

Sternberg Museum  
of Natural History

# Media Guide



FORT HAYS STATE  
UNIVERSITY



# Introduction

The average visitor to western Kansas is surprised to learn that a relatively modest university located in a rural community has an attraction as significant as the Sternberg Museum of Natural History.

The museum, located along Interstate 70 in Hays, Kansas, is a department of Fort Hays State University. The museum has been a part of the Hays community since 1914, when the first curator was appointed. In recent years about 100,000 visitors annually have enjoyed exhibits that highlight the fossils and natural world of the Great Plains.

The museum maintains an active program of changing exhibitions, bringing to the region significant shows that usually are only seen in much larger metropolitan areas.

Recent shows have included “*A T. rex* named Sue” and “Dinosaurs of Jurassic Park: Life and Death of Dinosaurs.” In addition to these big-name shows, numerous other high quality shows

have been hosted, enriching the lives of Kansas residents and tourists. In addition to the exhibitions, the museum houses significant scientific research collections of natural history specimens from across the Great Plains.

The museum has easy access from the Interstate and plenty of free parking. Groups are welcome and guided tours can be arranged.

The museum was named in honor of the Sternberg family. Two generations of Sternbergs collected some of the most spectacular fossils in the world. Their finds are in almost every major museum and have played a dominant role in initiating the study of North American fossils.

George F. Sternberg joined the Kansas State Teachers College at Hays in 1927 and established the fossil collection. After George’s death in 1969, the museum was named to honor this family that gave so much to the science of paleontology.

Come and explore the museum’s exhibitions and history, as there are many stories here to tell.



Museum visitors crowd around the recreation of George F. Sternberg excavating the famous Fish-Within-A-Fish fossil.

# Highlights

## Permanent Exhibits

One of the most important things about the museum's exhibitions and collections is that they focus on Kansas and the Great Plains. Visitors see things that were collected locally, that you could go out and find for yourself, right in the region. There is enough "exotic" nature right in our back yards, one does not need to travel to distant lands.

The permanent fossil exhibitions of the museum focus on the Late Cretaceous, the end of the Age of Dinosaurs. During that time, Kansas was covered by a shallow sea, and marine animals

Fossils on display in the Cretaceous gallery include the famous "Fish-Within-A-Fish," sharks, plesiosaurs, mosasaurs, flying reptiles, and more. The museum has also opened an additional geology gallery displaying fossils from all the geologic time periods, focusing on the specimens from Kansas and the Great Plains.

In addition to the sea creatures, Kansas was home to rhinoceros, camel, horse, bone-crushing dog, and lion, not things one thinks of when thinking of the Great Plains and Kansas today. Several scientifically significant sites across the plains record these animals from about 5-12



Sternberg museum proudly displays the world-famous Fish-Within-A-Fish fossil collected by George F. Sternberg in 1952 from western Kansas.

lived in what is now America's heartland. The muds of the sea preserved many fantastic fossils, and western Kansas is world famous for its rich resource. At the same time, on the margins of the sea, lived the last of the dinosaurs, including the mighty *Tyrannosaurus rex*, the king of dinosaurs.

Within a unique four-story dome, museum personnel have recreated a day from this long-ago time. Adventurous visitors walk among animated, life-sized dinosaurs in a fully restored land environment and experience the life of some of the most spectacular creatures that have ever lived.

Under the Kansas seaway, visitors come face-to-face with giant sea lizards and fishes that lived and died in Kansas and became fossilized.

million years ago.

More recently, Kansas was home to beasts of the Ice Age, lasting from about 2 million to 10,000 years ago. Animals such as mammoth, mastodon, and saber-toothed cats called Kansas home, and their fossils are also on display.

Rocks and minerals are also popular display items. One section of the geology gallery focuses on them, and a new florescent minerals exhibit will open soon. Here, minerals are subjected to ultraviolet light causing them to glow in spectacular colors.

New things get added all the time to the permanent exhibitions, and plans are on-going for future exhibitions.

## Changing Exhibits

One of the main goals of the museum has been to provide a venue for exciting and dynamic exhibitions on natural history and related topics. We strive to provide the people of Kansas with exhibitions that they could not otherwise see. For example, shows like “*A T. rex* named Sue” and “Jurassic Park: Life and Death of Dinosaurs” were smashing public successes. “Sue” attracted 106,000 visitors and “Jurassic Park” brought close to 50,000 visitors, many times more people than reside in the county!

We also look for exhibits that connect topics of natural science with other disciplines. For example, in conjunction with “In the Dark,” a show about organisms that live in environments without light, we are featuring “Blind Ambition,” a show highlighting the artwork of a blind woman, Lisa Fittipaldi, who lives her life in the dark, but has risen above her challenges to become a popular painter.

Below is a list of current and upcoming shows at the museum:

- **“In the Dark: Worlds Without Light,”** showing until September 8<sup>th</sup>, 2002. Highlights animals that live in dark environments, including caves, soils, deep sea, or at night. Also touches on human adaptations to darkness and blindness

- **“Blind Ambition,”** paintings by Lisa Fittipaldi. Fittipaldi lost her sight to a rare disease, but took up painting in defiance. Using her other senses, she creates images of incredible beauty. She has been featured on national television, and her work is on display at the Sternberg through December 31, 2002

- **“Endangered Treasure: Our Alaska National Wildlife Refuge.”** This exhibition was developed in response to the hotly debated issue that pits industrialization against wilderness preservation. The exhibition, organized by a group of concerned citizens, features 50 large format photographs by seven nationally and internationally recognized wildlife photographers. The



The museum hosted 106,000 visitors during the showing of *A T. rex* named Sue.

photographs depict landscapes, mammals, and birds and show the biological diversity and intrinsic beauty of the Refuge. On display 6 September – 30 November, 2002.

- **“Museum Memories: A Centennial Exhibition.”** Runs from 11 October 2002 through 5 October 2003. Produced by the Sternberg Museum of Natural History in conjunction with the centennial celebration of Fort Hays State University, this exhibition features many of the materials that we had on exhibit in the old Sternberg but that have been in storage since the museum moved to its new facility. This exhibition helps to illustrate the history and development of the museum, the university, and the region as a whole. The exhibition will also help to explain to the public why historical items are not normally displayed in a natural history museum and how the Sternberg Museum complements the various museums in the region.

- **“Masters of the Night: The True Story of Bats,”** runs from mid January 2003 through 7 September, 2003. This show will be up for the 2003 spring school tour season. It focuses on one of nature's most enigmatic group of animals, the bats.

## Education and the Discovery Room

Education is central to the mission of the Sternberg Museum, and the museum has an active education division providing public lectures, children's summer classes, teacher in-service programs, teacher support, and education material check out, as well as the Discovery Room open to the public.

The on-going lecture series entitled "Discover Kansas" features speakers from the museum and around the state speaking on a wide variety of natural history subjects. The lectures are held about once a month and are usually held in the museum classrooms. Topics from venomous snakes, birds of prey, water quality, and fossils are just a few of the subjects that have been presented in the past.

The museum partners with other community groups like the Hays Arts Council to offer summer classes for children. Usually, these programs involve an art or craft as well as learning about the natural world, all while having a great time.

During the school year, the museum education division offers "Story Hour," a free after school



Visitors enjoy the many animal furs available to touch and guess which animal they belong to.



Museum Educator, Cameron Liggett, shows off some of the many items from the museum's education collection.

program targeted at young children. A story book is read to the group and hands-on materials are provided by the museum to reinforce the message of the book. For example, if the story is about snakes, live snakes from the Discovery Room are shown to the children. This program is a good example of the basic approach to education undertaken by the museum, that learning by exploration of natural objects is the natural process that children undertake in their daily lives, and this learning style can be taken advantage of for lifelong learning.

The museum has offered a wide range of teacher programs. During large special exhibitions, special programs were designed to provide teachers with advanced knowledge and background so that they were better prepared to bring their classes and incorporate the museum's exhibition into their teaching curriculum.



Students in a class group hold one of the live animals from the Discovery Room, a giant millepede.

Other specialized in-services are offered, like the Dinosaur Dig. The museum received funds from the Forest Service to excavate some dinosaur bones found on their land. Seeing potential for a win-win situation, the museum opened the dig up to teachers from across the state, selecting them in a competitive process. The most important criterion for selection was the teacher's commitment to using their experience on the dig in their classrooms with their students. By providing teachers a real-life adventure, with all its hardships as well as romance, they are better prepared to communicate that to their students, and by teaching a handful of teachers, we can reach many times that number of Kansas children.

Other in-service programs have been offered in cooperation with the

university's College of Education. Two programs were recently grant funded with the goals of bringing in classes of teachers, providing them basic science content in certain areas, providing them with ideas for offering practical hands-on teaching methods for them to utilize, and providing them with material goods to take back to their schools.

All of these teacher programs also help to promote another important concept of the museum's education division; the museum is a resource for material and information support in a wide range of classes and across the curriculum. The museum has a "Teacher Room," a space set aside for education staff to meet with any teacher, to provide them with raw materials and information on any subject in the natural world. Often, teachers come and are amazed at the amount of material available to them.

Education does have formal kits available for check out by teachers, but often their needs cannot be filled by a ready-made kit, and one of the important services provided is to work with teachers face to face, to provide what they need for their circumstance.

A highlight of the museum is the Discovery Room, a "please touch" room where visitors can



Girl scouts have a sleep-over at the museum, and some sleep right under the famous Fish-Within-A-Fish fossil.



Museum and Forest Service personnel lead a dinosaur excavation in southeastern Colorado. Teachers were invited to join if they could show how they would use their experience to benefit youth.

handle and examine specimens, and learn at their own pace. You could say that our motto here is “Answers are good, but *Questions* are better.”

In the Discovery Room, specimens are made available to visitors and visitors are encouraged to follow the course that interests them. In this way science becomes inviting and fun, and this helps set the stage for a lifetime of continued learning.

A giant spider, computer workstations, and other activities engage visitors on a self-directed course of learning.

Live animals are also featured in the room. These animals change, but they highlight creatures from the Great Plains like fishes, reptiles, small mammals, spiders, and insects.

In the Discovery Room visitors can follow their own interests as far as they wish to take them. Want to find out more about this spider? Look up information in the books or computers provided. Happy enough to just touch a real fox skin and move on? Great! Providing a learning-by-doing environment with real objects is the special role that museums can fill in our educational system.

## Research

Basic research is the foundation of the Sternberg Museum. A museum is like an iceberg in that the part the public sees is only a small part of what is there. In this regard, many museum visitors have no concept of the sequence of events that occur before specimens appear on exhibit.

It can be said that museums have four primary functions: collect, preserve, study, and educate. Collection involves obtaining specimens that are of value to science, and the specimens and their data are preserved for future research. Scientists at the museum and visiting scholars and students use the specimens in their research, generating new knowledge and understanding about the natural world. Only then can the museum take that knowledge and disseminate it to the public in the form of exhibitions, tours, educational programming, books, videos, and the like. Without research, the last step could not take place.

The Sternberg originated as a collection of taxidermy mounts around 1902. C.W. Miller was

named as the first curator in 1914. Miller mounted bird specimens, and he and others began collecting various natural and historical items for display.

In 1926, College President William A. Lewis contacted George F. Sternberg, a fossil collector of renown, and invited him to come to the museum. Sternberg stayed for the remainder of his long career and built up the display collections, especially amassing a spectacular assemblage of fossils from western Kansas and elsewhere on the Great Plains.

Simultaneously, faculty members in the Department of Biological Sciences at the university were developing research and teaching

collections of modern biological specimens. These specimens were the foundation for what became scientifically important collections of plants, insects, fishes, amphibians and reptiles, birds, and

mammals. All of the research collections of the university were combined as one major museum, the Sternberg Museum of Natural History, in 1994.

The paleontology collection is widely known for housing some of the finest Cretaceous fossils ever found, including the third best collection of flying reptiles in the world, and some of the most complete mosasaurs, plesiosaurs, and fishes in any museum. In addition, the museum houses significant collections of more recent fossils from the Plains.

The fossil plant collection houses the remains of plants from the region plus the world's largest collection of fossilized seeds, many of them

representing new species to science.

The collection of modern plants consists of 15,000 labeled packets of fungi plus approximately 100,000 preserved plant specimens. The collection of insects likewise contains more than 100,000 specimens and emphasizes moths and butterflies of Kansas.

The collection of fishes is an important research collection that documents the fish fauna of watersheds throughout Kansas and adjacent states. Most specimens in the fish collection were obtained under contract with various State and Federal agencies as part of a project funded by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to

monitor stream quality and environments nationwide. The size of the collection of fishes is approximately 250,000 specimens. The collections of amphibians and reptiles and birds are small by comparison (fewer than 10,000 specimens), but it consists primarily of



Museum Collection Manager, Mark Eberle, works with students at a tide pool along the Oregon coast.

scientifically important voucher specimens from research projects.

The collection of mammals consists of about 35,000 specimens and is one of the top 10 mammal collections in the nation in quality and scope. Professional scientists have praised the collection for how well it is maintained.

The part of the iceberg that the public seldom sees, the research collections of the Sternberg Museum, thus are a tremendous scientific resource, used for hundreds of scholarly scientific publications. Those publications, whether authored by resident scholars or scientists from other institutions, help form the tapestry that is scientific knowledge.

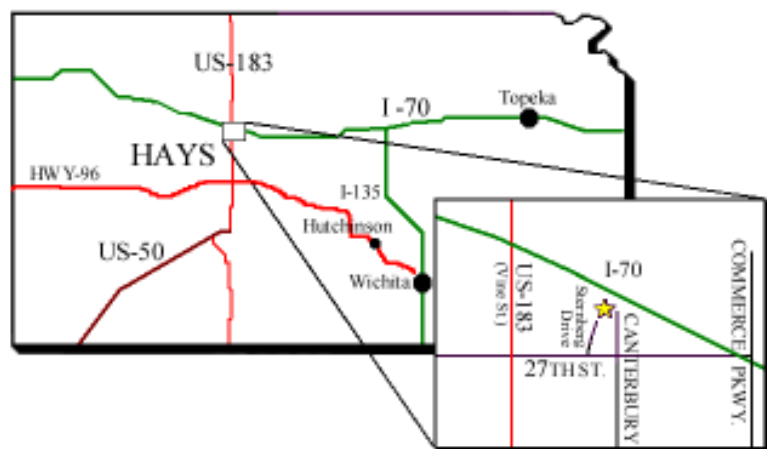


A teacher participating in the Pratt Mammoth dig during the summer of 2000 works on uncovering bones. The Pratt specimen is the most complete mammoth ever collected from the state, and research on the specimen is on-going.

## Hays Information

Hays, Kansas is located half way between Denver and Kansas City along Interstate 70 and is home to Fort Hays State University, Historic Fort Hays, and Hays Medical Center serving all of northwest Kansas.

More information about Hays can be gotten by contacting:



Hays Convention and Visitor's Bureau:  
800-569-4505, fax 785-628-1471 or  
[www.haysusa.net](http://www.haysusa.net)

## Museum Contact Information

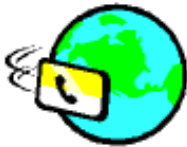
For more information on the museum, its programs or research, to get promotional photographs, or to be put on the media contact list, contact:



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Email: [gliggett@fhsu.edu](mailto:gliggett@fhsu.edu)  
Museum Web Page: [www.fhsu.edu/sternberg](http://www.fhsu.edu/sternberg)

Museum Hours: Tuesday–Saturday 9 AM to 7 PM, Sunday 1 PM to 7 PM, Closed Monday

Admission Price: \$6 for adult, \$4 for youth/seniors



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STERNBERG MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY  
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