THE MUSEUM OF WESTERN COLORADO
AND ITS DINOSAUR VALLEY EXHIBIT

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Unlike the curio cabinets of early European and American museums, the Museum of Western Colorado and its branches, Dinosaur Valley and Cross Orchards Living History Farm, are engaged in interpreting the environmental and social changes that have shaped the pre–history and history of west–central Colorado. Through the Museum’s tours, exhibits, classes, seminars, and volunteer programs, visitors are provided the chance to become involved in the Museum’s multi–faceted approach to the collection and preservation of the region’s social and natural history.

The Museum, founded in 1965, is located in Grand Junction and is a department of Mesa County government. It and its branches are operated by a full–time, paid curatorial staff and some 150 community volunteers, each of whom assist an average of 3 hrs a week throughout the year. From its inception, the Museum has also been guided by a board of trustees who are from the membership and serve in an advisory capacity.

The Museum is located in the former Whitman School Building and was opened to the public in 1966 as the Museum of Arts and Sciences. Exhibits, including a special time–line display, focus on the social and archaeological heritage of western Colorado. The Museum’s main offices, history division, historical archives, and research library are in the building. Since 1974, the Museum has also co–sponsored the Mesa County Oral History Project with the Mesa County Public Library. More than 1400 taped interviews with western Colorado personalities are featured in the collection.

Cross Orchards Living History Farm was acquired by the Museum in 1980 following an extensive community–wide funding effort. Its present 14.4 acres, at 3079 F Road, are the last vestige of the 243–acre Red Cross Land and Fruit Company which operated from 1909 to 1923, financed largely by Massachusetts capital. Extensive restoration since acquisition has included interior and exterior renovation of the historic barn/packing shed and bunkhouse, and reconstruction of the summerhouse. Authentically costumed guides and bunkhouse cooks interpret the history of the site, Wednesday to Saturday, 10:00 to 4:00, mid–May through October. Regularly scheduled events include the Spring and Fall Days on the Farm, the Apple Jubilee in October, the Julia Harris Lecture Series, and the Old–Fashioned Country Christmas. The site is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Museum of Western Colorado has maintained an active commitment to paleontology since its founding. In 1970, former Museum director Mike Mayfield recovered dinosaur fossils from the New Castle area. Lance Eriksen joined the staff as a professional paleontologist in 1972, and during the next 12 yrs made significant discoveries of national and international importance. These included the most complete Ceratosaurus skull found to date, and one of the world’s oldest fossil flowers.

In 1973 the Museum constructed a full–size skeletal replica of an Allosaurus. This plastic cast was made possible through the donations of Alfred T. Look and Dow Chemical, and the Goodwin Foundation. Following a number of significant finds in the Fruita area in the early 1970s, the Museum, a number of internationally known paleontologists, and the Bureau of Land Management combined efforts in 1976 to create the Fruita Paleontological Area and to have the land withdrawn from mineral entry and closed to vehicles. This area has been explored since 1975 by Dr. George Callison of California State University at Long Beach, and has yielded the world’s smallest known adult dinosaur and some of the oldest mammals (see Callison, this Guidebook). Field trips to the Dry Mesa quarry in Mesa County’s remote Escalante Canyon also have introduced staff and patrons to the “Supersaurus” and “Ultrasaurus” finds made by Dr. James Jensen and Brigham Young University (see Chenoweth, this Guidebook).

Dinosaur Valley, opened in June 1985, is an entire exhibit dedicated to paleontology. In its first year and a half, it attracted more than 105,000 visitors. Exhibit features include six animated, half–size dinosaur replicas whose throaty growls quickly initiate guests to the display. Fossils and casts trace the region’s prehistory from the flora and fauna of the Jurassic (age 143 million yrs) to the mammals of the De Beque formation, age 54 million yrs.

Museum staff and board members first discussed in 1984 the possibility of erecting a major dinosaur exhibit. Contact was made with Dination Incorporated, a California–based company that produces life–like models for museum exhibits. Chris Mays, president of Dination, was aware of the surrounding major fossil quarries and of the tremendous visitor potential of Grand Junction. On December 4, 1984, Mays visited Grand Junction and met with Museum board members and staff, community members, and businessmen. From these conferences emerged a broad–based plan designed to appeal to all age levels. It would include exhibits featuring museum collections, skeletal reconstructions, and a working laboratory.

Professional paleontologists, a California designer, and museum professionals from throughout the country were contacted for suggestions. Material acquired for the exhibit included three complete skeletal casts of dinosaurs known from the local area. These were obtained from Utah State Paleontologist James Madsen. Casts of a Tyrannosaurus rex skull and foot were acquired from the Los Angeles County Museum. Other agencies assisting with the project included the University of Colorado, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago.

Following a several–week search for a suitable building, the Reed Building at 4th and Main, which had formerly housed J.C. Penney Company, was selected. A press conference on February 20, 1985, announced the signing of a 3–yr lease agreement for the building, a lease–purchase agreement for six animated dinosaurs, and the construction of the “Dinosaur Valley” exhibit. Some $70,000 raised through city and county funding, and from local foundations and businesses, helped finance the project. Harley Armstrong, a local archaeological and paleontological consultant, was hired to assist with the developing exhibit.

As construction commenced, presentations were given to school groups and civic and social organizations. Major contacts were also established with Vernal, Utah, heart of “Dinoland”; and Price, Utah, location of the CEU Prehistoric Museum (see Young, this Guidebook) and the nearby Cleveland–Lloyd Quarry (see Madsen, this Guidebook). A “Dinosaur Triangle” to link the three cities as “Dinosaur Country” as a major regional attraction was proposed and established.