

Big Dig

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

Friday, 15 June 2012 13:38 - Last Updated Friday, 15 June 2012 13:55



Burge family finds ancient elephant bone

On a warm day in late April, Randy and Amber Burge and their two children were doing what they usually did while visiting Medicine Creek Reservoir.

Boating and stopping at beaches along the shore to explore, climb cliffs or play in the sand.

After pulling their boat up on a sandy beach, Randy and 7-year-old Jake started skipping rocks across the water while Amber and 6-year-old Taylor entertained themselves on the beach.

“Jake and I then started climbing up a clay bank and I saw a two-inch round thing sticking out,” Randy said. “We thought it was a bone so we started to uncover it.”

As he and Jake brushed sand from the object, the veterinarian said he thought it could be from a mammoth or bison since he knew the remains of many prehistoric beasts and artifacts have been discovered in the area.

In fact, Amber said the largest lower jaw of any known land animal recorded was discovered while the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation was working on an irrigation and flood-control project on

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Medicine Creek in the 1940s.

Randy said he tried to wiggle the bone, while it was still embedded in the cliff, but it was brittle.

“So I stopped before I ruined it,” Randy said.

Worried that someone would pry part of the exposed bone from its resting place—stuck in sand and clay about 20 feet from the top of the cliff—he had reservations about leaving it but didn’t want to move it.

“It’s a very popular spot on the lake, where a lot of folks park their boats and climb,” Amber said.

The Burges also knew the area was owned by the federal government and laws exist about removing fossils and artifacts.

The family left a message about finding the fossil with the manager of the recreation area and returned to Gothenburg.

Once home, Randy checked on cattle he owns and brought home a femur from a cow to compare sizes with the one in the cliff.

“The bone at Medicine Creek was twice as big,” he said.

Amber emailed pictures she took of the fossil to University of Nebraska State Museum paleontologists.

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Shane Tucker, a highway salvage paleontologist, responded the next day, on April 30, noting that it appeared the Burges found a limb bone from a four-tusked elephant called a gomphothere.

“Gomphotheres occurred prior to the Ice Age and had two tusks in their skull and in their lower jaw,” Tucker wrote. “The bone is probably six to eight million years old based on the geology around the Medicine Creek Reservoir.”

Also the next day, an archaeologist from the Bureau of Reclamation finished uncovering the bone and took it with him since the bureau deals with cultural and historical items found in the area.

A week ago, Randy contacted a Nebraska Game and Parks Commission biologist to see if there was more information about the find but there was none.

However the biologist did say that another fossilized bone had been found in the same area.

The thought of finding part of a creature six to eight million years old is mind-boggling.

“It’s pretty hard to wrap my head around it,” Randy said. “We were at the right place at the right time.”

Jake said: “It’s neat because it’s so old.”

“Before the Ice Age,” Taylor added.

Finding the fossil has made Amber more interested in the time period in which gomphotheres roamed the earth.

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“I want to know more about it,” she said, noting that she and Randy plan to take the kids to Morrill Hall which claims to have the world’s premier collection of fossil elephants and other exhibits.

In the meantime, when the family packs up and visits the lake, the children have a favorite past time.

“Looking for bones,” Randy said.

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