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THE NEBRASKA STATE MUSEUM

ERWIN H. BARBOUR, *Director*

A MORNING'S CONSIGNMENT OF PROBOSCIDEAN
FREIGHT

BY ERWIN HINCKLEY BARBOUR

In the accompanying cut the array of great tusks outlined through their rough crates may lack attractiveness, nevertheless the assemblage is quite out of the ordinary, and seems worth recording in bulletin form. In all museums, and like institutions, freight and express deliveries are matters of daily routine; however, the morning's freight shown in the cut is unique. Herein is represented the more showy portion of the proboscidean freight received at the Nebraska State Museum in a single consignment, in the field season of 1930. The other boxes of mammoth skulls, jaws, and bones, received at the same time, are not shown here. Taking everything into account it is doubtful if a like number of proboscidean relics were ever received by an institution in a single shipment. Since this shipment, as a whole, seemed spectacular, as well as instructive, it was put on display in Elephant Hall, and was exhibited during the week of the Nebraska State Fair, August 30, to September 7, 1930, and for some time afterward. The attendance at this State Fair totalled four hundred and thirty-nine thousand people, of whom large numbers found their way to the State Museum where the crated tusks and skulls proved to be an acceptable object lesson.

The freight consignment in question represents the work of four students collecting for about four weeks in south central Nebraska. What would be the yield under sustained effort!

The crates are built of two-by-four scantling which may give a better idea of proportions. The eight tusks shown

vary from six to twelve feet in length. Each tusk is heavily cinched, and as a measure of additional precaution is cinched to the crate itself. By cinching is meant that a specimen is bound around securely with strips of burlap, or any coarse cloth, dipped in a batter of plaster-of-Paris and allowed to set. To the left in the figure is obscurely shown a skull with one tusk in place, while in the centre is a large crate containing a fine large mammoth skull with both tusks in position, found in Peorian Loess, near Trenton, Nebraska. This crate is too large for the Museum elevator, and will not pass through the double doors of the work rooms. Accordingly, the skull and tusks must be prepared and mounted for exhibition where they stand in Elephant Hall. The dimensions of the crate are nine by eleven by three feet, each tusk measuring eight inches in diameter, nine feet in length, with a spread of nine feet at the tips. Four of the great tusks, one pair ten feet long, one pair twelve feet, together with skeletal parts, were found overlapping in a canyon near Bignell, Lincoln County, Nebraska. The belief is entertained that no other region of like size supported such unnumbered herds of proboscideans, or produced individuals of such royal proportions. Since November 1929, to date, the sand-tables in the work rooms have not been cleared of proboscidean remains. Before one set was disposed of another arrived.

It may be justifiable repetition to state that elephants roved Nebraska in incredible numbers, and that their relics are to be expected wherever ground is broken by dredge, road grader, or plow, or where the soil is washed by rains. In exploring the region we have found as many as half a dozen skeletons exposed upon the surface and more or less completely ruined by frost and plow, and all within a radius of two or three miles. Within the corporate limits of Lincoln, three skeletons and an indefinite number of teeth, tusks, and stray bones have already been unearthed. One mammoth skeleton was found just a mile west of Morrill Hall on R street, at the edge of Old Salt Lake, now called Capitol Beach. This was completely destroyed, barring one upper molar preserved

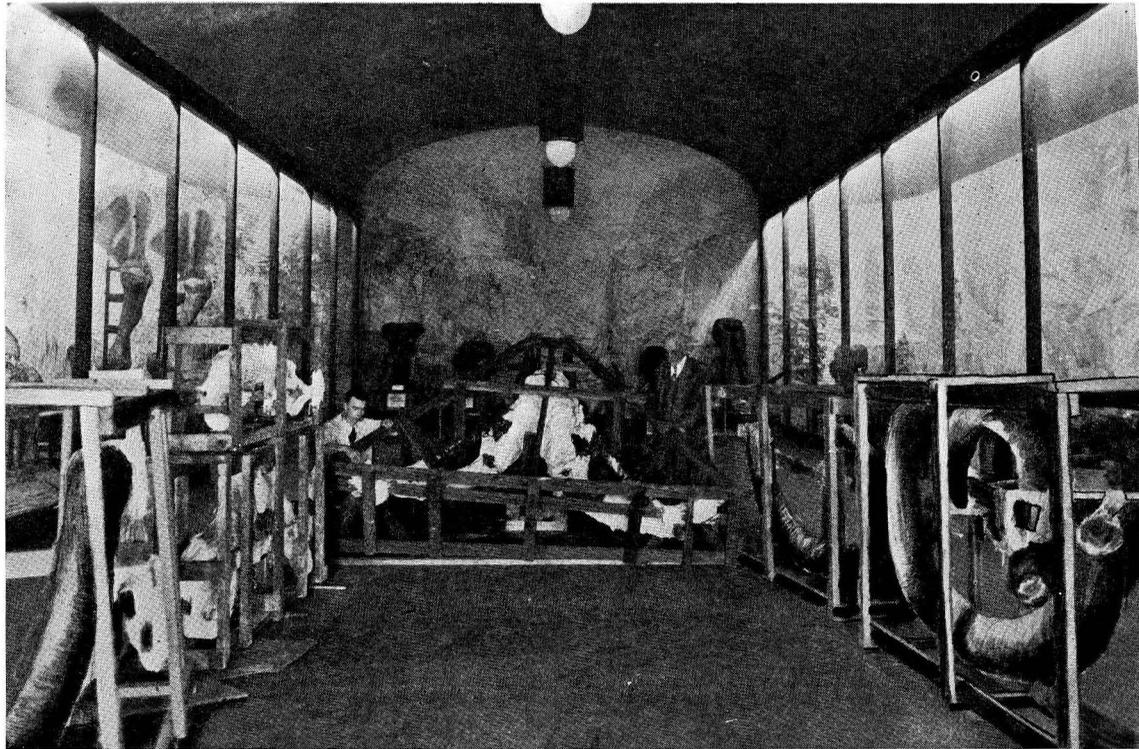


FIG. 102.—A portion of Elephant Hall showing crates containing mammoth tusks and skulls. This is a part of one morning's delivery of proboscidean freight at the Nebraska State Museum. To the left is indistinctly shown a mammoth skull with one tusk in position, and in the center one with both tusks.

in the State Museum. Another skeleton, a finely preserved mastodon, lies buried under fifteen feet of loess in Memorial Drive about three miles southeast of the University Campus, and a third skeleton, that of a mammoth, lies under the foundation of a house just one block east of Elephant Hall.

American proboscideans are Asiatic migrants which arrived in the Early Pliocene; flourished, as migrants to a new country often do; lived through the Pleistocene, when the last survivors in this country, the mastodon and mammoth, perished. The favoring conditions of this great region seem to have stimulated variation, and there is a fine array of genera and species, ranging from the low-browed, long-jawed, four-tusked, early mastodons to the high-browed, short-jawed, two-tusked mastodons and mammoths. The proboscidean collections of the Nebraska State Museum, The University of Nebraska, are large, and are growing rapidly. These collections, secured largely by funds donated by the late Charles H. Morrill, and Hector Maiben, comprise tetrabelodons, mastodons, mammoths, and the casts of European forms. The following is a partial list, exclusive of those stored: 31 skulls, 50 stray mandibles, 160 tusks, 430 teeth, some 8 or 10 skeletons complete enough for mounting, the skeleton of one African elephant, mounted, and two skins now being mounted by Mr. James L. Clark, New York City, and the mounted skeletons of two Indian elephants.

It is a most fortunate circumstance that the citizens of the State, feeling pride in the University of Nebraska, the head of the educational system of a great commonwealth, take pains everywhere to notify the museum of discoveries. Many have donated their private collections. Others have contributed of their means to the end that we secure and preserve for our State Cabinets the best and most representative examples of its resources and relics. But for this friendly moral support and private financial aid the progress made by the State Museum could never have been a reality.

The University of Nebraska,
Lincoln, Nebraska,
March, 1931.