# Miracle on the prairie: The development of the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History

MICHAEL MARES*

**Resumo**

Em 1983, o Museu da Universidade de Oklahoma, nos Estados Unidos, decidiu iniciar uma longa luta por um novo edifício, visto que o centenário Museu se encontrava instalado em antigos estábulos e celeiros. A Universidade foi irregular e inconstante no seu apoio ao projecto. Contudo, uma estratégia multifacetada e o envolvimento directo da comunidade local conduziram ao sucesso do empreendimento, após 17 difíceis anos em que a paciência e a tenacidade foram determinantes.

**Abstract**

In 1983 the University of Oklahoma's museum began a struggle for a new building. The century-old museum was housed in barns and stables. Support from the University was mixed. Grassroots efforts and a multifaceted strategy led to a successful result in 2000, after 17 difficult years requiring patience and tenacity.

## An interesting place

If one were to select a patch of earth randomly and view its history back through time, few places on the planet would have a story as interesting as the piece of land known as Oklahoma. Hundreds of millions of years ago when there was only a single continent, Oklahoma lay along the Equator. As continents split and migrated, and as oceans rose and fell, Oklahoma began to accrue a detailed record of the life forms that developed both in the sea and on the land. Today the State of Oklahoma lies in the center of the continental United States, but the rocks that were formed so long ago tell the story of the time when much of the land was under a tropical sea. In the stones of Oklahoma one can trace the evolution of life, from plant to animal and from invertebrate to vertebrate. During the Late Jurassic and Early Cretaceous most of Oklahoma was below the bed of an ocean, but the eastern and western boundaries of the state were staging grounds for the evolution of terrestrial vertebrates, including giant dinosaurs and early mammals. Oklahoma's dinosaurs left a record that extends across more

* Michael Mares is Director of the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History, University of Oklahoma, Norman,Oklahoma 73072, USA. Email: mamares@ou.edu.

than 80 million years of time and includes some of the greatest reptiles that have ever been discovered. Oklahoma's story was not over, however, and the disappearance of the ruling reptiles about 65 million years ago did not mark the end of the fascinating story of life in Oklahoma.

The uplift of the Rocky Mountains in the Miocene meant that the tropical forests that covered much of North America would have to retreat, as wind and rainfall patterns were disrupted. Soon drought-adapted grasslands came to dominate the central parts of the United States and a new group of dominant

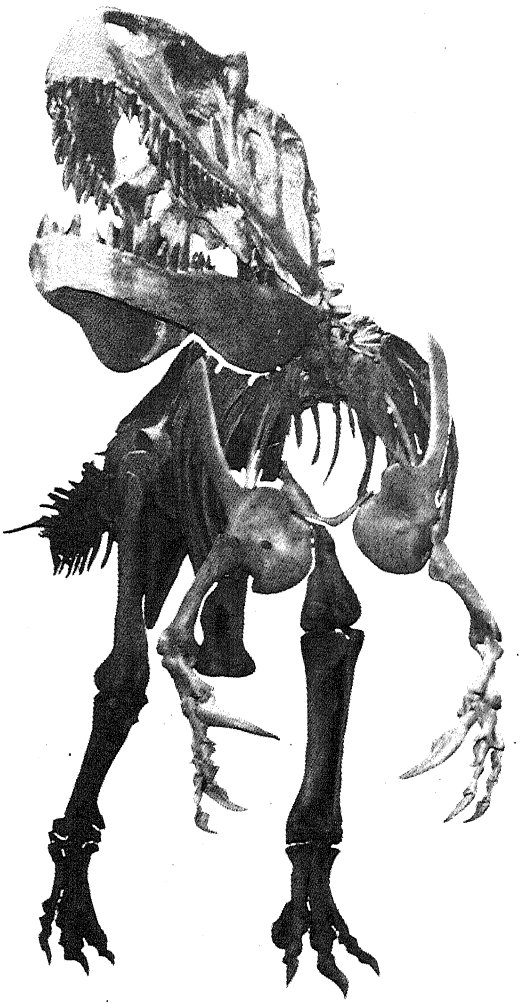

Fig. 1 – *Saurophaganax maximus*, a 36-foot carnivorous allosaurid dinosaur, and Oklahoma's State Fossil, on display at the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History (Photo: M. Mares).

vertebrates, the mammals, were quick to move into this habitat. The Miocene and Pliocene saw the development of herds of mammals that were adapted to life on the prairies. A diverse array of giant browsing and grazing mammals such as rhinoceroses, horses and camels inhabited Oklahoma more than 15 million years ago, along with various large predators. The richness of Oklahoma's mammal fauna at that time greatly exceeded the abundance of mammals that live in Africa today. As habitats and climates changed, however, the life of the prairies also changed, and the indelible records of species long extinct were left behind in the landforms of Oklahoma.

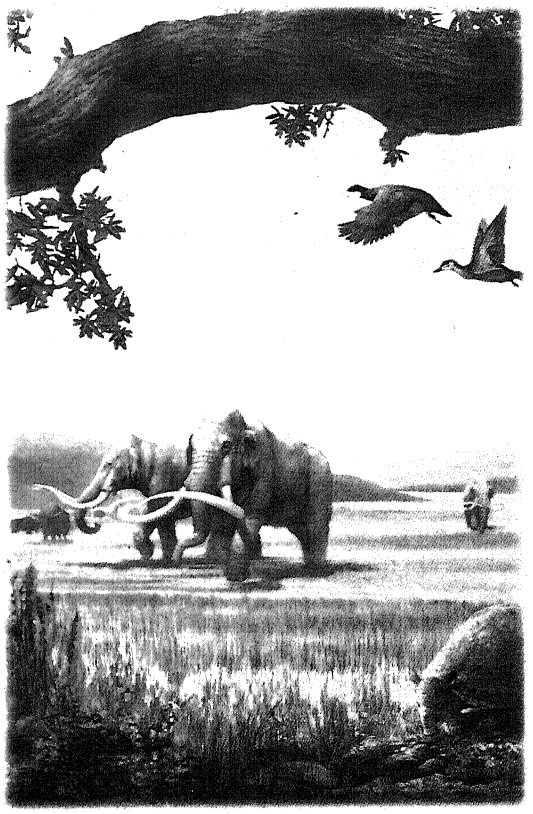

Fig. 2 – Oklahoma's Pleistocene as depicted by artist Karen Carr, from a mural on display at the museum (Photo: M. Mares).

In many ways the story of Oklahoma was just beginning, even though the extinctions of the Pliocene meant that hordes of species had disappeared forever. The onset of the Pleistocene, with the sweeping glaciers that covered much of North America, meant that Oklahoma's climate and fauna would also undergo great changes. Once again, Oklahoma's prairies and forests supported vast herds of ungulates such as giant bison and great predators such as the cave bear and sabre-toothed cat. As the Central American land connection was established across the Isthmus of Panama, new animals from South America began to appear. Oklahoma's fauna contained Northern Hemisphere species such as giant mammoths and mastodons, larger versions of today's elephants, as well as Southern Hemisphere animals such as giant ground sloths that provided a unique flavor to the land. Finally, near the end of the Pleistocene about 40,000 years ago, a new mammal appeared, an Old World primate that lived in large groups and that hunted the the giant mammals, possibly to extinction. Humans had entered the New World and some of the earliest records of their colonization were left in Oklahoma.

With the close of the Pleistocene and the disappearance of almost all of the giant mammals, it might appear that the most interesting parts of the Oklahoma story were over. However, the land now became a place for the unfolding of the human drama as reflected in the colonization of North America. The Native Americans who entered more than 40 millennia ago left many records of their passing, including the first recorded art object in the New World—the skull of an extinct bison with a zigzag ochre symbol that was painted on it almost 12,000 years ago. The great civilization of Spiro – the mound builders – also left behind an extensive record of their passing in the art and artifacts of the massive burial mounds of eastern

Oklahoma. Their magnificent artwork is today considered to be the pinnacle of pre-Columbian artistic development in North America. Eventually the harsh prairie land and tough eastern forests of the state would support only a handful of native tribes, who continued to live in Oklahoma until the great clash of cultures occurred, as Europeans colonized the North American continent and forever changed the lives of the natives.

Fig. 3 – A 1,000-year old Caddoan ceramic bottle from Oklahoma's pre-Columbian period on display in the Hall of the People of Oklahoma (Photo: M. Mares).

The Oklahoma story continued to unfold into historic times. In the 1500s, Spanish Conquistadors explored the area, although they never established settlements. Indeed, as waves of European colonists swept across North America in the 1700s and 1800s, few settlements were established in Oklahoma. Eventually, the United States moved to restrict the freedom that was enjoyed by Native Americans and a policy of removal and containment was established: native peoples were removed from their ancestral lands and relocated to Oklahoma, which became known as Indian Territory.

The story of Oklahoma was not over yet, however. Only nine tribes lived in Oklahoma before the relocation policies of the US Government were instituted. Once the territory was designated as a permanent home for Native Americans, 44 tribes from distant states and territories, as well as from Canada, were forced to live in Oklahoma. For a while it appeared that the tribes would be able to own portions of the territory forever. However, Manifest Destiny, the concept that the United States was destined to hold all of the land from the Atlantic to the Pacific, soon affected the destiny of the native populations of Oklahoma. The government decided to award much of central and western Oklahoma to white settlers, and did so with a unique concept of a Land Run. First in 1889, then again several times in the 1890s, races for free land attracted hordes of colonists, many of whom were Europeans who had come to the New World in search of new opportunities. This was a unique occurrence in world history. People lined up along a starting line and at the sound of a cannon raced into the wilderness to claim their portion of what was then called Oklahoma Territory. Norman—the town where the University of Oklahoma and its natural history museum would be built—was established in the first 24 hours following the first Land Run of April 1889.

As can be seen, Oklahoma is an interesting place. In many ways, its rich history makes it an ideal place to trace the evolution of life across time or the

development of cultures across both space and time. It is in this remarkable plot of ground that the forces of cultural development would lead to the establishment of a natural history museum. The story of the development of that museum is almost as fascinating as the story of the land itself.

## A cabinet, museum, and apparatus

In 1899, only four years after the last Land Run opened the Kickapoo lands in central Oklahoma – the last land that had not been claimed by white colonists – the Territorial Legislature met in Guthrie, Oklahoma, then the capitol of the territory. The legislature ordered the establishment of a "geological cabinet, museum, apparatus, and library" that would "contain specimens of minerals, organic remains and other objects of natural history peculiar to this Territory and other states and countries." The act also established the museum at the Territorial University in Norman and named the Territorial Geologist as its curator.

Factors that led the legislature to establish a museum included the fact that Oklahoma had not been well explored biologically, geologically, or anthropologically; the territory clearly required an assessment of its heritage. Perhaps more important was the fact that as eastern states (and even some mid-western states) had been established, many had developed museums, including South Carolina, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, Illinois and Nebraska. A museum was a clear indicator of cultural progress, a sign that a state had moved from conquering the land to establishing an appreciation of the higher pursuits in life. Certainly for a raw territory in the West, a museum was required to show that the people living on the frontier had an appreciation for science and culture that was every bit as developed as those living 'back East'. The establishment of a museum might also help to show that Oklahoma deserved to become a state. Indeed, only eight years after establishing the territorial museum, Oklahoma became the 46th state in the union.

The three decades that followed the museum's founding were a difficult time in the life of the nascent museum. By 1903 the collections had grown to more than 10,000 specimens, including 4,000 Oklahoma plants representing more than 1,000 species. The museum was then housed in the university administration building, but the collections and building were destroyed by fire in 1903. Gradually, the collections were rebuilt, and at least twice in the next 10 years fires would again ravage parts of the collections. Nevertheless, the curators persevered. Gradually, the present-day museum took form.

## Economic disaster and war

The next major development in the history of the museum occurred in the 1930s, a time of economic disaster in Oklahoma. Indeed, the suffering of the people in the state during the Great Depression became legendary with the publication of *Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck, a book that has never been well received in Oklahoma. When Franklin Roosevelt became President of the United States, he immediately moved to initiate government employment programs. As this time, Dr. J. Willis Stovall had arrived at the University of Oklahoma. A vertebrate paleontologist, Stovall was able to utilize government labor to assist in his explorations of the fossil history of Oklahoma. He discovered many dinosaurs and other fossils during this time, keeping a large crew in the field during much of the year.

Fig. 4 – University Hall after the great fire of 1903 in which the museum's entire collection was lost (File photo).

At the same time, archeological excavations of the Spiro Mounds site in eastern Oklahoma also used extensive government labor to excavate what would become one of the most important archeological sites in the United States. Dr. Kenneth Orr, a University of Oklahoma anthropologist and museum curator, was a key investigator in studying the mounds. A mining company searching for buried treasure had almost destroyed the Spiro Mounds site. A move by university anthropologists led to the passage of the first conservation law for the State of Oklahoma. The law protected the prehistoric mounds, and the massive collections of artifacts and human remains that were discovered were transferred to the University of Oklahoma's museum.

Together, the archeological and paleontological collections amassed by scientists and government workers in the 1930s would total several hundred thousand artifacts. They were collections of great beauty and immense scientific and cultural significance, and they had become a part of the university museum. These two areas of research – vertebrate paleontology and archeology – would continue to drive the museum forward over the next 75 years, eventually resulting in the construction of a remarkable new facility to usher in the new millennium.

In 1939 Stovall had developed a plan for a new museum, noting: "If there is an index to the cultural values planted deeply in the hearts of the people of any community it will be reflected in the number and quality of their museums of art, science and history. The reason that the museum plays such an important part in the cultural elevation of a people is

that the museum furnishes a point of contact between the higher education institutions and the general public. The museum reaches out and touches the high and low alike. It thus elevates the ignorant and unschooled and in so doing prepares them for intelligent direction at the hands of an enlightened state." Stovall went about the task of combining the many natural and cultural collections into a single administrative unit, something he accomplished in 1943, assuming the post of its first director.

The Museum of the University of Oklahoma, as it was known, contained most of the collections that had been developed by academic departments, including Anthropology, Classical Languages, Plant Sciences, Geography, and Geology. At this time, Stovall moved collections from several departments (including storage under the football stadium) into a group of buildings that provided about 5,000 square feet of exhibition space and storage space in former stables and barns. The collections now had a home, but the buildings were inadequate to protect the collections or permit their enjoyment by the public. Stovall continued efforts to develop a new museum, but was unsuccessful in obtaining the funds for a new building. Certainly Stovall was not lucky.

In 1929, just before the start of the Great Depression, the state had identified funds for the construction of a new museum building. These quickly evaporated in the economic disaster that befell Oklahoma and the rest of the nation over the next decade. Similarly, just as World War II came to an end in 1945, the legislature and university again worked with Stovall to designate funds for a new museum. The end of the war led to the sudden passage of what came to be known as the G. I. Bill, a government program to provide a college education for all returning servicemen. Suddenly universities across the country were faced with hordes of returning soldiers who were going to be students. The money that had been designated for the new museum was quickly reallocated to build dormitories. Stovall died in 1952 without ever obtaining funds for a new museum. On his death, the name of the museum was changed to the Stovall Museum of Science and History.

Fig. 5 – The Stovall Museum's main building in the 1950s (file photo).

## The middle decades, 1952-1983

The middle of the twentieth century saw the collections develop significantly due to extensive research by curators and their graduate and undergraduate students in academic departments. Additionally, the oil industry had become a major economic force in the state, and many wealthy oil pioneers and their families, as well as petroleum engineers and other geologists trained at the University of Oklahoma, had traveled the world, often collecting items of significant cultural and

artistic value. Many of these were donated to the Stovall Museum. The many collections from the Zoology Department also came under the care of the museum. The museum had many directors during the middle decades, and each in his way tried to develop a plan for the construction of a new museum building. Often these efforts would come tantalizingly close to success, but at the last moment funds were lost, potential donors died, or support for a new museum at the level of the university would evaporate. By 1983, the museum had collections stored in a rag-tag array of buildings, including decrepit World War II wooden army barracks, the original stables and barns that were given to Stovall in the 1930s, and attics and basements scattered across campus. None of the buildings offered protection from fire and some were so poorly constructed and such a great fire hazard that they were used to train firemen. Some of the greatest firetraps in Oklahoma – buildings with a projected 'burn-down time' of seven minutes – now housed the collective heritage of the state, an invaluable collection of more than six million specimens and artifacts.

## The later decades, 1983-1995

I was named director of the Stovall Museum in 1983. The only reason I was chosen to lead the museum, which had had a number of directors and acting directors in the middle decades, was that I was the first Ph.D. curator paid through the museum, rather than being a curator paid by an academic department. There was no one else to ask to be director when a previous director left the university. My appointment coincided with a hiring freeze that was imposed by the governor for all state positions. I had been the head of a search committee that was seeking a new director when the freeze went into effect. Once again Oklahoma was subjected to a downward economic spiral as both oil and agricultural prices plummeted. Unemployment rose, incomes declined, salaries of state employees (including faculty members) were

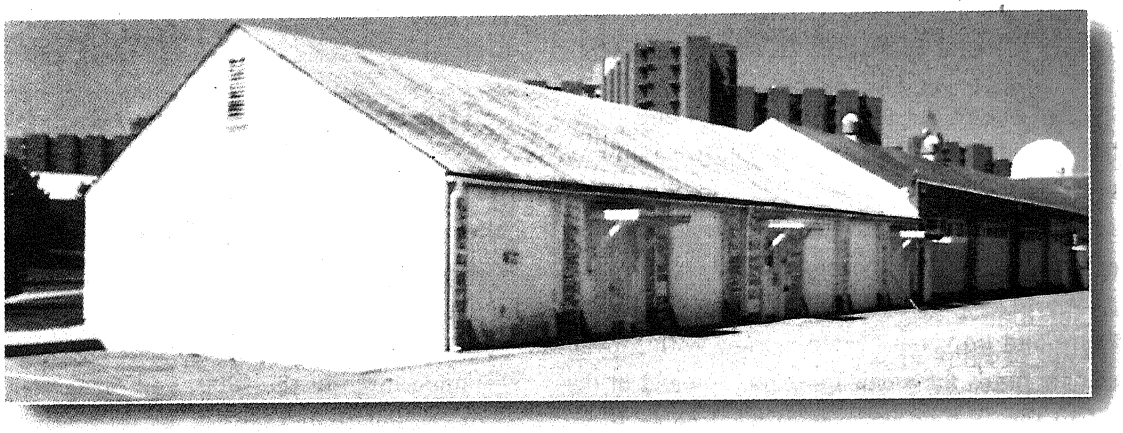

Fig. 6 – Some of the wooden stables that housed Oklahoma's collections of natural and cultural history for more than six decades (Photo: M. Mares).

cut, and there was little hope for improvement of conditions in the immediate future. Oklahoma was experiencing the 'Oil Bust', another depression, which, if milder than the Great Depression, was nonetheless a difficult time to even consider developing a new museum. The very idea of a new museum building during such hard economic times was ridiculed by many. There was no new museum on the university's horizon in 1983.

I came to the museum in 1981 and was told that I would be the first of several curators to be hired. By 1983, no additional curators had been hired, the director had left, and an acting director was running the museum. The university was unsure as to what to do with the museum. Hard economic times make it difficult to manage an organization effectively. The university entered a period of administrative instability. Presidents were replaced by interim presidents and these were replaced by new presidents. By 1995 I had reported to 10 different presidents and interim presidents. Some of these were professors or administrators with a history of service to the university and were familiar with the museum. In most cases, however, the fact that they were in an interim position made them unable to plan tong-term development strategies. Their job was to get the university through a period of instability until a 'permanent' president could be appointed. When such permanent appointments occurred within the context of economically challenging times, the last thing the new president wished to do was to consider building a new museum. Several presidents did not see the need for a museum on a university campus at all, viewing it not only as an unnecessary drain on scarce financial resources, but also a massive consumer of space – another scarce resource on all college campuses. Faculty did not support a new museum, feeling that any funds for such a project would be taken away from academic departments. Moreover, 'permanent' presidents were invariably not from Oklahoma, which meant that they had little emotional investment in the museum's holdings – the largest collection of the tangible heritage of the state. I called them the transient administrators, for they always had a bag packed and an ear cocked for a position at a more prestigious university. Their goal was to avoid controversy and keep the institution functioning during a straightened economic period.

The naming of a new president means that the overall administrative structure of the university will change as new provosts, vice-presidents, deans, and other administrators are appointed by the new regime. These university officials often reflect the general tone emanating from the president's office. If they have detected a lack of support for a new museum building, then each becomes more committed to making the museum disappear. During this difficult period the attitude toward the museum among higher administrators ranged from benign neglect to open hostility. Budgets were cut; staffing was reduced. There was little or no support for a new museum building. Soon there was talk of eliminating public programs and exhibits, downsizing research, and, eventually, selling the collections. It was difficult to fight what became a multi-front war with administrators. One never knew from where the next assault would come. Would the museum be closed? Would more staff members be eliminated? Would research programs be ordered to close? Would budgetary cutbacks continue? One president unilaterally gave the museum away to another city; I read about it as I opened the morning paper! He later asked me to sell some of the collections at Sotheby's in order to raise funds for a new museum. "What will you put in it after the collections are sold?" I asked. It was a challenging time to be a museum director.

## A difficult period

When I became director, I immediately decided that it was my duty to develop and build a new museum for the University of Oklahoma and for the State of Oklahoma. The economic conditions of the state did not concern me. We were in danger of losing the state's heritage and clearly had the moral high ground in a move to a new museum. As I examined each collection, I was struck by the beauty and value of the objects. There were many unique pieces that would be star attractions at major museums around the world. The museum had the world's largest *Pentaceratops*, one of the greatest dinosaur fossils ever found. It also had the world's largest apatosaur (brontosaur) – perhaps the quintessential dinosaur. The Oklahoma specimen was fully a third larger than the famous Carnegie Museum specimen on exhibit in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The precious Spiro Mounds artifacts that told of an artistic culture living in Oklahoma a millennium ago would be considered treasures in any museum, as would the small, but important, classics collection.

Clearly the curators, directors, researchers, students, and travelers had labored long and hard to amass a magnificent collection. Unfortunately, each day my staff and I faced a continued lack of support for a new building from the higher administration, as well as a lack of understanding of the importance of the collections or an appreciation of their value. To this one must couple the fact that Norman lies at the heart of Tornado Alley, an area famous for the most devastating storms on earth. Lightning, wind, and rain, not to mention tornadic winds spiraling at hundreds of miles per hour, could mean the instantaneous loss of Oklahoma's heritage. Each time a storm approached, the handful of staff members (we numbered only seven when I began) rallied to protect the buildings. Roofs, walls, and even floors leaked during every heavy storm. Pests as large as squirrels were able to enter the collections, at times damaging valuable objects.

Luckily, the museum was not lost to storm or fire, although there is little doubt that some administrators would have seen such an occurrence as divine intervention, removing, as it would have, a problem that would not go away. In subtle ways the administration let it be known that they did not support a new museum facility. Staffing and budgets continued to decline. I went through a period of five consecutive years without a pay raise, although faculty and administrators experienced significant increases during the same period. There was little or no support on the part of the university development office to identify potential donors who might be interested in a new museum building.

Through it all, we endured. How could we let these collections be lost in a fire or a storm because of simple neglect? Duty can be a heavy burden. Nevertheless, what was becoming increasingly clear was that the university would never take steps to build a new building unless pressure was brought to bear on the administration. I determined that the only pressure that could compel the university to support the development of a new museum was the pressure of the people. Ours was a public university. These collections belonged to the people. The museum had to become the museum of the people of Oklahoma.

## This is your stuff

Within a few years after becoming director, I decided to begin backroom tours for people interested in the museum. I began to travel the state telling the people

of Oklahoma the story of *their* museum, *their* collections, and the potential catastrophe that was looming on the horizon with each summer storm. "This is your stuff", I said. "Look how we are taking care of it. Would you put your greatest treasure in a building that was deemed unfit for horses? Would you store your family's heirlooms in a barn? Would you keep items worth tens of millions of dollars in buildings that would burn down in seven minutes?"

Oklahomans have an abundance of common sense. As we led tours through the collection for first tens, then hundreds, then thousands of people, we were able to reach out to a core of potential supporters. They were not happy with the way the university was protecting "their stuff". On one rainy day we led a tour of the anthropology collections. Among the items the visitors saw were hundreds of beautiful baskets covered with plastic sheeting. As we walked through the dark and dismal hallway in the aged barn, water dripped on the plastic. Some people had tears in their eyes as I showed them the precious objects of their heritage. They saw rare Native American baskets, ledger art from the last century, Greek pieces made long before the birth of Christ, Spiro artifacts that were old 500 years before Columbus sailed to the New World, dinosaur bones that had cracked because of heat or cold, rare vases that had been broken by squirrels that had gotten into the collection. They were astounded and angered: "How could this happen? Why won't the university do something about this? This is disgraceful!"

I, of course, could not agree more with their feelings. Indeed, I was happy that someone was finally sharing my displeasure with the current situation and my concern for the magnificent collections. Even though I had increased the level of awareness of the museum among the people of Oklahoma (I wrote most of the news releases that told of the plight of the museum in the local media), I needed some way to reach more people. It was not possible to bring everyone in Oklahoma on a time-intensive backroom tour. I needed to find a way for people to understand the beauty and value of the collections without having to tour the facilities.

## The Oklahoma Museum of Natural History

In the United States, one of the most effective ways of reaching the people is to deal with their elected representatives. Oklahoma's elected state house members and state senators represent the many local communities of the state. For the most part, they are people with deep roots in Oklahoma. I knew that if I could convince them of the importance of the collections and make them aware of the abysmal storage conditions of "their stuff", they would want to do something about it. A new museum could have a significant economic impact on the state. Oklahoma was suffering greatly in the strong economic downturn of the Eighties, and the state needed additional cultural and economic accoutrements to attract industry and tourists to the state. Surely a natural history museum would be a major player in a revitalized state economy. As I pointed out to them, "Oklahoma has done the hard part. We have built the collections. All that remains is the easy part, building a new museum". To their everlasting credit, most of the state's politicians, and especially the local delegation, became powerful and consistent voices for a new museum. As support from the citizens of Oklahoma increased over the years, the support of the elected officials became even stronger. I finally had important allies in my battles with university administrators.

In 1987 I was finally able to work with the local delegation to have a bill introduced into the legislature that changed the name of the Stovall Museum to the Oklahoma Museum of Natural History. We were now the state's official natural history museum. It was not possible to include funds for a new building at the time the law was enacted, but I was able to have phrases included in the bill obligating the state and university to work together to provide a museum building someday. Moreover, the university and state were also mandated to provide a staff of professionals of a quality merited by the valuable and extensive collections. The passage of this state law was a giant leap forward for the museum. Although we still belonged to the state's university, we now also belonged to everyone in the state in a tangible way. It was the law of the land. The collections really were "their stuff".

## Traveling exhibits cover the state

Oklahoma is a state with a large land area (68,679 square miles; 177,877 square kilometers—about twice the size of Portugal) and small population (about 3.4 million). One major challenge that the museum faced was how to use the collections most effectively to reach the largest number of people in the state. With only about 4,000 square feet of exhibit space, it was impossible to host many visitors or to show many objects. On a good year we would have about 50,000 people visit the museum. Most visits lasted less than an hour, for in that brief time a person could cover most of what was shown in the small museum.

Under the tutelage of Peter Tirrell, my then Assistant (and now Associate) Director, the Stovall Museum developed one of the finest traveling exhibit programs in the country. Using grant funds and other sources of public and private money (there were no funds for exhibits in the museum's budget), the staff developed a wide array of self-contained, attractive, informative, and easily transportable traveling exhibits. Rental fees for the small exhibits (which could be shown in a few hundred square feet) were minimal, and the larger exhibits, which required up to 1,200 square feet, had very low rental fees when the quality of the exhibit was considered. We designed the traveling exhibits to be shown in schools, banks, government buildings, libraries, malls, smaller museums, and other venues offering modest security and ready public access. The exhibits reached almost every town in Oklahoma and were extremely popular.

For most people, it was their first opportunity to see a museum exhibit. We received letters that thanked us for providing "my first opportunity to visit a museum." From 1980 through 1994, more than two of every three people in Oklahoma had seen one of the traveling exhibits. The Oklahoma Museum of Natural History was becoming important to the people of Oklahoma. It was becoming a regular part of their lives. The museum's traveling exhibits made friends for the museum throughout the state. People in the small towns of Oklahoma appreciated the museum's taking its time and energy to bring exhibits directly to their towns. They had largely been ignored by state institutions in the past and it was refreshing for them to receive exhibits that were not only attractive and informative, but fun as well. It was something that everyone, from grandparents to grandchildren, could enjoy together.

## Heritage at Risk

In 1988 I wrote a book called *Heritage at Risk*. It was a slim volume with beautiful color photographs of some

of the most valuable and exquisite objects in the museum's collections. The message of the book was contained in the title. The people of Oklahoma owned a remarkably extensive, superb, and valuable collection that reflected their heritage. This collection was in danger of catastrophic loss. Oklahoma's 'best kept secret' was a secret no more. I was asking the people to help me protect their heritage. This was "their stuff" and it was going to be lost... forever. If they did not act quickly, the many irreplaceable and lovely objects that were shown in the book for the first time would no longer belong to them. Their children would not have a great museum because this generation did nothing to help. The book gave them a taste of the glory of a new museum, while also showing the dismal conditions in which their heritage was kept. If they did not care, then no one would care. It was up to the people, for the university would not lead. As I wrote in closing:

> "The small and dedicated staff of the Oklahoma Museum of Natural History can work tirelessly to protect these precious items, can design interpretive exhibits that will bring information about these materials to the entire state, and can study the materials so that we learn to better appreciate our rich heritage. However, the staff cannot do a great deal to influence the construction of a new building for the museum or the addition of staff members. The real influence for a new facility and increased staff lies with the people of Oklahoma. These are your materials that are endangered. You need to let everyone know that the state, the university, and the people of Oklahoma must work together to protect these extensive, exquisite, and valuable collections. The are Oklahoma's heritage."

I used a small grant to publish the book and gave thousands of copies away at no charge to most state leaders, including politicians, business people, government and university officials, foundations, potential donors, and others who might be able to help in the drive toward a new museum. The book led to two groups of Norman citizens banding together under the names Heritage at Risk and Citizens for the Museum. They went door to door to gather signatures on a petition. The petition called on the City of Norman to sell property bonds (increase their property taxes) in order to provide an initial $5 million dollars for a new natural history museum.

This occurred at the end of the 1980s, a time when Reagonomics (anti-tax policies developed during the presidency of Ronald Reagan) meant strong anti-tax views by many people. To call for a tax increase during this period was to go against the trend against taxes that had swept the nation for most of the decade. The Oklahoma City paper in a headline on April 22, 1992 put it succinctly: 'Tax wariness casts doubt on museum plans.' To make matters more difficult, the people were calling for a single-issue question, which meant that like the gladiators of ancient Rome, the people of Norman would either give a 'thumbs up' or 'thumbs down' sign for a new museum. There would be no other questions dealt with in the special election. "Are you willing to put a new tax burden on yourself in order to help build a new museum?" That was the real question. It was that simple. Early on in the process, the president of the university told me to stop the election. I had wisely kept myself out of the citizens groups as we worked together to develop the election strategy. I had no power over the groups. These were simply citizens exercising their rights. I told the president, "Have you ever heard the word 'democracy'? I have no control over these people." "You will lose the election," he said. "We might," I replied, "but we've been in Norman for almost a century and the people like us. I think we will win."

As the election neared, it was becoming increasingly clear through polls that the museum bond election would be approved. When the votes were tallied, seven of every ten people had voted a tax on themselves to build a new museum. They made the city's money contingent on the university's raising $15 million in private donations and on the state's providing an additional $15 million. The snowball had been pushed down the hill. The museum project had a long way to go, but it would now be hard to stop. The people had spoken.

## The state acts again

In November 1992 a statewide election was held for a higher education bond issue. Higher education in Oklahoma had not received a significant increase in funding through bond money for a quarter of a century. The entire bond election included several hundred million dollars of support for higher education, but within the large package was a $15 million allocation for a new natural history museum in Norman. I had lobbied our president to have the remaining $30 million that was required to build the museum included within the bond issue, but he felt that we could raise the money through private means. Had he supported the inclusion of the entire amount in the bond drive, the new museum would have been finished much sooner.

There was no guarantee that the citizens of Oklahoma would approve a major bond question for higher education, especially given their anti-tax feelings. However, when the votes were tallied, the question had been approved by about 60 percent of the voters. I learned later that some politicians and political leaders felt that the glue that held the entire bond question together, and that helped it garner the support of the public, was the museum's inclusion in the package. The people of Oklahoma loved their museum and they voted to support it. We now had $20 million dollars. Oklahoma was going to have a new museum.

## How will we stop this project now?

When the City of Norman voted to fund the museum, it provided the first $5 million of a projected $35 million that would be needed to build a new facility. The state then provided an additional $15 million. This promise of funding, although not yet translated into actual funds, permitted me to proceed with site selection and the initial architectural work. As planning progressed, a site was selected for the new museum. Among seven possible locations, we picked a beautiful open area on the south end of campus near the law school.

We were under pressure to build a new museum in the heart of the campus or in or near the town's mall, a move favored by several business interests. However, I felt that the museum needed to remain a part of campus and should not be placed in a business area far from the university. For one thing, we taught many classes in the museum in fields ranging from botany to zoology, and from anthropology and history to geology. The collections provided unique opportunities to train undergraduate students and graduate students alike. Indeed, over the previous several decades, more than 100 advanced degrees had been awarded for research done on the museum's collections. Additionally, the museum needed extensive parking facilities, as well as room to expand in the future. There was no parking available in the heart of the campus. Finally, the state's finest museum deserved to be placed in a setting that permitted the natural beauty of Oklahoma to be

shown in a natural habitats park. The only location that offered all of these things was the site at the south end of campus. Originally, I was only able to control 10 acres, but soon this increased to 20. As presidents changed, it increased to 40 acres. Finally, when David Boren was named president, the site reached its final size of 65 acres. I was proud to have taken part in a small 'land run'—in the best Oklahoma tradition—that would ensure the beauty of the setting of the museum far into the future.

Gradually the building began to take shape, at least on paper. I had to use my imagination in working with artists so that they could produce renderings of the exhibits that potential donors and voters would find exciting and beautiful. We needed to help them visualize what could be. I needed to convince donors that a new museum would be one of the best things ever to happen in Oklahoma. This was not a simple thing to do, but it was, after all, their stuff, too, so I let the collections sell themselves. Eventually, with the significant assistance of the University Development Office, we began to attract donor interest. The person who was in charge of the campaign loved the museum and she and her assistant worked tirelessly to bring the museum story to the attention of donors. I was always ready to help and together we formed a dedicated team with a single goal: build the finest museum that Oklahoma has ever seen. We were not always supported by the higher administration of the university, but we persevered.

I was under great pressure to build an inexpensive prefabricated building. Why did I need so much money? Surely the $35 million that I was talking about was way too much museum for the university and for Oklahoma. Why couldn't I do it for $10 million? I replied with such questions as "What is Oklahoma's heritage worth?" I knew that the people of Oklahoma thought that it was worth a lot. I myself thought that it was priceless. "How can you put Oklahoma's heritage in a cheap building?" I asked. Plans came forth from various administrators to make the project less expensive. Why not build an exhibits building and leave the collections where they are – in the barns and stables? Why not build a cheap storage facility and forget about exhibits? Why not get rid of most of the collections and just build an inexpensive building for displays?

At one point I had to remove all of the offices from the blueprints for the new building because I was told that there would be no staff to fill them. I was able to accomplish this by labeling the offices as storage bins on the building's floor plans, much to the surprise of the architect. I also could not use the word library, since the very word made the president unhappy. There were several library spaces on the floor plans. Indeed, state law mandated that the museum maintain a library to deal with topics related to the collections and the mission of the museum. The libraries too changed their name, becoming 'student resource' rooms. The walls of the 'storage bins' were supposedly made of chicken wire, which the president found acceptable and inexpensive. The libraries had no bookshelves, for those would have been too obvious on the floor plans.

It was an uncomfortable period. At any point the whole project could come crashing down around me if my architectural trickery became known. Yet I also knew that I would deserve to be fired if I were to build a building that could not function. I felt that my first allegiance was to the people of Oklahoma, those alive now and those who would come later. They had paid for this building, not the president. I owed it to them. They had bought into the dream of a great new

museum. There was no way I could permit a pale imitation of the dream to be constructed. If I were to be fired, it would be because I had decided to do something sneaky for the good of the museum, not because I had acquiesced to something that would be bad for the museum.

I knew that it would be impossible to operate the building or develop the exhibits without a large staff and they would need offices. Experience had also taught me that it was useless to argue with the president. He was clearly wrong about staffing, just as he had been wrong when he tried to get me to sell the collections. I felt it was best to resort to a minor subterfuge in order to get the job done. Offices became bins; libraries became resource rooms. To do otherwise would have made me incompetent as a museum director. People would have to be hired to run the museum or there would be no public opening. This was the most popular public project in the history of Oklahoma. In the long run, he would thank me, for no one could withstand the heat if the people of Oklahoma arrived on opening day and there were no exhibits and no staff to operate the building.

My job was to get the building planning completed and to increase the excitement throughout the state about the exhibits and the new museum. Eventually, there would be irresistible pressure on the administration to act or heads would roll come opening day. The wait for action was nerve wracking, but waiting was the only strategy. With each permutation of the blueprints I had to see those ridiculous storage bins and resource rooms. Would we ever have a president that understood and supported the museum?

Each day, it seemed, led to new challenges to the museum project. Finally, one day in early 1994 we were asked to present the case for a new museum to a potential donor, the Noble Foundation, a foundation that belonged to one of Oklahoma's notable families and that had supported many cultural projects at the University of Oklahoma and throughout the state. Campaign Council Chair, W. R. Howell, CEO of JC Penney and I would make the case for a new museum. We would be given three minutes each to address the board. We learned later that the board did not know beforehand if they wished to support the museum project or what level of support they might be willing to provide.

We each spoke for the allotted few minutes. How does one sell such a massive idea in three minutes? Howell, a native Oklahoman, spoke eloquently of what it means to grow up in Oklahoma. He spoke of his desire to see Oklahoma's heritage on display. I then talked about the importance of heritage to the people of Oklahoma. I reviewed the remarkable collections and spoke about how a foundation seldom has an opportunity to touch the future of a state in as tangible, important, and permanent a manner as that afforded by the museum project. We owed it to our grandchildren. My three minutes flew by and the board meeting then continued for the rest of the day. That evening we would learn that the Noble Foundation and their affiliated foundations would eventually provide $10 million to the museum project. It was the largest donation in the university's history—by a factor of three. We now had $30 million. The new museum would carry the name of Sam Noble, who had passed away a few years earlier but who had been interested in natural history museums. The new museum would be called the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History.

A few weeks after the announcement of the Noble gift, I was told that a very senior administrator had called

his staff together and announced that the Noble gift had made his job much more difficult. "How will we stop this project now?" he asked. He should have asked me, for I knew the answer. There was no way he was going to stop the project. Moreover, I doubted that he would be in his position when the new museum was finally built. I was correct on both counts.

## A new president

In 1995 the University of Oklahoma Regents, the governing body of the school (and a group that had been supportive of the museum project for several years), appointed David L. Boren as the 13th president of the university. Boren had been Governor of Oklahoma and a United States senator for 16 years. I did not know how good a president he would be, but I was certain that I would not have to explain to him the value of Oklahoma's heritage. I visited with him shortly after his appointment and he quickly indicated his enthusiastic support for a new museum. He saw immediately that a new museum would be important in strengthening the scientific and cultural infrastructure of the state and in forming a bridge to the people. Moreover, he also was quick to agree that a new natural history museum would be an excellent addition to the university, where students and visitors would enjoy it. He agreed with my assessment that the museum would be the 'front door' for the university.

Working with Boren was a pleasure. I was able to argue the case that the initial $37.5 million project, while significant, was too small for our needs, especially given the fact that we had been unable to estimate the costs of the exhibits with any accuracy. I said that we needed to increase the overall project to $42.5 million. He agreed. I also noted that we had never been able to develop a staffing plan since a former president had said that is was his intention that my total staff would not exceed six people. He asked for a staffing plan. We had one ready, for we knew that the time would come when people had to be hired. Working with the university regents, the legislature, and the higher regents (the governing board for all Oklahoma public education), Boren and I were able to garner support for an exhibits development plan and a staffing plan for the new building. Suddenly my bins and resource rooms again became offices and libraries.

In February 1996 President Boren climbed atop a bulldozer disguised as a *Triceratops* dinosaur and, along with one of the Noble family's grandchildren, broke ground for the new museum. It would cost $42.5 million and would include almost 200,000 square feet, with about 50,000 square feet dedicated to exhibits. Within days the contractors had arrived and building construction was underway. Exhibit plans were also taken to the stage where construction contracts could be bid. Oklahoma's new museum was being built.

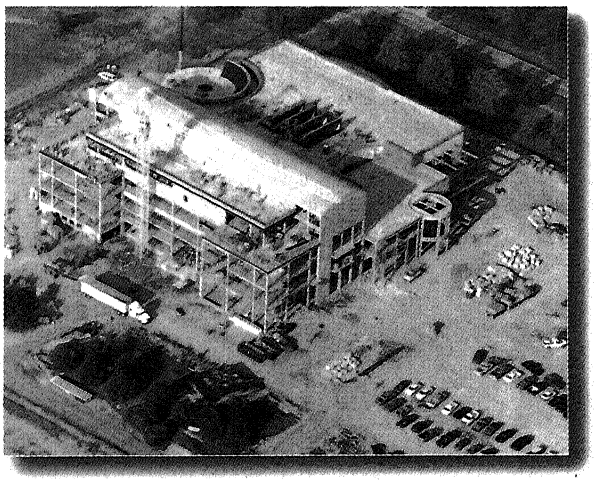

Fig. 7 – The new museum taking shape (© RogerBondy.com).

## Touching the future

I will not detail the actual construction of the new facility. Suffice to say that there were enormous challenges in getting the project completed more or less on time and within budget. I visited the project each day I was in town for more than 42 months, clambering up ladders and into the most hidden recesses of the building. The eternal struggle between builder and architect took place, with me, the representative of the owner, having final say on almost anything to do with the massive and complex structure. I knew that if I relented in the quality of the final project, the impact would extend across the generations. If it failed to meet the collective expectations of the people of Oklahoma, I would be responsible. I had helped develop, articulate, and sell a dream. I would not permit anyone to interfere with the successful completion of the project. We had promised the people a great museum. If it did not come to pass and it were my fault, I knew that I could never feel satisfaction again in having lost my single opportunity to "reach through the dark curtain of time and touch the future," as I once noted to our supporters. It was a crazy time. Each day brought new challenges, whether from the building contractor, the dozens of graphic artists, the exhibit designers and contractors, the lighting specialists, the landscaping people, or any of the hundreds, if not thousands, of others involved in the project. I knew that I would be the target if the museum project did not meet the people's expectations. However, I also knew that I had very high – almost perfectionist – standards. If my expectations were met, theirs would be too. Although

Fig. 8 – The Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History at night (Photo: Timothy Hursley).

I was not an elected official, the people of Oklahoma had given me something far more important than their vote. They had given me their hope. This museum was tangible evidence of their hope for the future. Their children and grandchildren would have a better world than their parents, and this museum would be a part of it.

## Turning dreams to stone

On April 12 and 13 2000 the new Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History was dedicated. All of the exhibits were not yet complete and we were still trying to finish some of the internal spaces. Nevertheless, the building – designed by Stuart Solomon of Solomon + Bauer of Watertown, Massachusetts and local architects William Kaighn and Associates – was beautiful. Oklahoma had never seen anything like it. It is the finest natural history museum in the region. The building has climate-controlled spaces for the collections, with the latest in high-tech security systems. The exhibits are breathtaking. Some of the greatest dinosaurs in the world are on display, including *Saurophaganax maximus* ('the greatest king of the reptile eaters') and Oklahoma's state fossil; the world's largest *Apatosaurus*; and the most complete and largest *Pentaceratops* in existence, an animal with the largest head of any land animal that ever walked the earth. The natural history dioramas permit the visitor to enter the exhibit space and become a part of nature. In the Hall of the People of Oklahoma are the Cooper Skull—the first object ever painted in the New World—and the priceless artifacts of the Spiro people. There is a large contemporary Native American art gallery with a breathtaking collection of Native American art. Opening day also saw an exhibit of artwork from throughout the world in the museum's Millennium Dinosaur Art Contest. In the south rotunda, the word's largest bronze mammoth is encountering a bronze sculpture of a Native American family. Both are

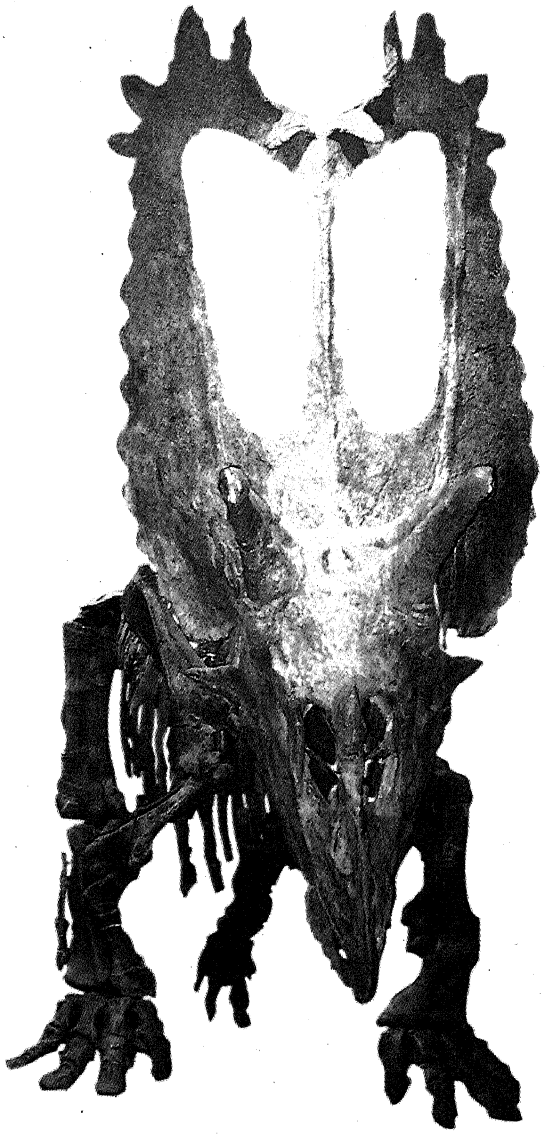

Fig. 9 – *Pentaceratops* on display in the museum. This individual animal has the largest head of any land animal that ever existed [almost 11-feet high (3.4 m)] (Photo: M. Mares).

standing on the floor along with the visitor. Standing by the family, you can feel the power of the mammoth and the challenge of survival faced by the early people of Oklahoma. Through the glass rotunda one sees the natural habitats of the state as a backdrop to the mammoth. The scene that is depicted in bronze could have taken place 15,000 years ago on the very spot on which the museum stands.

We completed our first year of operation in May 2000. Almost 300,000 visitors came to the museum the first year. I have yet to meet anyone who does not like it. I am proud to have played a role in the complex drama that surrounded the development of Oklahoma's new museum of natural history. The collections are safe. The people are satisfied. As you enter the museum there is a large donor plaque listing major donors. Before the many individual supporters is the following:

*The People of Norman*
*The People of Oklahoma*

It is a rare privilege to be a part of a project that is so large and involves so many people. Even more satisfying is having been able to work with the people of Oklahoma to turn a diaphanous dream into a beautiful stone reality.

The new museum will exceed all of our life spans, taking its message of Oklahoma's rich story far into the future, enriching the lives of our children and their children.

Together we performed a miracle on the prairie.