

Your Stories

Originally at <http://www.archives.gov/75th/stories/featured-stories/dinosaur-hunter.html>



Larger View

By 1938, the National Archives Building housed 370,000 feet of motion picture film.

Introduction

Featured Stories

Personal Stories

The National Archives major exhibition "*BIG! Celebrating the 75th Anniversary of the National Archives*," features big records, big events, and big ideas. One of the featured BIG! items is a cast of a dinosaur track found in New Jersey.

For more information, watch a [short video of the BIG! Press Preview](#), featuring remarks by Paul Olsen, and tour by curator Stacey Bredhoff.

Amateur Teenage "Dinosaur Hunter's" Find Ends up in the National Archives Discovery proves dinosaurs once roamed New Jersey! Archives records show teenager lobbied President Nixon

By Miriam Kleiman

In 1968, when the discovery of dinosaur tracks in an abandoned quarry in Roseland, New Jersey, made the local news, two teenage boys in a nearby town jumped on their bicycles and went to investigate. Working on their own, they uncovered thousands of fossilized dinosaur tracks, which an expert later described as "something of a milestone in the history of these animals because of the large number of tracks."

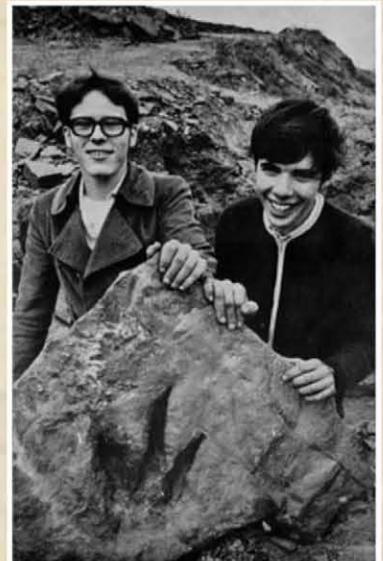
In 1969, 15-year old Paul Olsen, one of the dinosaur hunters, wrote the first of many letters to President Richard Nixon. Paul, who identified himself as one of a group of "young geologists" at the Roseland quarry, began an extended lobbying and media campaign to make the Roseland quarry a protected park area. He described their digs and included drawings of some of their Triassic-era finds. One such track, he noted, was "a rare find indeed." While the surrounding area was protected as park land, Paul wrote, the quarry itself was not. Paul urged that the quarry be "pressured (sic) for all eternity for our country," and closed his letter with the guarantee: "Mr. President, I can assure you it is worth it!"

The next year, Paul sent the President a detailed update on both the ongoing dig and the status of the quarry. Local and state officials had been contacted, and "all are in favor but all lack funds." Paul cited additional attempts to reach the President and other officials, and how he was referred from one office to another, eventually to the Department of the Interior's Mesozoic Fossil Sites Division, from which he received no reply.

"We feel, Mr. President, that this matter deserves your personal attention," Paul wrote, citing the President's State of the Union address lament of the rapid expansion of cities and suburbs, and the need for preservation of parks and recreation areas. Paul stressed that this was a matter of "national importance":

Good fossil localities on the East Coast are rare and great ones even more so. *It is a miracle that nature has given us this gift, this relic of the ages, so near to our culturally starved metropolitan area* (i.e. New York City, Newark Jersey City, Trenton, Philadelphia and the rest)... A great find like this cannot go unprotected and it must be preserved for all humanity to see, to enjoy and to serve as a natural resource for education for years to come. (Letter of February 4, 1970, *emphasis added*).

Local press closely followed this story and the drama of high school students versus government and big business. One article lightheartedly noted that Paul and his friend spent so much time digging that other teenage priorities were less important: "We always warn our dates that we might not show up. They have to play second string to a dinosaur," an article quotes Paul as saying. A UPI story mentioned Paul's other extracurricular activities – that he continued to paint professionally "in addition to working on his one-man fiberglass submarine" (UPI story reprinted in the Paterson News 11/30/1970).



Amateur dinosaur hunters Paul Olsen (left) and Tony Lessa with the dinosaur track that was later cast and sent to President Richard Nixon in 1972. Print, ca. 1970.



Larger View

Paul Olsen and the cast of a dinosaur print he sent to President Nixon in 1972. Image by Earl McDonald for the National Archives.

The Newark *Evening News* praised Paul and a friend in an editorial titled "Youth and Fossils" that placed the boys' preservation efforts in historical perspective: "And, just as the two young men proved by their zeal and interest that not all young people are alienated or destructive, so, too, did the Establishment demonstrate that it can be moved" (*The Evening News*, 11/30/1970).

On January 20, 1971, Paul received an official commendation from President Nixon for his work, having succeeded in getting the quarry put up for consideration as a national landmark. However, while achieving the landmark designation would have conferred status, it offered no legal protection for the site.

Paul again wrote to President Nixon a few months later. He politely thanked the President for the official commendation, but said it was not enough. While the award and the resulting publicity were positive, "at this moment... the Dinosaur Quarry is still not protected, still not a park." Paul outlined the challenges posed to the state and county in losing nearly 20 acres of taxable property, but stressed the urgency in protecting this land: "As we wait, erosion unleashes its powers... Every winter, hundreds of two hundred million year old dinosaur footprints crumble into dust as frost takes its yearly toll. All this and more happens as the political and economic 'red tape' thickens." He again thanked the President for his commendation, but warned that his work "shall be all in vain unless the Dinosaur Quarry becomes a park." He pleaded for the President to "take an interest in this amazing find and help protect it for all these Americans who take pride and interest in our history and natural heritage" (letter of August 19, 1971).

Eventually, the lobbying effort paid off. The land owner, Walter Kidde & Company, donated the 19 acres for what became the Walter Kidde Dinosaur Park. This land was then valued at more than a quarter million dollars.

On June 29, 1972, Paul sent President Nixon a very nice thank you note for both the Presidential Commendations and for the efforts by the President and the Department of the Interior regarding the quarry. With the letter, "as a token of our thanks," he sent a fiberglass cast of a 200 million-year-old dinosaur track – that of a *Eubrontes giganteus*, was made by a theropod (beast-footed) dinosaur similar to the Dilophosaurs, which is known from bones found in Arizona. The *Eubrontes giganteus* would have stood approximately 9 feet high. The gift eventually ended up in the National Archives Nixon Library and Museum in Yorba Linda, California.

A local paper noted that Paul and his fellow dinosaur hunters would head off to college "already well-grounded not only in their chosen field of paleontology but also in what it takes to beat the System."

In preparing the National Archives exhibition, BIG! curator Stacey Bredhoff located the then-teenager who had lobbied President Nixon. The call from the National Archives over 35 years later "came as quite a shock" to Paul. His initial reaction was "what footprint?" because "I had actually forgotten that I had sent the footprint to Nixon in the first place."

Today, Paul is one of the nation's foremost paleontologists, and a professor at Columbia University. He was recently elected a member of the National Academy of Sciences. He recalls that he "went ballistic" when he learned about the discovery of the tracks near his home, and that the experience opened up a world of scientists and scientific resources that determined the course of his career. Although the plaque imbedded in the cast dates the footprint from the Triassic period (248 to 206 million years ago), Professor Olsen recently stated that it is now thought to be from the early Jurassic period (206 to 144 million years ago).

Paul was a featured speaker at the March 16, 2009, BIG! press preview, and spoke at length with numerous reporters and staff about this boyhood exploration that changed his life. He referenced another item in the exhibition – a size 22 sneaker given to President George W. Bush by Shaquille O'Neal and said that compared to the shoe,

That [dinosaur] footprint may not be very large, but for a kid who was 15 years old, finding a fossil like that, and then having communication with a President, and receiving a commendation, sending it [the cast of the print] off, and ultimately having it be in the National Archives, that was a really BIG event.

He is now married with two boys of his own. Asked if his sons were dinosaur hunters, he responded: "Gustaf, my youngest, is better at finding fossils than I am, and Max my oldest loves the outdoors, but with their dad working with dinosaurs all the time, both really prefer other pastimes like drawing or computer games".

On Monday, April 27, Paul brought his wife, Annika, and their two sons, Gustaf and Max, to the National Archives. Before seeing the Charters of Freedom, the family went to the BIG! exhibition to view the now-famous cast of the dinosaur track. "Really cool!" both boys exclaimed. "It's definitely really cool."

The National Archives BIG! exhibition, celebrating the 75th anniversary of the National Archives, includes the dinosaur track cast Paul Olsen made in 1970. Since the footprint itself has been lost, this cast remains the only non-photographic record of this particular track.

The records cited are records from the Richard M. Nixon Presidential Library in Yorba Linda, CA, and the Nixon Presidential Materials Staff in College Park, MD.



Paul Olsen with wife Annika and sons Max (L) and Gustaf (R). Image by Cathy Farmer.



Paleontologist Paul Olsen speaks at the BIG! Press Preview, March 11, 2009. Image by Earl McDonald for the National Archives.