

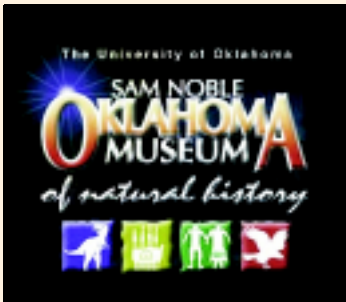


# Virtually Linked to the World

BY BRENDA WHELOCK

Long before the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History opened its doors, thousands of people were touring its vast galleries and learning about its collections in cyberspace.

The museum's Web site—[www.snomnh.ou.edu](http://www.snomnh.ou.edu)—was launched in summer 1997 but has been redesigned several times and expanded to include such popular features as a virtual tour, online postcards and a World Museum Index, providing links to more than 7,500 museums worldwide.



Maintaining the Web site is a full-time job for Chris Gant, who also is pursuing his management information systems degree at OU. Along with Patrick Fisher, the museum's coordinator of computing

systems, Gant has worked closely with museum administrators to create a Web site that is aesthetically pleasing, as well as functional and original.

"We didn't want to model our Web site after someone else's," Fisher says. "We want our site to be about this museum and be unique to the things we do and the programs we offer."

One of the most popular features on the OU museum's site is the "Virtual Tour," which allows visitors to browse through the galleries and exhibit spaces by clicking on a facility map. Once inside a gallery, virtual tourists can drag their mouse to get a full 360-degree view of the room or zoom in on a particular area.

"One of our future plans," Gant says, "is to offer 'hot spots' so visitors can view some featured exhibits in virtual 3-D. One might click on a bison skull and be able view it from any angle or move in for a close-up."

Another popular link is the "Live Museum Cams," which allows visitors to see real-time video footage from two digital video cameras located inside the museum. One shows visitors coming and going from the museum's main entrance. The other, called "TenontoCam," is focused on the fossilized skeleton of a *Tenontosaurus*, a plant-eating dinosaur recently excavated in southeast Oklahoma. Through TenontoCam, online visitors can witness the ongoing preparation of the skeleton in the museum's paleontology lab every Tuesday and Thursday from 6 to 8 p.m.

Gant recently added links from the museum's home page for announcements, upcoming events, and news releases. The public, as well as journalists, can access museum news releases and photographs by browsing through the "Media Relations" archive.

"When Richard Cifelli, the museum's curator of vertebrate paleontology, announced the discovery of a giant *Sauroposeidon* dinosaur last year," Gant says, "the museum Web site received nearly a half-million hits in one 48-hour period."

In the last year, Gant has worked closely with museum curators to expand Web site information on exhibits and collections. The information is especially valuable to teachers, who can tour the museum online and familiarize themselves with its collections before they ever set foot in the building.

From the museum Web site, visitors can click their way to the Smithsonian or the Louvre via the "World Museum Index." The index is a springboard to thousands of museums worldwide and is searchable by region, language, and discipline.

The Web site is literally loaded with useful information. Visitors can learn about SNOMNH history and collections, find



Robert Taylor

Chris Gant manages the Web site [www.snomnh.ou.edu](http://www.snomnh.ou.edu), which he helped develop with Patrick Fisher. Museum enthusiasts can go online to tour SNOMNH, learn about the collections, observe ongoing specimen preparation, contact museums worldwide, and share the excitement that accompanies research discoveries.

e-mail addresses for administrators and staff, access research papers and articles by museum scientists, or learn about job openings and volunteer opportunities. Prospective visitors even can get directions and print out maps to the new facility.

A virtual museum visit would not be complete without a postcard. The Web site offers a variety of picture postcards for visitors to e-mail to friends and family. The cards are similar to the popular Internet greeting cards and link recipients to the museum's Web site, where they can retrieve their cards.

As the Web site grows, Gant encourages public input. "On nearly every page of our Web site, there's a link to the museum's general e-mail address for people to submit their comments and suggestions," he says. "We're always looking for bright ideas." 🍌