

# The Oregonian

**Building a future on rocks from the past**

**The Paleo Project promotes Fossil as an "edu-tourism" gateway**

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**ERIC MORTENSON**

**The Oregonian**

FOSSIL -- Sometimes you have to look around to realize what you've got.

Thomas and Mary Hoover figured that out in 1876. They were applying to open a post office in their Central Oregon rimrock settlement, so the story goes, when some government functionary asked them what they wanted to call it.

The Hoovers were ranchers. Accounts vary, but supposedly a landslide out on their range sometime earlier had exposed the stony bones of a prehistoric animal. What it was has been lost to memory; various people recall that it was a woolly mammoth, a saber-toothed tiger, a camel-like animal or a three-toed horse.

At any rate, the Hoovers supposedly looked at each other and knew the answer. "Fossil," they said.

Jump forward 130 years, a blink of the eye in geologic time but a long haul for humans. Fossil, the county seat of Wheeler County, is a place waiting for something to happen. It's down to 460 souls now and hanging on, with a single, blinking red traffic light, 23 kids in the high school and people still shaking their heads about the closure of the Kinzua lumber mill 30 years ago.

The county itself is Oregon's least populated, with fewer people -- about 1,550 -- than square miles, 1,715. Its 2002 median household income was the lowest in the state, \$26,819 -- 64 percent of the state average.

Compared with the rest of the state, Wheeler County has a greater percentage of people living below the poverty level.

Like every other depressed area in Oregon, the county has beat the sagebrush for economic development, winning grants and making plans, but largely striking out. Longtime County Judge Jeanne Burch says they've worked it hard, but the truth is that no heavy industry is going to drop down out of the achingly beautiful blue sky and put everyone to work.

"Our remoteness works against us," Burch says.

A colleague from Hood River County told Burch that it had the same problem until people realized they could take advantage of the nearly constant wind in the Columbia River Gorge. Hood River's windsurfing boom and associated growth speaks for itself.

The lesson wasn't lost on Burch.

"You have to look at what you have," she says. "We have rocks."

She pauses.

"But our rocks are 50 million years old, and they have these fantastic leaf fossils in them."

And that's how the idea for the Oregon Paleo Project came about.

Backers acknowledge that, at this point, it's a great idea in search of money. Led by Burch, a coalition of the school superintendent, elected officials, teachers, planners, business owners, ranchers, scientists and county residents is pushing for Fossil and Wheeler County to take advantage of being the front door to the John Day Fossil Beds National Monument.

Group members have formed the nonprofit Oregon Paleo Lands Institute, with a board of directors and a mission to help "Northwest residents and visitors of all ages to explore, understand and enjoy the world-renowned natural history of north central Oregon, its ancient and living landscapes and cultures, and the full fossil record of Earth's last 50 million years."

The idea turns on the concept of "edu-tourism," that a new class of travelers is looking for more than entertainment. The project would include adding a high school wing to the grade school and turning the existing high school in Fossil into the Oregon Paleo Lands Institute, with classes, labs and seminars for tourists, students and teachers.

The three units of the national monument -- Clarno, Sheep Rock and Painted Hills -- lie within easy driving distance of Fossil. The new Thomas Condon Paleontology Center, across the highway from the monument headquarters at Sheep Rock, is expected to be a strong tourist draw.

The town of Fossil has its own piece of that action: The hillside above Wheeler High School's baseball field is layered with rocks bearing plant fossils, and it's one of the few places in the country where the public can gather fossils and take them home.

The fossils tell a remarkable story about this part of Oregon. Though the area is now bone dry, with only 14 inches of rain a year, one-third of Portland's annual total, it was once wet enough to grow redwood trees. It also was home to strange rhinos, buffalo-sized pigs, saber-toothed tigers, turtles and herds of sheep-like grazers called oreodonts.

### **Rain diminishes**

All of that began to change 40 million years ago when the volcanic Cascades rose and gradually -- it took perhaps 20 million years -- blocked much of ocean-born rains from reaching Central and Eastern Oregon.

"That rain shadow popped up like a damn picket fence," says Bill Orr, a retired University of Oregon geology professor and a member of the paleo institute's board of directors.

Repeated flows of lava and mud, along with ash dustings, locked in and preserved plant and animal remains. Erosion has since exposed a world-class record of life over the past 50 million years. To scientists, who can read the layers like chapters in a book, the area is prized for the duration and diversity of its fossil record.

Fossils found at widely scattered sites in the John Day basin were crucial to piecing together the evolution of horses, which over time evolved from four-toed, to three-toed to single-hoofed animals. The area attracted the biggest names in paleontology, and thousands of John Day fossils are on display or stored at museums and colleges across the country.

"That whole area of Oregon is stunning," says Vicki McConnell, state geologist, director of the Department of Geology and Mineral Industries, and a member of the paleo institute board. "When you go into Central Oregon, it's like visiting the Southwest. It's really a tremendous area and underappreciated, I think."

### **Economic domino**

Give people a reason to visit Wheeler County, the thinking goes, and the first domino of economic development -- services -- will follow. Fossil now has a couple of bar-restaurant combos and a mercantile, but the "edu-tourists" will need more places to stay and eat, followed perhaps by a hardware store, medical offices, real estate firms, construction companies, video stores, rental joints for recreation gear and so on.

"The demand can beget supply," says Todd Davidson, director of Travel Oregon, the state's tourism commission. "Tourism can act as a gateway industry."

Edu-tourism is a "powerful trend," he said, adding that Wheeler County is right to pursue it.

"It's all part of a desire to have a more enriching experience," Davidson says. "It's not about going and being lectured to, but about going and experiencing, and it has an educational component as well.

"With the paleo project, they can experience an incredible part of Oregon, and if they want to go behind the high school and dig fossils on their own, they can do that, too."

The idea has the enthusiastic support of such residents as Barbara Bowerman, a retiree whose husband, Bill, was the longtime University of Oregon and Olympic team track coach and co-founded Nike with one of his former runners, Phil Knight. Bill Bowerman was raised in Fossil; his grandparents were Thomas and Mary Hoover, who named the town.

#### **At 91, a cheerleader**

Barbara Bowerman, 91, is on the institute board and describes herself as a cheerleader for the paleo project.

"The whole area is a perfect teaching laboratory," she says, "not only about what happened millions of years ago but of what's going on right now on the skin of the Earth."

The project has some momentum and plenty of believers. In the past three years, it has won more than \$250,000 in grants, most of which went to pay for the detailed development plans. The next step is to hire an executive director.

"The potential for the area is quite amazing," says Richard Ross, a retired Gresham city planner who owns property in Wheeler County and is president of Oregon Paleo Lands Institute.

There's anecdotal evidence, at least, of the type of visitors who might stay longer if the paleo institute were up and running. Burch, the county judge, said rafters, campers and hikers frequent the John Day River and could be drawn in to visit. Working only on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays last year, a fossil site interpreter counted more than 2,100 visitors to the high school hillside.

Burch says the county's cattle ranches will remain a key part of its identity, but its future is in its old rocks.

"It's really the need to reinvent ourselves," she says.

Eric Mortenson; 503-294-5972; [ericmortenson@news.oregonian.com](mailto:ericmortenson@news.oregonian.com)