largest land creature have come along frequently.

For a time in the 1970s and 1980s, the title was claimed by a pair of dinosaur fossils discovered at Dry Mesa Quarry on the flanks of the Uncompahgre Plateau near Delta.

Supersaurus and Ultrasaurus — which was later determined to be a large individual of the species Riggs named



Elmer Riggs’ assistant, H.W. Menke, standing with a leg bone of the Brachiosaurus discovered on the Redlands near Grand Junction.

Brachiosaurus — were the largest dinosaurs found at the time. Ultrasaurus was estimated to be 100 feet long. But it was soon overtaken by discoveries of larger dinosaurs elsewhere on the planet.

At the Field Museum, Riggs’ discoveries were eventually overshadowed by other dinosaurs. One recent creature was not larger, but certainly more fearsome.

Sue, the largest and most complete skeleton of a Tyrannosaurus rex, has been on display in the central hall at the Field Museum since 2000. The giant fossil was discovered on the Cheyenne River Indian Reservation in South Dakota in 1990.

Sue will be disassembled and moved out of the Stanley Field Hall, the central gallery at the entrance to the museum, beginning next February. The cast of Patagotitan mayorum will take up residence there.

But Sue won’t disappear. She will be reassembled in another exhibit hall in the museum called “Evolving Planet,” and will be placed in

context with other dinosaurs. Equally important, the dinosaurs and other fossils discovered by Elmer Riggs, in western Colorado and on other expeditions, also remain at the museum, some of them very visible.

The Apatosaurus is also in the Evolving Planet display area now.

A plastic replica of a Brachiosaurus skeleton, based on Riggs’ incomplete fossil discovered on the Redlands, stands outside the Field Museum. Inside, in addition to Apatosaurus, are bones of some of the many other fossils and dinosaurs and early mammals that Riggs discovered.

Information from *The Field Museum in Chicago, the Museums of Western Colorado and Bob Silbernagel’s book, “Dinosaur Stalkers: Tracking Dinosaur Discoveries of Western Colorado and Eastern Utah.” More information about the Field Museum can be found at fieldmuseum.org.*

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Grand Junction visitors bureau gets new name

By JOE VACCARELLI
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The website already used the name for the past 15 years, but the Grand Junction Visitor and Convention Bureau finally made it official, recently changing its name to Visit Grand Junction.

The organization is a city department that is focused on marketing the city and surrounding area to bring in tourism dollars. Its website — visitgrandjunction.com — highlights events such as the Colorado Mountain Winefest in Palisade, hiking on Grand Mesa or in Colorado National Monument, biking trails and rafting on the Colorado River.

“We thought it would make a lot of sense to go with the flow and reflect our core mission. This also brands us in a way similar to many other organizations,” Executive Director Debbie Kovalik said, referencing sister organizations such as Visit Denver, Visit Fort Collins and Visit Estes Park. “It is clearly easier to say when people call here. Staff are more than excited to say, ‘Thank you for calling Visit Grand Junction.’”

In coinciding with the name change, Visit Grand Junction is also placing more emphasis in having information on its website and directing people there rather than mailing out brochures.

Kovalik said the organization is still printing brochures, but not nearly as many as five or 10 years ago. “That website is our greatest asset,” she said.

Visit Grand Junction is also looking at a rebranding effort to create a more contemporary look and hopefully be more competitive in bringing visitors to town. Kovalik said the organization will focus on what really brings people to town and makes them come back.

“We’ve really been working on that for more than two years by doing loads of research, understanding customers and people who come here,” Kovalik said, adding that 73 percent of visitors are in the Grand Valley for their second or third trip.

Visit Grand Junction is funded by a lodging tax that was passed in 1989. Kovalik started with the organization in January 1990.



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Paleontologist Rick Hunter uses a sharpened carbide needle to meticulously scrape rock away from around the bones of a raptor. The 9-ton chunk of rock that encases the fossil may contain as many as six different animals and may take as long as 10 years to fully excavate.

Project aims to unlock mystery of Utahraptor

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SALT LAKE CITY — Utah paleontologists are asking people to help raise \$100,000 so they can extract Utahraptor fossils from a 9-ton block of stone to find out more about this sharp-clawed predator that lived during the Cretaceous Period.

The Utahraptor Project, a GoFundMe account with a \$100,000 goal, will go toward uncovering bones inside the “Utahraptor Block,” a quicksand trap about the size of a king-size bed.

After starting the project last September, donations stalled around \$16,000. But funding doubled almost overnight after a New York Times article highlighted the crowdfunding efforts.

Donations totaled more than \$33,110 as of earlier this month, the Deseret News reported.

“We’ve put a lot of blood, sweat and tears into collecting this thing, and we want to see the project through. And we want to see it done right,” said fossil preparator and Utahraptor Project leader Scott Madsen. The “Utahraptor Block” was discovered in 2001 by a geology student who spotted a bone sticking out from the Cedar Mountain hillside.

The student alerted Madsen and state paleontologist Jim Kirkland. The two paleontologists searched the mountainside, “armed with one photograph and a vague description of where this thing was in an ocean of rock,” Madsen said. They found the site after hours of searching, but it took more than a decade to get the 9-ton sandstone slab off the hill-

side and into a museum lab in Lehi.

Madsen found that at least six dinosaurs are trapped inside the rock, with bones lying like pick-up sticks.

At least one dinosaur is a herbivore, possibly an iguanodont. The rest are Utahraptors, from “Jurassic World”-size adults to juveniles to newborn hatchlings. Madsen believes the bones could revolutionize the image of the Utahraptor.

The Utahraptor is typically displayed as 23 feet long, lanky, feathered and long-clawed. The shape and structure of the new Utahraptor bones are a bit different from what paleontologists thought the dinosaur looked like.

The juveniles are more stout, like adults. Madsen theorizes the dinosaurs may have hunted in family packs since a large range of Utahraptor ages were found in the sandstone.

“This might be the only well-documented quicksand trap in the dinosaur record,” Madsen said. “We’ve kind of got one shot at getting this right.”

After a number of failed attempts to find outside funding, Madsen launched the Utahraptor Project. Most of the money from the GoFundMe goes toward buying equipment, like microscopes and needle tools to uncover the bones.

But Madsen hesitated moving forward after donations slowed, partly because he still needs other tools, like 3-D computer software to document the position of the bones. He also has yet to be paid for his efforts.

BLOTTER

COMPILED BY SENTINEL STAFF

According to the Mesa County Sheriff’s Office:

- Mark Dulany, 40, was arrested for several charges concerning auto theft on Thursday.
- Candido Mondragon, 47, was arrested for traffic offences on Sept. 1.

- Jesus Rodriguez-Caro, 26, was issued a summons for disorderly conduct in the 2900 block of Yew Leaf Willow Road on Sept. 1.
- A bank fraud was reported in the 3200 block of Interstate 70B on Tuesday.
- A burglary was reported in the 500 block of Gardner Way on Aug. 9.

- Animal cruelty was reported in the 600 block of 35 Road on Aug. 29.
- A restraining order violation was reported in the 3000 block of Sequel Way on Aug. 21.
- Harassment was reported in the 100 block of Turner Avenue on Aug. 8.

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