

Allosaurus:

The true story of one of the most significant fossil finds in creationist history

by

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One of the greatest finds in the history of creationist paleontology was made in the “backyard” of a Christian family living in a remote area of Colorado a few years ago. An Allosaurus skeleton, including one of the largest and most complete skulls ever found, was excavated from the jutting hills and up-tilted layers of prehistoric muds, clays and sandstones of the Jurassic Morrison Formation bordering Skull Creek Basin near the tiny and appropriately named town of Dinosaur. Beginning with what appeared as a series of “divine appointments” and a historic show of unity, members of many different creationist groups were involved in the discovery and removal of these bones. Sadly, that togetherness soon deteriorated into partisan wrangling and selfish positioning for profit and control.

Word of the Allosaurus find first came to the attention of workers in creationist paleontology as a member of Dr. Carl Baugh’s dig team, by chance, attended a church service in the town of Dinosaur, Colorado one Sunday morning in May of 2001. Dave Babbitt, a retired surveyor, had been volunteering his skills to grid Baugh’s fossil location in northwestern Colorado for years. This site, much like the wall of bones at the Dinosaur National Monument’s Visitor Center, while not yet producing any complete skeletons, is a massive jumble of Jurassic dinosaur bones, likely including those of Diplodocus, Camarasaurus, Allosaurus, Ankylosaurus, Stegosaurus and assorted crocodylians and fish. Babbitt left his Michigan home on Wednesday, May 16th pulling his fifth wheel trailer and hoping to reach the dig site by Monday. He made such good time, however, that he was able to make it all the way to a trailer park in Massadona, CO, a speck in the road just a few miles away, by Saturday the 19th. Having a day to spare, Babbitt decided to attend Sunday morning services at a small church in Dinosaur he’d visited in the past.

“Coincidentally,” a local Christian layman named Dana Forbes was filling the pulpit for the regular pastor that particular Sunday. In the course of his message, Forbes mentioned having found dinosaur bones on his property the year before, which his family hoped to find a way to use for God’s glory. Babbitt spoke with them after the service, told them why he was there and asked if he could visit their land later that day. Returning to Massadona following the service, he was surprised to find the Forbes family having lunch at the restaurant there. In what was *not* a pre-arranged meeting, Babbitt ended up joining the Forbes at their table—when in walked Dr. Baugh, who had also arrived earlier than expected for his dig. The introductions were made and following lunch they all headed to the Forbes’ home to see the bones. In seeming answer to the Forbes’ prayers, a vital connection had been made.

Being one of the few men in the creationist world with experience in dinosaur excavations, Baugh, of Paluxy River “human” footprints fame (or infamy, depending on your point-of-view), had by then been running his digs in northwest Colorado for six years. During that time, in addition to Babbitt, he had assembled a team of diggers, including top equipment-and-logistics man Don Yaeger, expert fossil excavator/preparator Joe Taylor and photographer Burton Stokes. Taylor had invited me to participate in these digs the previous year, and I was back again that May eager to work and to see what new bones we’d find.

By the time I arrived the following Saturday, most of the others had already been there for almost a week, including a new group of folks from Florida, the DeRosa family, who’d also been

invited by Taylor. Interestingly, from the time I got there, instead of Baugh's dig the "buzz" around camp was all about a new find on the "Forbes Ranch," featuring phrases like "more dinosaur bones," "large Sauropod" and "Allosaurus." Though I didn't have the opportunity to visit this new find at the time, it was clear that another Christian family in the area had discovered a cache of dino bones on their land—most intriguingly, with the possibility of an allosaur. The chatter continued all week, but that's as far as things went.

As I learned from friend Don Ensign, then employed by Taylor at his Mt. Blanco Fossil Museum, shortly after they arrived at Baugh's spring dig Dana Forbes visited the site, where Baugh introduced him to Taylor. Subsequently, Baugh, Taylor, Ensign, Stokes and Pete DeRosa—at Taylor's invitation—visited the Forbes', where Dana and his wife, Brenda, reiterated their desire to use the fossils on their property to benefit the cause of creationism, while displaying samples of what they'd found. Initially most appeared to be merely pieces of large Sauropod bones. Fairly common—many had already been found at Baugh's site—they didn't generate much excitement. However, the interest level suddenly soared as Dana brought out more samples at Ensign's urging, which Taylor quickly identified as *Allosaurus vertebrae*. Soon thereafter, Forbes, Taylor and DeRosa, who was acting as an agent of Creation Studies Institute at the time, began initial discussions about forming a partnership to excavate the allosaur, with Taylor serving as chief excavator and DeRosa arranging funding. (By this time, Baugh had turned over all further dealings with the Forbes to Taylor.) Needless to say, when the spring dig was over we all drove home with visions of allosaurs dancing in our heads, wondering what it would all mean to the creationist world and anxious to return in the fall.

Along with Taylor, Ensign, Yaeger, Babbitt and a few other diggers, I returned to Baugh's dig site in September of 2001 to finish excavating the bones we'd worked on in the spring. We pulled out some large "jackets," one easily weighing 500 lbs, but much of our talk that week centered on the other bone site a few miles down the road with its mystical promise of an *Allosaurus*. Pete DeRosa, who worked for CSI and ran their public "fossil floats," looking for Ice Age bones on the Peace River in Florida, also joined us with his family, caravanning out with Taylor. To my knowledge, the DeRosas, particularly father, Pete, and sons, Peter and Mark, had never worked a dinosaur dig prior to that spring, where Taylor had coached them in the difficult art of excavating fossils from rock-hard Morrison sediments. Formerly, the DeRosas' fossil excavation expertise consisted of picking up Pleistocene bones of creatures like mammoths found in soft river sands and dirt. In spite of this, though it seemed odd to me, they preceded us to the allosaur site, where we would be joining them when our work was done.

After a few days, we arrived at the Forbes' with great anticipation. Dana and Brenda, welcomed us warmly to their property, and Don Ensign and I set up our tent as fast as we could and quickly headed up to the bone site, which lay atop a rather steep, gray hill. When we arrived most of the others were already there, and Taylor was examining the tail vertebrae of the "Forbes *Allosaurus*" that had been partially excavated by the DeRosas. As I approached, it was clear that, while pleased to see the articulated bones, Taylor was not happy about the sloppy work Pete and his sons had done. The vertebral column had been badly undercut, and, fearing damage, he was furiously repacking dirt beneath the fragile bones. To all within earshot, particularly the DeRosas, Taylor explained that paleontologists *never* remove dirt from directly under dinosaur bones until they are encased in plaster, stressing that without the support they could easily break. Hearing this, Peter DeRosa apologized repeatedly for their mistake. Fortunately, Taylor had caught it in time and no real harm was done.

A host of people representing a variety of creationist groups eventually participated in this dig, including all the members of the Baugh/Taylor team from the other site, other Baugh associates, the Hall and Lines families, the Forbes family, Tom DeRosa, head of CSI in Florida (no relation to the other DeRosas) and the Pete DeRosa family. With all these folks working together, the excavation went quickly as we uncovered the allosaur's entire tail section—at least 12 feet long—as well as a shoulder girdle. In the next day or two, representatives from Answers in Genesis, Buddy Davis and Mike Zovath, also joined us. While most of the digging was done at this point, Davis and Zovath eagerly rolled up their sleeves and got their hands dirty helping to apply plaster jackets to the bones. They and others also took video and photos of the work, including the arduous job of removing the field jackets from the steep hill.

This was accomplished with the timely aid of Brenda Forbes' brother George Bostick, who showed up on the scene with his yellow, four-wheel drive "monster truck," which, with its oversized tires, high ground clearance and V-8 engine could seemingly go anywhere. George arrived just in time, the last day of the dig, and provided enormous logistical help—not to mention a lot of plain old elbow grease—in getting the three jackets down the hill and into his truck, including one easily weighing 4-500 pounds. Unfortunately, the ribs, limbs and, most importantly, the skull were not found at this time. But, as we gathered up our equipment, tired, dirty and exhausted from the exertion of the preceding days, great hope was expressed that we'd find the rest of the Allosaurus, including the skull, next year in the spring of 2002.

The following morning, Sunday, a rather stunning, impromptu worship service was held on the open dirt of the Forbes' property near their home—stunning for the number of different creationist groups represented and for the warm bond of unity expressed by one and all over the groundbreaking work and cooperation they'd just engaged in. Included were people from Dr. Baugh's Creation Evidence Museum, Joe Taylor's Mt. Blanco Fossil Museum, Tom and Pete DeRosa with Creation Studies Institute and Davis and Zovath of Answers in Genesis, not to mention the Forbes. Songs of praise were sung, prayers of thanksgiving were uttered, a brief message was given and numerous testimonies were offered about all that God had orchestrated, along with great hope for future unity in finding ways to use this incredible find for God's glory. Unfortunately, as everyone hugged, shook hands and bade fond farewells, those hopes would soon vanish into thin air, even as the allosaur-filled field jackets made their way to Taylor's museum in Texas in the bed of his truck to be prepped and restored.

By spring of 2002, the clarity of purpose and vision—not to mention any semblance of unity—that had characterized the previous fall dig had become as murky as a Florida swamp. When Taylor and Yaeger arrived at the Forbes property separately at what they believed to be the pre-agreed upon time (May 10th), each was told by Pete DeRosa that they'd come too early, that some filming was going on at the site and that they'd have to go elsewhere for a couple of days. Scratching their heads, Taylor and Yaeger reluctantly withdrew and set themselves up elsewhere. They knew that the DeRosas had hooked up with Doug Phillips, head of a home schooling group called Vision Forum from San Antonio, and that 30 or so folks from VF had paid to work the dig site (and that this was partly how DeRosa had arranged funding for the excavation). However, the seeming "miscue" made no sense to them.

When Taylor and Yaeger returned to the Forbes' on May 12th, they could see that in searching for the allosaur skull the home schoolers had removed some dirt beneath the area where the tail vertebrae had been found. DeRosa then informed them that on the last day of the VF dig, one of the group, Dr. Bruce Bellamy, had uncovered some new bone fragments. They didn't know what

it meant, but speculated that it could be skull material. It was only after two days of hard digging by Taylor and Phillip and Jordan Hall that it became clear to Taylor that it was the articulated neck section of the Allosaurus. Digging further, they soon encountered a lower jaw with teeth, hitting the jackpot next day by finding the dinosaur's skull. The excavation of the neck and skull took up the rest of the week, finishing on Sunday evening, May 18th.

I arrived the afternoon of the 17th, and was greeted by Brenda with the joyous news of the skull. By the time I got up to the site, the neck vertebrae had already been removed but the head was still there, partly plastered with the lower jaw and some of the teeth clearly in view. It was lying nose-down in hard sandstone and looked to be about a yard long. Everyone appeared pretty exhausted by that point, and I jumped in eagerly. Carefully digging around the wonderful thing, Taylor and I found pieces of wood that were partly petrified, partly coalified—and partly still wood! (We had also found woody, organic material beneath the tail vertebrae the year before.) Obviously buried at the same time as the allosaur, this material—and consequently, the bones—could not be over a hundred million years old, as secular science dates dinosaurs found in the Morrison Formation. For the wood to have retained its pulpiness, it could only be thousands of years old, at best. George Bostick also joined us that afternoon, with the two of us (mostly George) doing a lot of the pick and shovel “grunt work” that remained to get the skull out.

Work continued the next day, centering on jacketing the skull, turning it, removing excess rock, final plastering and getting the huge, 800-lb. package off the hillside. And, once again, without George and his truck, we wouldn't have been able to pull it off when we did—and even at that it took us all day and into the early evening to get the job done. This time as camp broke up, the farewells were hurried as folks headed off in their separate ways, the DeRosas to Taylor's museum in Texas where the allosaur skull and other bones were to be stored and prepared, and the Taylor crew over to Baugh's site. On May 24th Peter and Mark DeRosa, along with their assistant, Dan Burns, delivered the bones to Taylor's Mt. Blanco Museum, where Don Ensign helped unload it. At this point it was understood that Taylor, the only real expert among the parties, would have primary responsibility for cleaning and prepping the Allosaurus, while training the DeRosa boys and two other young creationists, Chantell Lines and Phillip Hall (who'd both be taking a semester off from college for this purpose), with funding assured by the DeRosas. This is where the story gets really murky, if not downright muddy.

Over the next few months confusion reigned among members of the original “team” that had first excavated the allosaur in the fall of 2001. Miscommunication, misunderstandings and possible deceit on the part of some led to accusations of dishonesty and betrayal, growing distrust and threatened lawsuits. In the meantime, Doug Phillips ran an article on Vision Forum's Web site titled, “Home School Expedition Uncovers Rare Allosaur and Giant Sauropod,” which basically claimed credit for the discovery and the excavation of the Forbes Allosaurus (not to mention other dinosaurs previously found by the Forbes). At this point, believing that he was entitled to at least a one-third share of the Allosaurus, based on the verbal contract between Dana Forbes and Pete DeRosa (this defacto agreement of May 2001 was witnessed and legally binding), Taylor began looking into the possibility of selling the allosaur “unprepped.” Not only was he disturbed by the direction events were taking, but with his museum, the Forbes and the DeRosas all strapped for cash, he raised the option as a way to keep them all going financially. Shortly thereafter, DeRosa informed Taylor that the Allosaurus bones would be taken to a Vision Forum “lab” in San Antonio. Taylor protested in a letter, citing their original agreement, but relented under threat of a lawsuit. When the DeRosas appeared at Taylor's museum with a rental

truck, out of concern for damage, Taylor and an assistant even graciously helped load the field jackets, which the DeRosas never could have managed alone. Taylor also insisted that they sign a contract then and there, which was done.

The DeRosa boys ended up prepping the Allosaurus skull at the Vision Forum facilities. In the fall of 2002, VF produced and sold a video called, “Raising the Allosaur,” that reiterated the claim that Phillips’ home school group had discovered and excavated the rare dinosaur. Disappointingly, beyond the Forbes, the (Pete) DeRosas and the VF group, no mention was made of Dr. Baugh, Joe Taylor, Don Yaeger, Tom DeRosa, CSI, AiG or any of the other myriad people who had participated in the excavation. It soon became clear that Doug Phillips was using the discovery merely to promote the work of Vision Forum. Phillips seemed to have little interest in acknowledging the contributions of those who did most of the work—ironically, all in the name of “Christian ministry”—and contrary to the principles his organization espouses. Phillips’ misrepresentations along with the DeRosa’s failure to provide the promised funding proved financially devastating to the Forbes, who had to sell their land, and to Taylor, who was forced to pursue mediation in order to receive payment for his share in the find. Enmity and strife has persisted as the DeRosas and Vision Forum have continued promoting and profiting from their false and self-serving versions of the Allosaurus discovery.

Perhaps the saddest thing about this situation is the tragically missed opportunity to glorify God it represents for the Creationist Movement. All too typically in the Christian community, what began in unity ended in disagreement and division, and, instead of benefiting all the groups involved and contributing significantly to the creation science, this God-given opportunity was used to enhance the work of a selfish few and received scant attention from genuine creation scientists. If the kind of selfishness and infighting characterized by this episode continues to take place when a valuable fossil is found by members of the body of Christ, it is likely that creationists will have little to contribute to the debate between creation and evolution for decades to come, at least when it comes to the field of paleontology—often called the most evolutionistic of the sciences.