



From left: A papier-mâché dinosaur is hefted atop a 67-foot limestone slab bearing dinosaur tracks as part of the 1936 centennial exposition; Wann Langston (in glasses) on a dig around 1940; the surviving portion of the trackway on display at the Texas Memorial Museum.

CREDIT: Photos courtesy Marc Airhart

DEPARTMENT OF MYSTERIES

Most of The University of Texas' first dinosaur tracks might never be recovered, but the final chapter of their story is yet to be written. Are there any amateur sleuths out there? If you've got a theory, a photo, or better yet, some rock-solid evidence about what happened to UT's missing dinosaur tracks, drop Jackson School writer and science sleuth Marc Airhart a line at mairhart@jsg.utexas.edu.

Dinosaur in the Deep End

{ CAMPUS MYSTERIES }

BY MARC AIRHART

WAS ABOUT TO HANG UP WITH PALEONTOLOGIST Wann Langston when he said, "Do you want to hear an interesting story?"

Back in 1936, The University of Texas put on an exposition as part of the state's centennial. It showcased the University's treasures, plus other wonders. One of the most spectacular was a 67-foot limestone slab bearing the footprints of a three-toed dinosaur. It was so big the organizers erected a special viewing platform in front of Gregory Gym. Atop the tracks was a life-size papier-mâché dinosaur squashing its way across a tidal flat.

The show lasted from June to December, when everything was disassembled. Then the tracks vanished.

"How do you lose a dinosaur?" asked Langston, now professor emeritus in the Jackson School of Geosciences. We had to find out.

The late Glen Evans, a UT paleontologist when the tracks went missing, once told him the tracks were "in a swimming pool under a building on Little Campus." Vague, but it remained a tantalizing clue.

Although he never saw the tracks live, Langs-

ton did have a connection to them. The man who made the centennial dinosaur model was his old mentor, J. Willis Stovall of the University of Oklahoma. Young Langston had been a budding paleontologist who helped grad students in OU's fossil preparation lab.

As centennial exposition preparations got underway in 1936 and Langston was just beginning high school, UT contracted Stovall to make the dinosaur model for \$200. After the centennial, the model disappeared, too.

On the Case

I gleaned a few details from campus archives. The tracks were discovered along Cowhouse Creek in Hamilton County, dug out in pieces by young paleontologist Bill Strain, and reassembled in Austin. Altogether, it was considered the longest trail of dinosaur tracks ever exhibited. The three-toed, meat-eating monster that made them was estimated to be about 25 feet long with a 5-foot stride.

Langston came to the Texas Memorial Museum in 1962 and has researched the dinosaurs, ptero-



How do
you lose a
dinosaur?
We had to
find out.

40

{ ACRES }

saurs, and crocodilians of Big Bend ever since.

He gave little thought to the missing dinosaur tracks until the late '80s, when he ran across photos of Stovall's model. He asked a few UT elders about them, but the closest he got was the swimming pool reference.

"I wouldn't say they're my number-one priority," the 90-year-old Langston says of the missing tracks. "I just happened to be the only one around here to have lived long enough to remember this episode."

Last Stop: Little Campus

A 1936 *Daily Texan* story describes the clearing out of Gregory Gym for games and dances. It described where many of the wonders from the centennial exposition were going: Indian mannequins, stuffed buffalo, rare books, and relics were heading to places like the Biological Laboratory.

"The dinosaur tracks, one of the largest exhibits," the *Texan* said, "will be removed sometime and stored in Little Campus Dormitory."

Little Campus was a block next to the southeast corner of campus housing dorms, offices, and labs, including the Bureau of Economic Geology. The Bureau's head, Elias Sellards, directed the soon-to-open Texas Memorial Museum. Many of the University's fossils were already housed near Sellards' office on Little Campus.

So the Little Campus part of the legend made sense. But what about the "swimming pool under a building"?

I assumed the legend meant some outdoor pool had been built over. I checked maps, but couldn't find one. And no new buildings were built on Little Campus after 1936.

Then, reading through a history of Little Campus titled *Remnant of an Era*, I read that the Building G dormitory had a pool built in. Suddenly the legend made sense.

I couldn't locate anyone who had worked in that building in 1936, when the tracks were relocated, or even for years after.

A 1986 *ALCALDE* article noted that some artifacts had been stored in "the swimming pool under the Little Campus Building" until being moved to the present-day Pickle Research Campus. Clearly, it was used to store items that people just didn't have room for.

The Dinosaur One Step

Today, what's left of Little Campus has been

renamed the Heman Sweatt Campus. Some of it was carved up for an I-35 expansion, while some went toward an Erwin Center lot. Only two structures remain: John W. Hargis Hall (originally Building H), the Bureau's main building in the '30s, and Custer House (originally Building C), General Custer's headquarters for three months following the Civil War. Building G, which housed the swimming pool, was torn down in the late '70s. It's now a patch between the two remaining buildings.

I called to tell Langston that I had pinpointed the pool's location. But he had a surprise. He said one of the dinosaur footprints had survived. It had been around the Vertebrate Paleontology Lab for decades. Now it was on display at the Texas Memorial Museum.

And there it was in the Cretaceous display. The catalog number indicated it was from the same Hamilton County dig site as the 1936 trackway. Langston is confident this footprint is from the same trackway that was displayed.

But what of the other 16 tracks? Were they forgotten, moved, or thrown away?

A Different Time

Today there's a whole scientific branch—ichnology—that studies the tracks, scratches, and signs animals leave behind. It's thrown open a picture window on life in the distant past.

"It finally dawned on people that tracks were the closest thing to a living animal that we're ever going to have, because the tracks represented things the living animal did," says Langston. "There are a lot of ichnologists now, but it was just getting started around that time."

No one knows what was lost to science when the tracks disappeared, Langston says. No one at UT in the '30s had the expertise to thoroughly study them. Many of the items in the centennial exposition, he said, were chosen because they were striking, not for their scientific value.

Whatever happened to UT's first dinosaur tracks, the University isn't alone. OU paleontologists found their own dinosaur trackway in the Oklahoma Panhandle around the same time and brought it home for display. The tracks were set in a concrete slab for a walkway on the university campus.

"We know what happened to them," says Langston. "They broke up and people threw them away. They just didn't stand up to human foot traffic after 120 million years."

HUGE GRANTS

\$121
MILLION

That's how much the **Texas Advanced Computing Center** and 16 other institutions were awarded by the National Science Foundation in July. TACC and its partners will use the money to develop the Extreme Science and Engineering Discovery Environment, the world's most powerful collection of integrated advanced digital resources.