Geology museum gets big haul from long-distance trip

BY ERIC SPROTT
THE JOURNAL

CLEMSON — As the final pallet came off the moving truck Thursday morning on the grounds of the South Carolina Botanical Garden, Adam Smith had to feel a sense of relief knowing he could rid himself of the vehicle.

After three 12-hour days of driving it from North Dakota back to Clemson, the relief had to be nice — though the haul was plenty satisfying for the curator of the Bob Campbell Geology Museum, who has a new arsenal of impressive fossils that will eventually become featured exhibits.

"It was exhausting, but it's really exciting for us to have these things," Smith said. "There's nothing else like this in the Upstate."

What Smith is referring to is the partial skeleton of a Cretaceous triceratops, Paleocene crocodile and an Oligocene turtle from North Dakota. Smith said Clemson University, and specifically the geology museum, has established a collaborative agreement with the North Dakota Geological Survey, whose senior paleontologist, Clint Boyd, was a graduate school classmate of Smith's.

"We'll be continuing fieldwork in North Dakota with Clemson students and others next summer," he said.

The crown jewel of the haul is the 68-million-year-old triceratops specimen, which arrived in three jackets made of burlap that were dried after being soaked in plaster to form a protective coating.

"This is one of those iconic dinosaurs every kid knows the name of," Smith said. "It's really exciting for children of all ages in the Upstate to be able to come here and see a real example of one of these animals instead of a picture in a book."

Geology museum employee and Clemson University student Arthur Brown, a Walhalla native, assisted Smith in North Dakota and said it was hard to describe the impact the trip had on him — including a behind-the-scenes look at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, where Smith formerly worked, on the way back to Clemson.

"It was probably one of the most defining moments in my life, and I know that sounds incredibly cliché, but it was kind of a reminder of what it is I really want to work toward and the kind of places I really want to be able to go in my life," said Brown, a 2008 Walhalla High School graduate now majoring in geology and minoring in biology. "Being able to work here and actually getting a chance to explore the National Field Museum and going out with Dr. Smith and bringing that triceratops back to Clemson cemented the idea that this is possible and someone from a small town like Walhalla can go out and do something absolutely amazing and bring it back here to share."

Prior to going to North Dakota, Smith — along with SCBG and geology museum director Patrick McMillian and his son, Nick — visited the ranch of Clemson alums Goz and Pat Segars in Roundup, Mont.

While there, they collected a number of finds that will soon be on display at the museum.

"We found some exceptionally preserved Paleocene plant fossils," he said. "Even though I'm a vertebrate paleontologist, these plant fossils are particularly interesting in that they're about 62 to 64 million yeas old, so it tells us about what sort of forests were growing right after the demise of dinosaurs, dinosaurs just like the triceratops we brought back from North Dakota."

In addition to the new upcoming displays, the geology museum is celebrating the soft opening of its latest exhibit — a fossil preparation lab visible to visitors through glass windows.

Later this summer, a grand-opening ceremony will be held, with an exclusive event for members and donors on a yet-to-be-determined Friday night, followed by a Saturday event open to the public full of dinosaur-themed activities for children.

"We want people to come out, see the new prep lab and see some of the fossils we've been preparing," Smith said. "We've been very busy making changes across all the exhibits and activities here at the museum, and that's a trend people can expect to see continued in the future."

esprott@upstatetoday.com | (864) 973-6681
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PHOTOS BY REX BROWN | THE J

Bob Campbell Geology Museum curator Adam Smith, right, and Clemson geology student Arthur Brown, a Walhalla native, secure a jacket of fossils Thursday morning prior to taking it into the museum on the grounds of the South Carolina Botanical Garden.



Adam Smith looks on as South Carolina Botanical Garden senior horticulturist John Bodiford uses a skid steer to unload a jacket of fossils Thursday morning outside the Bob Campbell Geology Museum.

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