



A cast of the Huntington Mammoth dominates the interior of the C.E.U. Museum in Price.

Mammoth Displays Life In Ice Age

The Huntington Mammoth at the College of Eastern Utah Prehistoric Museum is one of the most popular and dramatic displays opened in years. The huge beast lifts its huge tusks skyward almost reaching the ceiling. It isn't hard to imagine a world where mammoths, mastodons and other Ice Age mammals wandered in search of food while at the same time providing food for man.

Recent research indicates the Huntington Mammoth may have been one of the last hold-outs, an aged, feeble individual desperately seeking food outside its normal territory some 10,000 years ago.

But before we get to that chapter in our story, the circumstances surrounding the mammoth's discovery are just as exciting.

Our story opens as the operator of a huge backhoe is removing a deposit of black, slippery muck from the base of a dam in Huntington Canyon. As he moves one load of the muck he notices what appears to be the end of a huge bone. Soon the state archaeologist and state paleontologist are notified that a bone measuring four feet long and eight inches around has been torn from the ground.

During the next few days qualified professionals and a band of dedicated amateurs work feverishly to remove what turns out to be one of the most complete mammoth skeletons ever found. Over 98 percent of the huge beast's bones are eventually found. The evidence is so well

preserved even food is found in the animal's stomach cavity. One official proclaims, "It was like the animal walked into a fridge and died and someone closed the door behind it."

The hectic moments surrounding the animal's discovery and its eventual excavation produces many tumultuous moments, not the least of which is a public declaration that a "mastodon" has been discovered. State paleontologist Dave Gillette called it a mastodon because mastodons were known to inhabit forests, with records up to 10,000 feet. With this discovery situated at over 9,000 feet and a huge tusk dramatically demonstrating it was an elephant, the find was called a mastodon. Further work showed it was indeed a mammoth, and a mammoth found at a record elevation.

Quickly several unanswered questions became obvious. How did the animal die? What drew a plains animal into the alpine environment of Huntington Canyon and what killed it?

Recent research shows the muck was all that remained of an Ice Age lake created as two ancient glaciers melted. As the find was studied lying among huge dirt-moving equipment, it became obvious that if the valuable find was to be saved, officials had to work fast — very fast. The valuable bones had to be excavated and preserved while work on the dam continued.

The mammoth turned out to be a

very old individual. Almost every bone indicates severe bone disease of some sort, mainly arthritis. Three vertebrae from the lumbar region in the lower part of its back had fused. Dating techniques indicate the animal lived at the end of the Ice Age. Experts speculate the old bull may have ventured far from its normal range in search of adequate food.

Soon the story takes another turn. A night watchman poking around a pile of muck created by the backhoe finds a jawbone — the jawbone of an Ice Age short-faced bear. He also discovers a prehistoric spear point. Although found out of context, the discoveries provide evidence of an ancient life drama. Officials now believe the aging mammoth may have become stuck in the ancient muck and struggled to free himself. The struggle attracts not only the huge short-faced bear, but ancient man as well. Officials have also found what they believe may be "cut marks" on the bones of the mammoth, indicating its ultimate demise may have come from the hands of man.

Much of this ancient drama is scientific speculation — but speculation based on circumstantial evidence.

The mammoth's bones are in climate-controlled storage at the museum, but many can be viewed by the public. A replica of the beast now has a prominent place in the Hall of Man at the museum, a dramatic reminder of how perilous life was during the Ice Age.