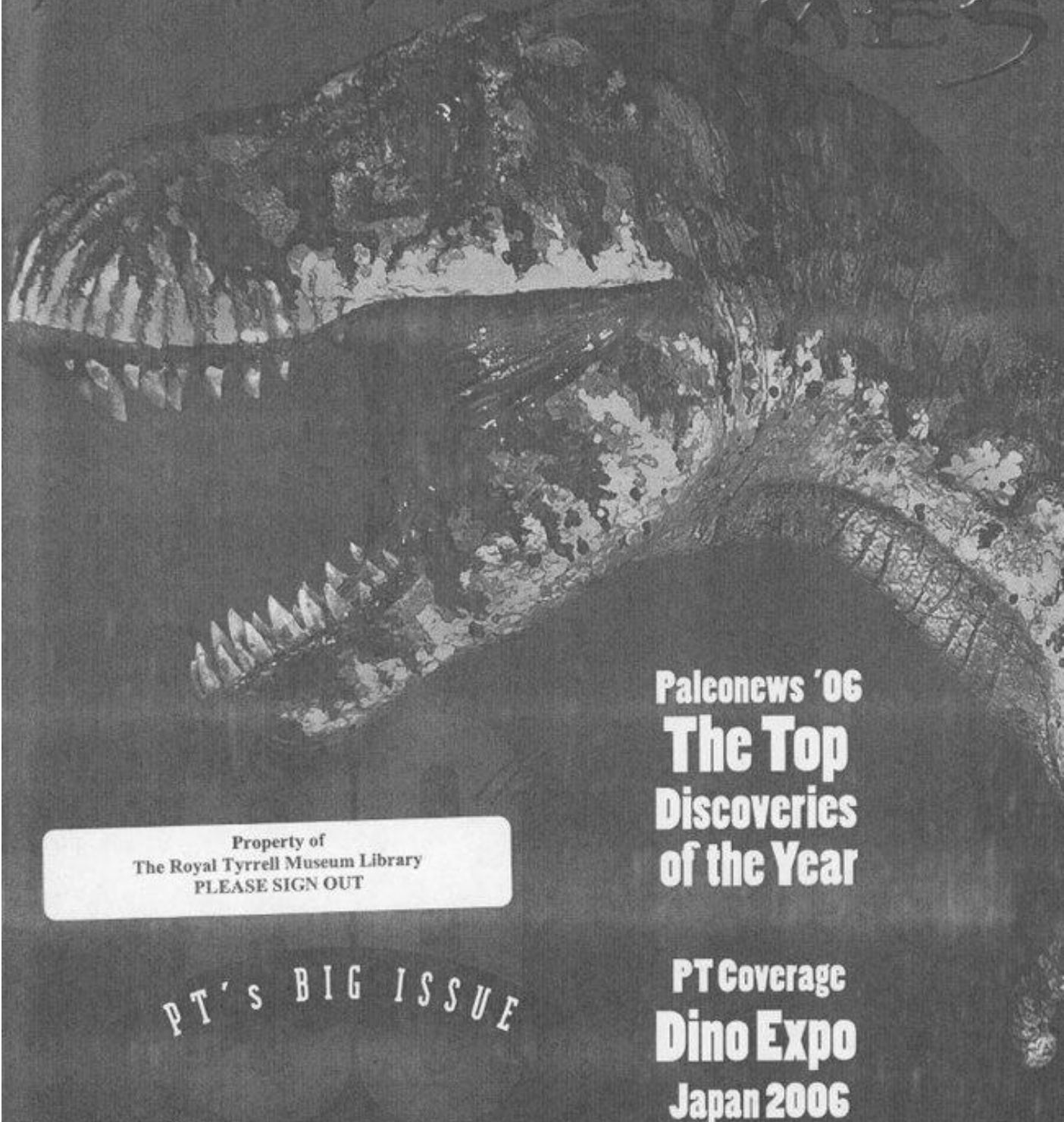


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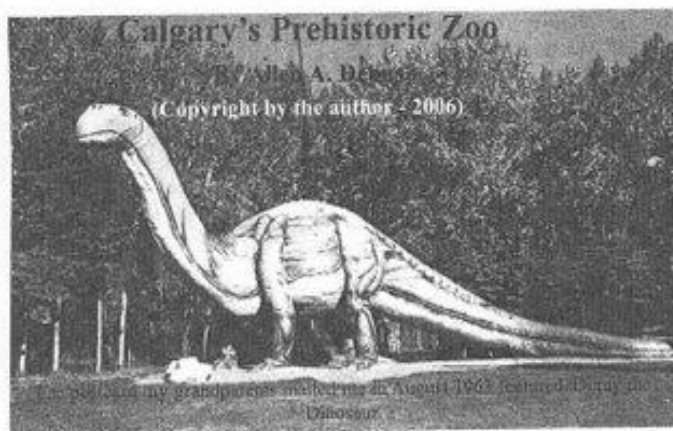
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## Calgary's Prehistoric Zoo

Allen A. Decker  
(Copyright by the author - 2006)

The sculpture my grandparents inspected in August 1963, featured Dippy the Dinosaur.

When it comes to dinosaurs, western Canada is a chief point of interest. Not only were their fossilized remains found there in spades during the early 'pioneering' years of dinosaur collecting by stalwarts such as Charles H. Sternberg and Barnum Brown (who both wrote popular accounts about their Canadian dinosaur discoveries), but also in more recent years by paleontologists such as Phil Currie. One of western Canada's most popular paleontological displays has for many years been Calgary Zoo's "Prehistoric Park." Surprisingly very little has been written about this popular park in the many dinosaur fan-zines and publications first emerging during the 1980s era of dino-love. And so for its history one would turn to the writings of Donald F. Glut, who enlightened us in his *Carbon Dates* (1999), *Dinosaurs: The Encyclopedia (Supplement 2)* (2002), and *The Dinosaur Scrapbook* (1980). Another book, David Spalding's *Into the Dinosaurs' Graveyard: Canadian Digs and Discoveries* (1999), offers a bit more on the Park's early displays as well as further details on the history of the Calgary Museum which featured fossil bones as far back as 1911.



'Dippy the Dinosaur,' which I still have. They wrote, "Dear Allen: We saw this monster this afternoon. He was over two times as high as your house..." By 1963 I had transformed into a major 9-year old 'dino-ophile.' But who wouldn't, knowing there were dinosaurs twice as high as my house roaming around out there in the northwest! Recently, I located my grandparents' old photographs and projector slides, stored in the basement. I'd never seen these images previously, showing Calgary's dinosaur sculptures including the *Stegosaurus* and a few others (shown here). More on those shortly.

Here, I plan to (cautiously) outline a history of the Park, admittedly & apologetically conducted at 'long-range.' But I'll also foreshadow an interesting development concerning the Park's primeval inhabitants. Lacking the Park's complete story and realizing that others were then possibly research-

No, I've never visited the Park, so I'm not an expert. But relatives have, and through their travels, marvelous postcards and photographs arrived from afar. My grandparents' Prehistoric Park visit of 1963 aroused early interests after I received their postcard showing

ing who might do the job more competently, I avoided the temptation of writing about Prehistoric Park in chapter 31 of my *Paleoimagery* volume. Now, at this belated juncture, I can fare at least reasonably in this digression - so here goes.

While the practice of completing life-sized dinosaur restorations for public display would appear to be a British-European tradition - (considering Benjamin Waterhouse Hawkins' 'Crystal Palace' dinosaurs & other exhibited Victorian antediluvians, and Joseph Pallenberg's century-old dino-sculptures for Hagenbeck's Hamburg Zoo, for example) - many of you wouldn't have known that the oldest dinosaur park of sculpted prehistoric animal restorations placed on permanent display in North America was Calgary's "Prehistoric Park," which even slightly antedates Rapid City's "Dinosaur Park" - the oldest such park built in the United States. However, there were other American challengers to the throne such as the life-sized, mechanized dinosaurs from the 1933/34 Chicago World's Fair, and Hawkins' never completed "Palaeozoic Museum," circa 1868 -1870. You can read about these wonders in my *Paleoimagery* (2002) or in Don's *Dinosaur Scrapbook*. Today there are many such parks scattered around the world, many of which I've had the good fortune to see; an amply illustrated book really should be written about them all someday.

Collectively from Glut and Spalding, we learn that Prehistoric Park was inspired by Pallenberg's Hamburg dinosaur models, as, in 1932, Lars Willumsen, the Calgary Zoological Society's newly appointed director, convinced Society president Dr. O. H. Patrick that a similar park should be constructed in Calgary to memorialize Canada's rich fossil reserves. Then, sculptors and engineers were invited to work on the ambitious & to say the least 'mammoth' undertaking. Glut mentions sculptor Charlie Beil (1894-1976), engineer Arne Koskeleinen, and Finnish artist John Kanerva (b. 1883). Beil is most renowned for his

skilled bronzes of western scenes, sculptures of cowboys and plains indians. In 1973, Beil was honored with the highest medal which can be bestowed upon a civilian - "Member of Order of Canada" for his artistry. And in 1968, he received a Doctor of Laws from the University of Calgary. Of Koskeleinen who scaled-up Beil's miniature models to full-size, there is less readily available information; further information concerning Kanerva's contributions is coming to light. Paleontologists such as Charles M. Sternberg, Barnum Brown, Loris S. Russell, Charles Gilmore and W. E. Swinton offered technical expertise as to the dinosaur designs; in 1957 Swinton even proclaimed that Prehistoric Park's models were the most accurate figures of prehistoria yet sculpted.

Most likely owing to its gargantuan size, the final dinosaur statue of the original grouping was 'Dippy,' completed in 1935. Situated on St. George's Island, Dippy was fashioned as a super-sized, 107-foot long and 35 foot tall concrete *Apatosaurus*. It weighs a remarkable 120 tons! According to Glut, Dippy was 'unveiled' to the public on August 9, 1935. Fifty-two years later, Dippy the Dinosaur would be officially designated as an "Alberta Historical Site." Spalding differs, however, claiming that Dippy - declared to be the Park's 'official mascot' in 1959 - was instead introduced to the public in 1938. The first dinosaur statue to actually be constructed was a scaled-up *Chasmosaurus* with many to follow over the next two years. The prehistoric menagerie lineup would steadily increase over two decades, until circa 1957 - (stated by Glut to be the approximate date of the Park's last 'original' addition) - when the first dinosaurian wave then boasted a total of 50 statues.

An interesting short DVD made in 1958 is available from the National Film Board of Canada titled "Craftsmen Young and Old," (for \$20.00) of which less than 4 minutes is devoted to Mr. Kanerva, "The Man Who Made Monsters." The black and white film shows grade school children touring

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Old Calgary Zoo Stegosaurus, photo by George Debus, 1963

the Park, while the aged-looking, cigar-smoking, short & pot-bellied Kanerva demonstrates how concrete is applied over wire mesh to flesh out dinosaur bodies, and then subsequently plaster as 'skin' texture is slathered over the concrete. The film was most likely made during the late 1950s, as the narrator states that "upwards of 30" life-sized statues had been completed, "after a quarter century." We also learn that Kanerva was inspired to build prehistoria during the 1920s after his interest and curiosity had been aroused from a 'silent movie' involving prehistoric life. Before proposing to



At left - Jonas-style T. rex currently on display at Prehistoric Park. At right - formerly exhibited T. rex. Photos by (l-r), Rick Debus - 1992; George Debus - 1963

build the statues he researched by reading every book he could find on paleontology. Interestingly, the film shows one statue that was at an 'in-progress' stage; Kanerva lifts one happy child aboard an impressive *Uintatherium* model.

Besides glorious 'Dinny,' Glut also published photographs of the original *Plateosaurus*, *Allosaurus* and *Styracosaurus*. To me, some of the 'lesser' sculptures generally seem similar in quality to those of Wisconsin Dells' now defunct 'Enchanted Forest,' (which you may read about in chapter 26 of my *Paleoimagery*. But Dinny is spectacular, worthy of commemoration!

Calgary Zoo's Prehistoric Park opened to the public on August 25, 1937. Glut provides a listing of 'prehistoria' originally placed on display in his *Dinosaur Scrapbook*, which I won't repeat here for sake of brevity. Originally, the display was not arranged in an obvious chronological sequence. But that matter was remedied in 1956 when, facilitated by the Alberta Society of Petroleum Geologists, edifying alterations were made, "...so that the visitors could trek through time. Forklifts and a Royal Canadian Air Force crane rearranged the models, and they were repaired and repainted." (Quote from Spalding, p.106) Quite an undertaking; several must have cracked or fractured during movement. The ever-popular life-through-time portrayal now began in the Pennsylvanian coal age, extending



Top - Jonas Studio's Corythosaurus. Bottom - Centrosaurus, modified at left. Both photos by Rick Debus, 1992.



through the Mesozoic and into the Pleistocene.

An old, undated card shows what sort of mischief younger zoo patrol would have gotten themselves into at Prehistoric Park. The card is actually a postcard-sized 'Hunting License,' authorized by the Ancient Order of the Most Grand and Phoney League of Dinosaur Hunters for 25 cents. A list entry was added to identify 'Next of kin,' in case 'Dinosaur catches you'. On the front side three of the models are visible, including the aforementioned *Corythosaurus*.

A 1992 visit to Calgary by my geologist brother and his family pique my curiosity concerning the park's history. This is because photos my brother took there didn't seem consistent with those I was more familiar with appearing in Glut's *Dinosaur Scrapbook*. Instead of the odd assortment (often quaint-looking, mid-20th century stylistic statues, I spied what appeared to be a number of Paul Jonas sculptures from the 1964/65 New York World's Fair. Glut certainly never mentioned these. What had happened? So I wrote the Calgary Zoological Society, inquiring about Prehistoric Park's history and famous primeval denizens. Kevin Strang, Education Program Coordinator, kindly replied. He stated on 11/19/92:

"Of the models constructed between 1935 and 1960 (author's note, i.e. when, according to Glut (1980), John Kanerva retired), only Dinny the Brontosaurus is still in existence. Currently, we have the following models on display.

From Paul Jonas Studio, Hudson, NY - 5 models acquired in 1980  
Originally from England. Purchased in bankruptcy sale & renovated by PML Exhibit Services of Calgary - 20 models acquired in 1984; Purchase from Topographics Ltd., Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada  
Centrosaurus, acquired in 1983; Fabricated by in-house forces - Pteranodon 1983; By PML Exhibit Services Ltd., Calgary - Apatosaurus, acquired in 1988.

Note - PML has gone to strictly design and the fabrication division

Concludes on Page 56



now Matrix Ltd., in Salmon Arm, British Columbia. I hope this information is of use to you."

Now I understood. Following repainting & rearrangement of the Park models into their ordered life-through-time sequence in 1956, ground was later broken in 1978 for a 'new Prehistoric Park project.' Then, evidently, a 'mass extinction' of the Beil/Kanerva/Koskeleinen 'fauna' happened. Despite Dr. Swinton's expert testimony as to the quality of the originals, by 1978 efforts were underway to upgrade the display, although this time with fiberglass models judged as more accurate; hence the succession of purchases as stated in Mr. Strange's letter. Two sections, east & west, were opened, respectively in 1983 and 1984.

It's a fair guess - yet lacking definitive information, only a guess - that the originals (through 1957), except for Dinny of course, may have been destroyed via sledgehammer to make way for the new ones. So, there's no clear record as to the disposition of the first generation models, all of which were formed in cement and reinforcing iron. Hopefully several of the models - perhaps most likely the smaller prehistoria - were spared following their decommissioning. But if so, where could they be?

Which leads us to the most recent development. Evidently as of March 2006, a new documentary educational film was being prepared about John Kanerva's involvement in the creation of the original cast of Park prehistoria. I found out about this through an internet search, in which a rather heated 'palaeo-blog' exchange unfolded between an artist who considerably sought to commemorate John Kanerva's involvement with Prehistoric Park, and his unrelenting grandson, W. Kanerva. While sparing you all the details (& I'll allow you to search on your own for this blog), it does seem as if the original concrete models were destroyed in 1983 and that one, Cal Abrahamson, "spared Dinny from the wrecking ball." Furthermore, John Kanerva's original miniature sketches, "scale-models made from plaster... and hand carved scale-models from a block of wood that he used to make his monsters," are still intact and will be featured in this new documentary by an unnamed producer. So, indeed, we look forward to this interesting production.

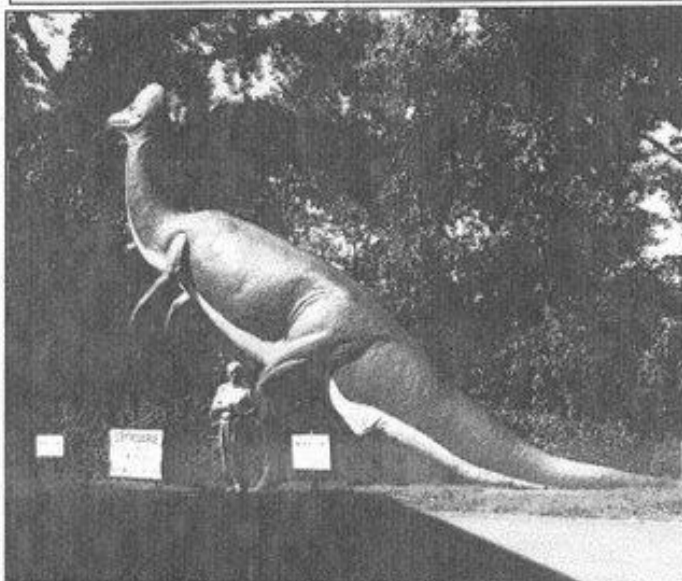
As mentioned previously, while researching for this article I decided to use the stamp postmark date of my 'Dinny the Dinosaur' postcard as a guide. Then I plunged into my grandparents' projector slide collection, and discovered seven photos they had taken at Prehistoric Park on that sunny August day so long ago. I can't reproduce all their photos here, but visible

to me & for the first time, were 'new' shots of (1.) 'Dinny' with children scrambling up the end of his very long, thick tail, (2.) a toothy **Tyrannosaurus** held within the confines of a chain-link fence, (3.) two **Dimetrodons** and an **Edaphosaurus**, (4.) a **Styracosaurus** with **Pachyrhinosaurus** standing behind, (5.) **Chasmosaurus** with sprawling front limbs and armored **Paleoscincus** in foreground with **Thescelosaurus** further down the pathway and the large concrete 'body' of another non-descript dinosaur further along the path, (6.) **Plateosaurus** (with no signage visible), and (7.) a photo of my grandfather - smiling through all the years as if he just knew someday I'd find these pictures - standing next to **Corythosaurus**. Also, in a 1963 photo album, I found my grandfather's photograph of Prehistoric Park's **Stegosaurus**.

As far as visiting the Park today, well, I've seen those great Jonas statues in several locations around the country. *G-Fan* editor John D. Lees, who recently revisited Prehistoric Park, fondly remembers the old statues. "I was first at the zoo in about 1965... so I saw all the original concrete dinos... I was kind of disappointed to find them all gone this year... I was quite attached to those old fashioned guys and wanted my kids to see them. Dinny is the only one left... but he's off in a corner and hidden away..."

There's always a lead time for PT articles, so, it's possible that by the time you read this you may have already seen the projected Kanerva documentary. Alternatively, in case you haven't, maybe now you'll be inspired to learn more. It's quite a distance from Hanover Park, IL to Calgary, but if all the original Beil/Kanerva statues were still there I'd undoubtedly go.

Top - George Debus, my grandfather standing beside old Corythosaurus statue - photo by Edna Debus. Bottom - Plateosaurus, photo - George Debus, 1963.



(Note: In the 'palaeo-blog' exchange, W. Kanerva also criticized the Sinclair Refining Company, implying they had swiped Dinny the Dinosaur's symbol to use as their company 'mascot' to sell gasoline. However, just a quick checking of my memorabilia files led me to the original Sinclair Dinosaur Stamp Album, copyright 1935. On the 3rd page one can see a picture of Sinclair Opaline and Pennsylvania Motor Oil cans, both of which feature a sauropod on the label. My guess is that further checking would indicate that the Sinclair brontosaurus logo would extend the usage of this symbol even further back. Furthermore - Sinclair had their own mechanized 'Brontosaurus' life-sized dinosaur on display at their Sinclair Dinosaur Exhibit at the Chicago 1933/34 World's Fair, predating Calgary's Dinny the Dinosaur by at least a couple of years. I also own three of Sinclair's souvenir newspapers available at the Fair, interestingly none of which clearly shows any product or advertising bearing their famous 'Brontosaurus' logo. So when exactly was the Sinclair dinosaur symbol trademarked? According to Ghut (1999, p.18), Messmore & Damon Inc.'s mechanized **Apatosaurus**, created in 1925 & also appearing at the 1933/34 Fair in The World A Million Years Ago exhibit, was nicknamed 'Dinny.' You can read more about Messmore & Damon's sauropod model in chapter 29 of my *Paleoimagery*; Allen A. Debus is also the author of *Dinosaurs In Fantastic Fiction: A Thematic Survey* (2006), a new McFarland book - ISBN - 0-7864-2672-1 )