

# Fossil field day for OCC scientists

By Carol Azizias  
staff writer

Amateur and professional paleontologists will have a field day looking through the more than 1,500 fossils in Oakland Community College's new collection.

Amassed over a 20-year period by Thomas C. Witherspoon, a Dearborn elementary school teacher, the collection includes such rare fossils as the 350 million-year-old crinoids (also known as sea lilies) and 500 million-year-old trilobites (a distant relative of the horseshoe crab).

"Many museums don't have as valuable a collection as my private one," said Witherspoon.

The amateur paleontologist's private collection consists of thousands of fossils he dug up during expeditions across the United States and Canada.

Part of that collection — valued at \$234 — is now housed at OCC's Highland Lakes campus. Witherspoon's gift represents one of the largest individual contributions to the college.

"I DECIDED to donate the fossils when I found out OCC was in dire need of materials," said Witherspoon, who also has made contributions to Henry Ford Community College in Dearborn.

OCC officials said the collection is a valuable asset to their geology program.

"Students are enthused about the opportunity to handle (specimens) they normally would have seen only in textbooks," said Michael Marlow, geology instructor at OCC.

While most students take the three geology courses offered at OCC to fulfill their science requirements, some are interested in the field as a stepping-

stone to careers in the oil and mining industries, said Don Wujek, another OCC geology instructor.

"Some of our graduates are now working on oil fields in Texas, oil rigs off the Gulf of Mexico and in tungsten and cobalt mines in Colorado," Wujek added.

WITHERSPOON hopes students who see the collection will be inspired to pursue careers in the field.

His own interest in paleontology was sparked while viewing a similar exhibit of fossils more than 20 years ago.

"When I was teaching a unit on the history of living things, I became very interested in fossils and decided to see the collection at Cranbrook."

"I came across some fossils which are commonly called butterfly stones and date back to the Devonian Period (350 million years ago). They were similar to ones I had seen in Arkona, Ont., Canada (where he and his family went for summer vacations)."

After meeting with then-Cranbrook director Walt Nichols, Witherspoon decided to transform his intellectual curiosity into a life-long hobby.

"Once I showed Walt two bushels of horn coral I had found. He sorted through them all and found only two that were perfect. The others were either broken or corroded."

"From then on, I started investigating. I read more books on the subject and took junkets to Illinois and Ohio to look for different types of fossils."

"I became very selective and hunted rare fossils such as trilobites (prehistoric creatures which crawled along the ocean floor)."

fossils he owns in rock quarries which are now off limits to collectors.

"Many of the quarries prohibit fossil hunters because of federal government safety standards," he said.

Although he has never put his life on the line to dig up a rare fossil, he remembers one occasion when an overzealous collector did.

"We were in the Medusa Cement Quarry at Silica, Ohio, and there was a huge slab teetering on a little pillar of shale. The slab must have weighed as much as a car."

"One college student began chipping away at the rock, and it fell 30 feet down into the quarry. It took 40 people to move the rock off him. When we finally got him out, he was a bloody mess."

The accident didn't discourage Witherspoon from fossil hunting, but it did make him more aware of its dangers.

WITHERSPOON also collects some not-so-rare specimens such as flint from Flint Ridge, Ohio, Arccona, Ont., and Alpena. "A number of my students have become geologists," he said.

Witherspoon and his son, Tom, are collaborating on a project to lease fossils on a scientific site they identified from a farmer in Indiana.

"We hope it will enhance the scientific knowledge of the Mississippian (300 million year old) crinoids (or sea lilies) of Indiana."

Even though he spends countless hours researching and hunting fossils, his avocation never will replace his vocation.

"Teaching has always been my first love," he said.



BILL BRESLER/staff photographer

Tom Witherspoon and his "pet" trilobite George, a fossil shellfish found near Silica, Ohio.



A Mississippian crinoid, this fossil was found at Indian Creek, Montgomery County, Ind.

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"COLLECTORS don't find many of the rarest types," Witherspoon said. "Out of the millions of animals and plants that have inhabited the earth, only a very small number of actual fossil remains can be found."

Witherspoon found most of the rare

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