

Mastodon in a Biscuit Box

John W. Hoganson

I have always said that the Highgate Mastodon has a life of its own and its spirit lives on. Many of you are aware that in 1992 we restored the skeleton of the Highgate Mastodon, one of the elephant-like animals that lived at the end of the Ice Age about 13,000 years ago, for exhibit at the North Dakota Heritage Center in Bismarck. This was the first restored skeleton of any prehistoric animal exhibited in the state. I wrote an article that was published in the December 1991 issue of the North Dakota Geological Survey Newsletter about the fascinating history of the discovery, travels, and eventual display of that fossil at the Heritage Center (the article is on our website).

In brief, the skeleton of the Highgate Mastodon was discovered by a farmer while digging a ditch on his farm near the town of Highgate, Ontario in 1890. The fossil was purchased by merchants from a small town near Highgate. The bones were taken on the road as a traveling show to fairs and other events in Ontario and other parts of Canada in the early 1890s. People paid to view the bones, but the skeleton was not assembled. Mysteriously, the skeleton ended up in “dead” storage in a warehouse in Minneapolis. In 1898, Dr. James Grassick, a physician from Buxton, North Dakota purchased the bones. Grassick sold the mastodon to the University of North Dakota in 1902. It vanished into obscurity at UND until 1947. At that time, it was given to the State Historical Society of North Dakota and transferred to Bismarck. The fossil vanished again in a Historical Society warehouse. It reemerged in 1991 to be restored for inclusion in the new First People Heritage Center exhibit that debuted in 1992.

That does not end the story of the Highgate Mastodon. Periodically, over the years, I have received telephone calls, letters, emails, and visits from people, often reporters, wanting to know more about this fascinating fossil. Some of them have shared with me previously unknown information about the beast. Relatives of the farmer from southern Ontario where the fossil was found have even visited the Heritage Center to see the Highgate Mastodon. Scientists studying mastodons have contacted me to obtain specific information about the fossil. Always I am asked how the most complete mastodon skeleton ever found in Ontario ended up in North Dakota on display at the Heritage Center. I refer them to my 1991 article.

The saga of the Highgate Mastodon continued when I received a message from Peter Russell with the Earth Sciences Museum at the

University of Waterloo, Canada in 2005. Earlier that year, Shirley Fenton, an employee of the Earth Sciences Museum discovered mastodon teeth in a Weston's English Biscuits box while cleaning the attic of her family home in Highgate. Peter was interested in knowing whether or not the Highgate Mastodon had all its teeth. My answer to him was no, we had to fabricate a missing tooth for the Highgate Mastodon skeleton reconstruction. That began a quest to determine if any of the teeth in Shirley's biscuit box was the missing tooth.

The children's booklet, *A Mastodon in a Biscuit Box*, is the story of the detective work to determine if one of the teeth in the biscuit box, discovered 120 years after the fossil was excavated, was from the Highgate Mastodon. The booklet also provides a brief history of the Highgate Mastodon and information about mastodons in general.

A Mastodon in a Biscuit Box



Peter Russell, John Hoganson,
Paul Karrow and John Motz