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JUMBO AND OTHER ONTARIO ELEPHANTS

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Alice said to Jumbo
"I love you"
Jumbo said to Alice
"I don't believe you do,
For if you really love me,
Like you say you really do,
You wouldn't go to London
and leave me in the Zoo."

(Courtesy of Pat Trunks,
ROM Library)

Jumbo (from jumbe, Swahili for chief) the biggest elephant ever held in captivity, was captured as a baby in Africa and grew up in the London Zoo. Phineas T. Barnum bought him in 1879, but Jumbo did not enjoy circus life for long. On September 15, 1885, in St. Thomas, Ontario, he charged a Grand Trunk Railway train with fatal results, but his name lives on as an adjective describing something huge, like jumbo jet. Jumbo was not the first elephant to die in Ontario, however; we know of about 110 Ontario reports of bones of extinct elephants, the mastodon and mammoth. It is these fossil elephants and the emerging evidence that they were the prey of palaeo-Indian hunters that I want to discuss.

Several months ago I accepted an invitation to present a paper at a symposium to be held this fall at the Museum of Science in Buffalo, New York. The symposium will feature several papers on the Hiscock site near Buffalo. From the titles of these papers and what little has been published, plus hearsay, the site appears to be a spring-fed bog that accumulated sediment mostly between 14,000 years ago (glacier retreat) and 10,000 years ago. So far, bones of 22 vertebrate species have been identified, including mastodon, caribou, elk, and, surprisingly, "California" condor.

Until now there was no evidence of this jumbo scavenger as far north as the Great Lakes, although bones of similar age are known from Texas and Florida. ROM ornithologist Jon Barlow thinks this rare bird (only nine are alive today) once fed on dead elephants, but that when the elephants became extinct the condor's range contracted to California where beached carcasses of whales were a readily available food.

To go along with the mastodon scavenger, the Hiscock site yielded evidence of a mastodon hunter, not sabre-toothed tigers, but palaeo-Indians. A Clovis fluted point and flint knife were in the deposit, although the artifacts were more closely associated with the elk than with the mastodon. This is an exciting association, but not exactly a "smoking gun"; only in distant Missouri have mastodon bones been found along with fluted points. (About a dozen mammoth-kill sites are known, all west of the Mississippi River.) In Ontario, most archaeologists point to circumstantial rather than fossil evidence that palaeo-Indians hunted good Canadian caribou, but there is one report of a fluted point with a mastodon (more of this later).

My interest in extinct elephants and man began over 15 years ago when I joined a vertebrate palaeontologist, the late Gordon Gyrmov, to check out a reported find of elephant bones near Ayr, Ontario. At the site we found buried bones and flint artifacts. Alas, Gord identified the bones not as mastodon, mammoth or even Jumbo, but as European horse and the flints as archaic. Later I helped Chris McGowan with his palaeontology gallery, both in making an Ontario distribution map of fossil elephants and in doing pollen analysis on a bit of mud adhering to the skull of the gallery mastodon. In the past few years I have led local collecting expeditions and then, back in the lab, have done more pollen analysis, demonstrating that the extinct elephants lived in a spruce woodland. What better than to pull this work together for the Buffalo symposium.

Figure 1. Poole children holding mammoth bones found on their farm

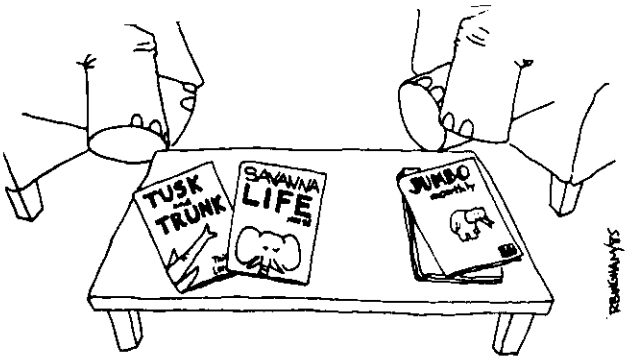
The last catalogue of Ontario mastodons had been published in 1967; there was none for mammoths. I knew that archaeologist Laurie Jackson compiled catalogues of both for his 1978 M.A. thesis entitled "Late Wisconsin environments and palaeo-Indian occupation in the northeastern United States and southern Ontario". We have gotten together to update these lists for our symposium paper, which will also include sections on radiocarbon dating, palaeoecology and palaeo-Indian hunters.

Our record now contains about 75 mastodon, 27 mammoth, and 8 unspecified fossil elephants. A few date from the last interglacial (125,000 years ago) and the last glacial (45,000 years ago) but most are postglacial (since 14,000 years ago). Except for an interglacial mastodon from Moose River in northern Ontario, they all seem to have lived and died in southernmost Ontario, from Toronto westward. Some have been radiocarbon dated as

young as 7,000 years ago, well after the traditionally accepted extinction date of 10,000 years ago. Did southern Ontario harbour a relict population that lingered on into the archaic? Probably not, but the young dates need to be explained and the Rostock mammoth provides such an explanation.

In 1982 the ROM got a call from farmer Terence Poole of Rostock, Ontario, who said that he had plowed up mammoth bones (Fig. 1). He found them on the surface of a peaty hollow, and we excavated the site to look for more bones as well as to study the stratigraphic setting. A bone sample was radiocarbon dated at a very young 4,290 years ago, further support for a local relict population. However, pollen analysis on peat taken from a cavity in the dated bone showed it to be full of spruce pollen. The spruce pollen zone has been convincingly dated as ending 10,000 years ago and thus we suspected the reason for the young bone date was contamination by modern carbon, perhaps rootlets.

Our excavation yielded no more bones, but we did find some tusk fragments in situ that turned out to be from the spruce zone sediment. Unlike bone, tusk has few pores that allow penetration by rootlets. The radiocarbon date on the tusk was 10,790 years ago, in agreement with the pollen date. Other pollen analyses of sediment associated with post-glacial mammoth and mastodon bones in the Great Lakes region show them to be in the spruce zone, implying that radiocarbon dates are suspect and that the theory of mammoth and mastodon persistence after palaeo-Indian time into the archaic must be discounted.



the periodical table of the elephants

(From The Newspaper, Dec. 4/85)

Did Ontario palaeo-Indians prey on elephants? "Smoking guns" remain elusive; none of the Rostock mammoth bones had fluted points stuck in them. Yet there is a fluted point in the Museum of Indian Archaeology in London, Ontario that was collected near the Thames River. According to the farmer who donated it fifty years ago, the point came from alongside some mastodon ribs and tusks, but, alas, no professional archaeologist saw them in association.

Hard by the Thames River mastodon/fluted point site is St. Thomas, where Jumbo caught the train. Jumbo's bones were preserved and now rest in the American Museum of Natural History. In 1891, J. Hoyes Panton (1847-1898), Professor at the Ontario Agricultural College, described mastodon bones excavated near Highgate, also near St. Thomas. He compared measurements of Jumbo's longest rib, humerus, and femur with those of the Highgate find and showed that the mastodon was 10% larger! Although Jumbo may have been the last elephant to die in Ontario, he was not the biggest. This honour must go to his distant cousin, Panton's jumbo mastodon.

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WALTER KENYON 1917-1986

Walter, my valued colleague and dear friend is gone. I first met Walter on a visit to the ROM in January, 1967. After chatting, I mentioned that I needed to rent a car and he generously volunteered his assistant, Claus Breede, to drive me to Budget and get the car. When I joined the Museum, he shared with me his interest in the prehistoric Indian use of wild rice, a subject stemming from his excavation of the Swan Lake site in northwestern Ontario. He then provided money and the use of his cranky Land Rover (he called it his land lord) for fieldwork on the history of wild rice. Wild rice came up again in connection with his excavations on East Sugar Island in Rice Lake. Pollen analysis subsequently showed wild rice to have been available to the several prehistoric cultures he excavated.

Four years ago he retired from the Department of New World Archaeology. Thereafter, on three or four mornings a week, Eva dropped him off at the Canadiana Building. He climbed three floors to the Botany Department, loud greetings were exchanged and coffee and cigar-break declared. His transparent flattery cheered us all, including Herb his cockatiel. After break he set to work on his various projects, including a guest curatorship for an exhibition in a B.C. museum, advising James Bay Cree on reconstructing trade forts as tourist attractions, but most of all writing.

He wrote several popular articles and book reviews, but mostly he worked on his books. He was pleased with his Mounds of Sacred Earth: Burial Mounds of Ontario when it was released a few weeks ago. His "History of James Bay" will be published in December. Last January, to keep abreast of the modern trend in writing, he bought a computer and began to learn word processing. According to Gene Wilburn, when Walter first started, he allowed that he had a great fear that he would "push the wrong button and cause the machine to split down the middle whereupon dangling participles and misplaced modifiers would come spilling out all over the floor." Once he got past this fear, he speeded up to the point where he nearly finished his last manuscript, "Arctic Argonauts: a History of Arctic Exploration". Plans are being made to have it completed.

Walter was more than an archaeologist and scholar. He took an interest in our day-to-day problems; no manuscript was too confused or unfamiliar for his gentle corrections, and on more personal topics he offered wise but unobtrusive counsel. We were all touched by this wonderful individual.

(This tribute by Dr. McAndrews is reprinted from LINK, the ROM staff newsletter.)