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FEATURED

## Buzzin' Around Beeville

### Buried treasure trove of animal antiquities

Jul 16, 2019



The skull of a shovel-jawed gomphothere (pictured on bottom) is still wrapped in its field jacket.

Old fossils are being connected with Bee County, but longtime residents should not be offended.

According to the June 27 issue of The Alcalde, University of Texas alumni magazine, an article describes that long-buried fossils collected before World War II are leading UT researchers to think the Texas coast once resembled the African Serengeti.

Bee-Picayune readers will remember a similar story by Editor Jason Collins which appeared in our April 24 edition.

In *The Alcalde*, author Joe Hanson begins: “A squat rhinoceros lumbers through the grass on the banks of the Blanco Creek, near Beeville. Nearby, a prehensile trunk shovels a bundle of vegetation into the maw of an elephant-like behemoth. There’s the yip-yip of a coyote, as peculiar horses graze and gallop in the distance. The alligator lurking near the shore is familiar, as are the turtles basking in the sun, but the giant tortoise and the camels seem out of place on the Texas coastal plains.

“Of course, this isn’t yet Texas. There is no Beeville, and the creek here has no name, because this scene is playing out 10 million years ago.”

These fossil bones from the Miocene period were collected on area ranches between 1939 and 1941, as part of a New Deal-era work program run by the university’s Bureau of Economic Geology.

“In the decades since, most of the fossils have laid buried in the archives of UT’s Vertebrate Paleontology Library at the J.J. Pickle Research Campus — many still untouched, frozen in the plaster casings applied by the Works Progress Administration excavators,” Hanson said.

Fortunately, this collection known as the Lapara Creek Fauna has been rediscovered, thanks to Steven May, a research associate from the Jackson School of Geosciences, along with his wife and others.

“May’s research has revealed a stunning diversity of ancient wildlife roaming the South Texas plains millions of years before longhorn cattle: unfamiliar creatures like *Ceratogaulus*, a horned gopher; a giant elephant-like beast called *Gomphotherium*; a barrel-chested rhinoceros called *Teleoceras*; and a strange three-horned antelope-like animal called *Synthetoceras*,” Hanson wrote. “But many of the extinct species would be instantly recognizable to our eyes today, including wild dog-like canids and coyotes, a dozen species of horse, even mice and rabbits. At least one species from the Texas Serengeti, *Alligator mississippiensis*, still survives today, lurking in swamps and bayous.”

May, a retired geologist who worked for ExxonMobil for 35 years, went to work at UT where he discovered this mostly unresearched collection from Bee County. He contacted some of the current landowners (including John Blackburn and Robert Bridge) who were more than willing to help him rediscover the Miocene quarries along the banks of the Medio and Blanco creeks.

Perhaps, the fossil collections someday will be prominently displayed in Texas museums. As May said to Collins: “It would be nice to put something in Beeville for schoolkids to be able to see some of

these fossils and what Beeville looked like 10-12 million years ago.”

And for any youngster who may be wondering, yes, that was long before the Alamo, Goliad or San Jacinto.