

Diggin' Up Bones --- Maries County Style

By Gary Knehans

People laughed at Henry Buschman when he installed drain tile in a swampy tract of land in Maries County around 1921 to make it suitable for raising crops. "Crawfish Land," they called it. But the idealistic farmer laughed the loudest and the longest when his unorthodox strategy proved unbelievably effective. For many years, Buschman grew better corn than anyone else around. And, in the disastrous drought year of 1936, this converted swamp was the only field in the Maries Creek valley that even produced a crop.

By the late 1940's, however, the tiles had begun breaking up and clogging. The field got soggy and soggy. So, in the fall of 1950, the present owner, Andrew Buschman, a grandson of Henry's, contracted John Streumph to dig out the tiles and to cut a new drain channel. Streumph dug down six to twelve feet with a drag line and left the dirt piled up to dry out. When he returned to the site in the spring of 1951 to level the field, the contractor spotted some strange chalkiness in the excavated dirt. Closer inspection revealed not chalk but bones,

huge bones, lots of bones. With the help of a shovel, Streumph dug around and unearthed large teeth and bones, some of which appeared to be tusks. The excited contractor loaded part of his find in his pickup truck and drove to Vienna, where he came across high school vocational agriculture teacher, Marvin Helms.

"I've got something in the truck I'd like to show you," he told Helms.

"What's that, Johnny?," the teacher asked inquisitively.

"Bones," Streumph replied with an air of mystery as he led Helms to the bed of the pickup.

Throwing a canvas covering back to reveal the bony cargo, the contractor awaited Helms response, which was quick in coming.

"Whew," the teacher whistled. "Where did you ever get those?"

Streumph told the man the story of his accidental discovery of the prehistoric relics. Helms in turn phoned the University of Missouri for assistance in identifying the bones. He described them to a specialist in the paleontology department at Mizzou. Helms said the teeth measured four by eight inches each with multiple conical crowns and some ball-and-



An assortment of mastodon bones found near Vienna in 1951. Courtesy of the Old Jail Museum.

socket joints measured almost twelve inches across. To the paleontologist, the bones apparently belonged to a mastodon, a huge, extinct elephant-like mammal with long shaggy hair. Other mastodon bones had been discovered previously in other parts of Missouri and these appeared similar to them.

Since the University of Missouri apparently wasn't interested enough in the find

to send someone down to have a look, Streumph sought help from a local state conservation agent, Rayburn Brooks. The agent contacted Donald Johnson, the curator of the Natural History Museum in the State Capitol. Accompanied by photographer Gerald Massie, Johnson drove to Vienna to inspect the bones and the site of their discovery.

As soon as he saw the huge molars, the museum curator knew

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that they belonged to a mastodon. In fact, he thought there were enough bones to suggest that three of the prehistoric beasts had been buried in "Crawfish Land." One of them he thought was a younger, smaller mastodon. This prompted Helms to theorize that the young animal had been stuck in the mucky swamp. When the parents came to assist their offspring, they mired down as well. All three, he thought, then succumbed to either starvation or asphyxiation.

Johnson wasn't so sure that the same area was a swamp some 100,000 years ago when he estimated the mastodons had died. Many bones of smaller animals

also were found mixed with the mastodons', but they were of animals of more recent origin. Even today, the discovery site contains pockets of quicksand, which occasionally claim stray livestock and wildlife.

Because of its soggy characteristics, the site has never been fully excavated in a thorough scientific way. Whether it contains other hidden secrets remains a mystery to this date. However, people who wish to view some of the prehistoric bones uncovered by John Struempf in 1951 can find these objects of interest at the Old Jail Museum in Vienna.

