

# Travel



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(Wb, T-8A, F-4C, 6D \*XB)D



Visitors to the Mammoth site are amazed at the bones' size.

Photos by Micky Jones

## Mammoth exhibit

### Hot Springs, S.D., has wealth of interesting, ancient bones

FOR THOUSANDS of years it was just a hill outside the town of Hot Springs, S.D. Today it may be the biggest news in the Black Hills, especially for a certain kind of traveler.

If you drive right past those screaming billboard invitations to repel the gardens, marine spectaculars and plastic dinosaur parks, I suggest you come to a screeching stop at The Mammoth Site.

The Mammoth Site is the largest accumulation of Columbian Mammoths in the New World, one of the most important fossil finds on the planet.

Thirty five of the giant elephants have been found so far, and there are at least as many to come. It's amazing how excited you can get over a dirty old bone.

THE COLOR photos at the entrance to the new Mammoth Site building, which opened last fall, one block north of the Highway 18 Truck Bypass on the south edge of Hot Springs, give you a fast introduction to what has been going on around this hill since the bulldozers first uncovered the giant tusks in 1974.

The bones of these six-to-ten ton animals, last seen walking anywhere in America 12,000 years ago, have been found in small pieces all over this area.

They found fragments when they built the A and W downtown, and when they built the sewer line to the Veteran Administration Center on top of Battle Mountain, but the big news was when Phil Anderson began excavating the slopes between Evanston and De-



1-of-a-kind traveler Iris Jones contributing travel editor

troil streets for a housing development in 1974.

Neighbors say that when George Porky Hanson, driver of the bulldozer, hit the tusk that had been buried for 26,000 years, it sounded like a stick of dynamite had exploded.

PORKY WENT looking for his son, Dan, who took geology classes across the state line at Chadron State College in Nebraska, and Dan got so excited he slept at the site to protect the find.

Dan Hanson's college professor, Dr. Larry Agenbroad, led townfolk and students in a careful dig of what was assumed to be the scattered remains of one mammoth.

This proboscidean, bearer of 15-foot-long tusks, is a member of the elephant family, our largest living land mammal, so even one specimen is a major job.

After two weeks they realized that the 170-by-150-foot hill was full of mammoths — there could be a hundred of them there — so they abandoned the idea of carting them off to a museum.

THE TOWNSPEOPLE established a non-profit organization, raised \$220,000 from corporations and bake sales, then won grants from public and private supporters.

In 1975 they found a complete skull in a near-life position with tusks and teeth intact, as well as the remains of nine more animals. That brought in the National Geographic Society and Earthwatch (Educational Expeditions International).

Earthwatch offers serious amateurs the opportunity to participate in hard-working but adventurous expeditions worldwide, and serious paleontology students were soon digging, brushing and scraping at what came to be known as the Mammoth Graveyard.

When the new building opened last fall, Jim Jensen, a former Graveyard digger from Englewood, Colo., stood in front of a huge skull with 10-foot tusks and said: "I found that fellow in 1976 and named him Gunther. It seemed like a good name for a mammoth."

JENSEN WAS also there in 1983 when the team found a rare short-faced bear, considered one of the highlights of the dig.

These people all understand this drama, 26,000 years in the making, but a greenhorn like myself could be forgiven for asking how a nice short-haired bear like that got into a place like this, along with enough mammals to keep the scientists excited for another 50 years.

I had already seen a geology model of the Black Hills at Black Hills Petrified Forest museum, northwest in Piedmont, S.D., so I knew that the Hills were really a dome with a valley forming a complete elliptical ring around it. Folks around here call that valley ring the "race track."

IN SCENE ONE of this drama, there was a sinkhole in the race track, a deep depression formed when a cavern roof collapsed. The steep sides were covered with red Spearfish shale, which even now is as slippery as grass when wet. The assumption is that mammoths wandered into the hold to drink

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and couldn't get out. You've seen circus elephants tied by one leg, so it won't surprise you to know that a mammoth was more or less immobilized when he got one leg stuck. He was too heavy and clumsy to climb the slippery slopes, so he died trying.

Repeat the scene a few hundred times, interspersed with sandstone deposits, and you end up with a sinkhole full of mammoth bones, most of them scattered around, a few in skeleton form.

ALLOW TIME for the softer ground to wash away, leaving only a core of bone-cluttered earth, and you get a hill just outside the town of Hot Springs, S.D., sitting in the sun waiting for Phil Anderson to build a housing development.

By the way, everybody in South Dakota gives Phil Anderson credit for being more interested in preserving the site than he was in making real estate money.

A lot of other things were going on in Hot Springs while the bones were waiting to be discovered and some of them are still going on. The Indians had a good war on Battle Mountain over the sacred springs for which this place was named. A farsighted entrepreneur practically built the town himself in the late 19th century because he saw the potential for tourism when the railway came in.

HOT SPRINGS was one of the hot spots of the west for nearly half a century, promoting their spa water as a cure for the following ailments: rheumatism, kidney and urinary diseases, stomach trouble, intestinal disorders, skin diseases,

asthma, tuberculosis, paralysis, nervous prostration, liver complaint, gout, syphilis, chronic diarrhea, habitual constipation, and other disorders.

The Great Depression eventually eliminated the disposable income needed for tourism and medical science began doubting the value of hot springs water to cure every ailment known to man.

The wonderful old sandstone buildings from those early days have survived and are in use, mostly as medical facilities and retirement homes, which pay the Hot Springs taxes these days.

THE VA CENTER, a sanatorium and retirement place for veterans, has been there for a long time, on 91 acres donated by the people of Hot Springs.

The town of Hot Springs was

chosen, along with Galena, Illinois, and Madison, Indiana, as a bi-centennial pilot project called the Main Street Project.

It is still an interesting little town for tourists, who come on their way to and from Mt. Rushmore, Wind Cave National Park, Custer State Park and the nearby Angostura Recreation Area.

The National Golf Foundation chose Southern Hills Golf Course as one of the finest 36 courses in the Midwest, even though it's only nine holes.

THE MOST famous town spring was covered over and turned into a huge swimming hole in the late nineteenth century, with great twisting slides for kids of all ages.

Evans Plunge is still one of the biggest attractions in Hot Springs, a great way to wash the dust of the hills off on a hot day.

But if you are the right kind of traveler, you will find the Mammoth Site to be the most rewarding way to spend part of a summer day in the Black Hills.

For more information, contact the Mammoth Site of Hot Springs, Box 666, Hot Springs, S.D. 5774 or call South Dakota Tourism toll-free at 1-800-843-1930.



The variety of mammoth bones found in South Dakota is unprecedented.

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