

A Beastly Encounter

Face-to-Face with the Columbian Mammoth

BY BRENDA WHELOCK

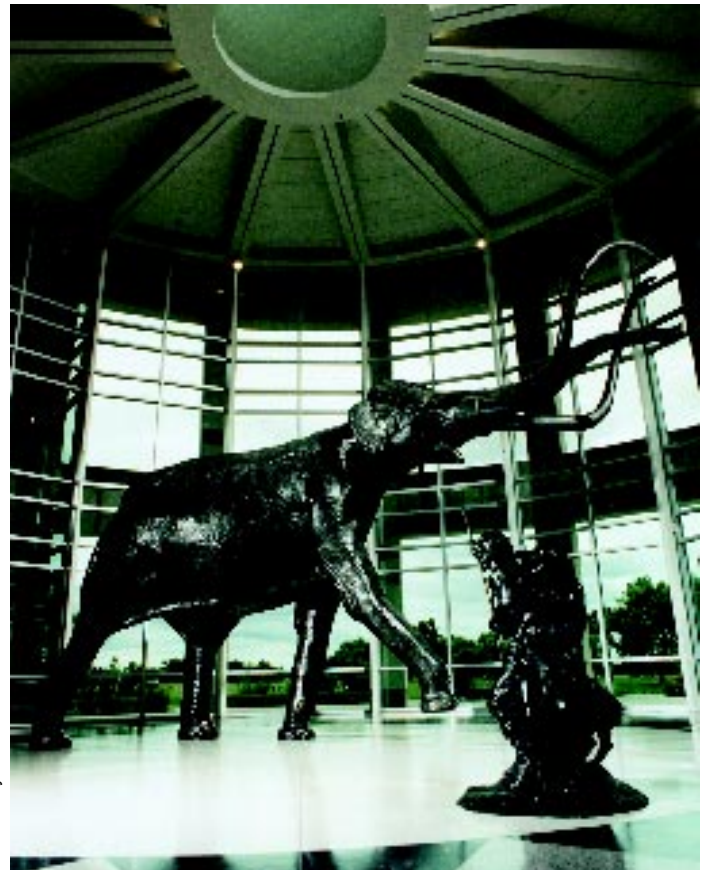
Imagine hiking across the Oklahoma plains with your spouse and baby while the family dog follows close behind. As you ascend a hill, the dog becomes agitated by something ahead and begins growling. Reaching the hilltop, you realize why and are nearly paralyzed with fear. Standing just feet ahead of you and your family is a four-ton Columbian Mammoth.

Human encounters with mammoths might sound like something right out of a Steven Spielberg movie, but they were a reality for people who lived more than 10,000 years ago on the prehistoric landscape of what is now Oklahoma. Such a dramatic encounter is portrayed in the new museum through life-sized bronze sculptures of a Paleo-Indian family standing face-to-face with a Columbian Mammoth. The sculptures, sponsored by the American Airlines Foundation, are centerpieces for the W. R. Howell Pleistocene Plaza, the museum's grand glass and stone rotunda.

The idea for the exhibit came from Museum Director Michael Mares, who recalled a giant African elephant he once had seen displayed at the Smithsonian Institution.

"Mammoths were even more impressive and were hunted by Native Americans more than 10,000 years ago," he says. "The idea of people and a great behemoth interacting in a scene that could have occurred on the very site of this museum so long ago became something that I thought would provide cause for reflection on time past, ancient life, and the dignity of people in the face of extraordinary challenges."

The exhibit also serves as a transition point between the prehistoric animals featured in the Hall of Ancient Life and the early humans highlighted in the Hall of the People of Oklahoma, adds Mares.



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The Paleo-Indian family and their pet dog were sculpted by OU artist-in-residence Paul Moore along with graduate student Sohail Shehada. The pair worked closely with museum curators to replicate the characteristics—including body build, clothing, and spear points—of the Clovis-era people living 11,500 to 10,800 years ago.

The accompanying mammoth sculpture by Nebraska artist Fred Hoppe is believed to be the largest in the world, weighing 5,000 pounds and measuring 15 feet at the shoulder and 23 feet in length. It is based on fossil remains of a large Columbian

Mammoth found in Lincoln County, Nebraska, in 1922.

Hoppe spent more than a year and used more than 3,000 pounds of clay sculpting the creature. Its skeleton-like framework, or armature, was made from 17-foot-long ponderosa pines. The finished piece was cast in 86 sections requiring three tons of bronze and 500 pounds of welding rods, Hoppe says. "The sections took over three months to weld together, and then we had to grind out the seams."

Aside from working on such a large scale, the sculpting process was much like that of any other piece, Hoppe says. The



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greatest challenge was accurately depicting an animal that has been extinct for thousands of years.

"It was like being a forensic scientist," he says. "We had this big skeleton from which to work, then we had to piece together lots of other clues."

Hoppe consulted with museum scientists and studied cave drawings made thousands of years ago by people who actually had seen mammoths. He used casts from mammoth footprints to determine foot size and shape. He studied photos of a frozen mammoth found in Canada to help determine features such as ear and trunk size. He also gleaned clues from modern-day elephants, such as how much muscle mass mammoths might have borne on each bone or the cadence of their legs as they walked.

"We considered every part of its body down to its toenails," he says.

Hoppe says he is honored to have one of his works displayed in a state-of-the-art facility like the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History.

"I have traveled to museums all over the world, and I've never seen anything like this museum," he says. "The people of Oklahoma have a national treasure."

OPPOSITE AND ABOVE: A Paleo-Indian family and dog encounter the SNOMNH's bronze Columbian Mammoth in the Pleistocene Plaza. The life-size family, created by OU artist-in-residence Paul Moore, and sculptor Fred Hoppe's mammoth are favorite features of the new museum. The mammoth was so massive it had to be disassembled and moved cross-country by flatbed truck, then reassembled onsite and bolted to the plaza floor. Hoppe later installed these new, more scientifically precise set of tusks. INSET: Who can resist patting a dog—even a prehistoric, sculpted one? The dog's bronze nose is kept forever shiny by the loving hands of small visitors who find him just the right height.

SNOMNH Director Michael A. Mares does not mince words when describing what it is like working in a world-class museum facility.

"It feels great," says Mares, whose determination was a deciding factor in making the SNOMNH a reality. Mares is a 20-year veteran of the museum who spent each previous year hoping, planning, and seeking support for a facility deserving of Oklahoma's treasures.

"We were always working in spite of the former buildings," he says. "The new facility is a marvelous tool, and we're still learning how to use it to its full capacity. In a way, we haven't had time to sit back and enjoy it."

Time has been a luxury for a director whose staff has grown from approximately 15 to more than 100 in the past two years and who has helped oversee what can best be described as the ultimate relocation project.

"We had a challenge very few museums have faced—packing and moving out of an old museum scattered in 10 different buildings, and planning and building a new museum and all of its exhibits at the same time. It's an extraordinary accomplishment for the staff.

"The changes we've undergone are amazing," Mares adds. In its old home, the museum was proud to attract tens of thousands of visitors annually. Since opening in May 2000, the SNOMNH has attracted more than 300,000 visitors.

Mares is especially proud that the museum has become a destination for Oklahomans who want to show off their state to visitors and a place where families can spend quality time together.

"Oklahoma's heritage is reflected here in a unique way. If you want to spend several hours somewhere and be the better for it, this is the place to do it."

—Anne Barajas

Mike Callaghan

