The University of Nebraska State Museum

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COVER PHOTO
Stromatolite tubes of the
Proterozoic-age Huttenberg
Formation, part of the upper Otavi
Group.
One of the interpreted reservoir
facies in the Ovambo Basin of
Northern Namibia. Photo by RMAG
member, Tom Hoak.

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The University of Nebraska State Museum

By R.F. Diffendal, Jr., PhD, Curator, UNSM Invertebrate Paleontology Collections

I first walked through the doors of Morrill Hall on the main or City Campus of the University of Nebraska on a day late in August of 1962 and thought that I had entered paleontology heaven. Morrill Hall then housed the University of Nebraska State Museum (UNSM), most of the Geology Department, and some other parts of university units. I was a new graduate student hoping to pursue research in invertebrate paleontology in the Department of Geology and was on my way to see the department chairman for the first time. When I entered the building I walked through a vestibule and found myself headed directly into one huge gallery of fossil elephants, Elephant Hall. Wow, what a sight! Even today, more than 50 years later the hall is extraordinary with its fully mounted mastodons and mammoths and its fine displays of all things proboscidean. These were not invertebrate fossils, but they were wonderful.

The history of the museum started in 1871 with the establishment of a “Cabinet” for natural history specimens by the University Board of Regents. The present museum building, Morrill Hall, was dedicated in 1927 and has undergone many improvements since then. UNSM has eight informal divisions: Anthropology, Botany, Entomology, Invertebrate Paleontology, Parasitology, Vertebrate Paleontology, Zoology, and Informal Science Education. There are separate Geology collections of minerals, rocks, and meteorites. UNSM is fully accredited.

The museum is currently housed on three floors of the building with plans to expand to the fourth floor in the near future. The first floor houses 16 beautiful Nebraska Wildlife dioramas showing plants and animals native to regions across the State. Cabinet displays in the adjacent hallways have mounted examples of invertebrates (including some from the entomology collections) and of vertebrates. There are other displays that are changed from time to time.

The second floor has Elephant Hall, of course, along with galleries of fossil rhinos and horses, ancient life from Precambrian through the Paleozoic, a Mesozoic life gallery, and one devoted mostly to displays about the Nebraska Highway Salvage Program, one funded by the State for collection of fossil remains found during highway construction across Nebraska. Mueller Planetarium is also on this floor.

The third floor has galleries devoted to areas of anthropology, to dinosaurs, and to evolution as well one with special exhibits. Minerals and rocks are displayed in cases in the hallways.

The museum has huge research collections of millions of specimens from the divisions plus geology. These are housed principally in another building on

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Fossil trilobite from the Pennsylvanian rocks of southeastern Nebraska.

Fully articulated fossil rhinoceros being excavated at Ashfall Fossil Beds State Historical Park.

is the only place I know of where you can see fully articulated skeletons of Miocene age rhinos, horses, and other vertebrate animals in place where they were found. Ashfall is cooperatively run by UNSM and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. Trailside is known for “The Clash of the Mammoths” display, skeletons of two mammoths that died while their tusks were locked.

References
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