

THE SATURDAY EVENING POST



Photo by Sarra

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Maryville and, on the other, to potter to his heart's content amid old bones. By the time he won his bachelor-of-arts degree, he had developed such a skillful hand with them that he was permitted to assemble whole mammoths himself.

Eager to proceed with postgraduate work, Colbert applied for and was granted an \$1800 fellowship by Columbia University, and there he plodded through two more degrees—becoming a master of arts and a doctor of philosophy.

As an outgrowth of his doctor's thesis, he produced a 400-page opus with the breezy title *Sivallik Mammals* in the American Museum of Natural History. It brought him one of the highest honors that American science can bestow—the Elliott Medal of the National Academy of Sciences.

In 1930, while Colbert was still at Columbia, the American Museum appointed him research assistant, subsequently sending him to Europe for further polish. To French and German, which he had already studied, he added enough Italian and Spanish to be able to understand scientific papers in those languages. In fact, about the only language in which important fossil reports are written that he can't make head or tail of is Russian. But the Soviet paleontologists obligingly attach English translations to all their reports and send them on to the American Museum.

During his early years at the museum, Colbert formed an ideal companionship with an equally serious-minded employee, Margaret Matthew. Not only was Miss Matthew a scientific draftsman specializing in fossil drawings but the daughter of an able fossil hunter, the late William Diller Matthew. It was inevitable that, following daily exposure to each other and to fossils, Colbert and Miss Matthew should marry. Mrs. Colbert still illustrates some of her husband's papers. She has also produced since 1937 five boys, none of whom, however, as yet evinces much interest in fossils.

The home life of a fossil hunter, as exemplified by Colbert, presents a sharp contrast to the high adventure of the field and laboratory. He owns a two-story shingle house standing on a small plot in the placid suburb of Leonia, New Jersey, half an hour by bus and subway from the museum, and, when approaching it, he tries to dismiss from his mind all antediluvian thoughts.

"Otherwise I might get into a rut," he says, adding significantly, "Some paleontologists talk and think shop all the time. Apt to make a man unbalanced."

Colbert's day begins at six-thirty, when he rises to help Mrs. Colbert wash, clothe and feed their progeny. He also prepares his lunch, usually a sandwich, which he carries to the museum in a paper bag, so that he will not have to waste time in a restaurant away from his fossils. The curators are expected to report for work at ten. Colbert is invariably in his office, a long, white-walled room, by nine, and he seldom sticks his nose out of the building until after five.

With the approach of spring, however, a familiar gleam comes into Colbert's eyes. By the first of June he is headed for the fossil lands, duffel bag slung over his shoulder. What fascinates and baffles the citizens of Leonia, who follow this seasonal trek with huge interest, is how their shy, quiet

fellow townsman can announce that he is off to hunt for bones as old as sin and actually return with a truckload of them.

Despite the careful groundwork laid by Colbert before he launches an expedition, chance does occasionally take a hand. During his adventures with the alligators, for example, he relaxed his exertions long enough to go boating on the Caloosahatchee River. A few feet offshore, rearing up like the hulls of sunken ships, he spied the leg bone, ribs and vertebrae of a mastodon. In themselves, mastodon bones are comparatively common, but none had ever been discovered so far south in North America, and this is the kind of fresh data an alert paleontologist pounces on with glee.

The most freakish chance in Colbert's experience led him to a choice find not 200 feet from his own desk—to the hilarity of the newspapers that got wind of it. For years the museum had hankered after a Java rhinoceros, an almost extinct species. One of its trustees, Arthur S. Vernay, financed a series of costly expeditions to Java in the hope of snaring one on the hoof. The natives would report seeing several of them hanging around, but somehow they had always taken to the hills a few hours before Vernay's party arrived. Meanwhile, in June of 1942, Colbert was conducting a one-man expedition of his own in the museum's attic. He was rummaging among some Indian rhinoceros skulls preparatory to writing a report, when he picked up one, lying there for anybody to see, that had a slightly different shape.

"Feeling pretty sure what it was, I dug up some photographs of the Java rhino," he relates. "The skulls matched perfectly. Then I compared the teeth. That clinched it."

Blushing furiously for the museum, he checked the label on the skull against the file catalogue and found that it had originally belonged to Prince Maximilian of Wied, a big-game hunter who had sold his collection of 1000 stuffed animals to the museum some seventy years earlier.

"Maximilian should have recognized it when he got it," Colbert says sternly. For several months nobody enlightened Vernay, who had given up his Java expeditions in despair of ever finding even part of a rhino. "We were afraid to tell him," Colbert explains.

Chance also led Colbert to the crowning discovery of his career, and one of

the most valuable in the annals of paleontology. Familiarity with dinosaurs has bred a certain contempt for them in Colbert, who by now knows almost as much about their way of life as he does about his own. In his obsession with the dimmest pages of the earth's history, he has come to regard them as mere Johnny-come-latelys, and until recently he had longed to lay his calipers on a real old-timer.

During the summer of 1947, while he was traveling through New Mexico with two assistants, en route to Arizona for a routine reptile hunt, he passed Ghost Ranch, near Abiquiu, New Mexico, the 30,000-acre estate of Arthur N. Pack, publisher of *Nature* Magazine and a friend of fossil hunters. He decided to take a quick look around. The expedition never reached Arizona.

Half a mile from the main house, in a gulch, one of the assistants, George Whitaker, dropped to his knees with a shout of triumph. Embedded in the sandy clay was a small fossil claw. Whitaker couldn't identify it for sure, but Colbert had no doubts. It was a piece of *Coelophysis*, a forerunner of all the dinosaurs from *Tyrannosaurus rex* to *Brontosaurus*.

Only a few scattered bones had ever been recovered before, the complete picture of the creature being based on inductive reasoning. Believed to have been three feet high and six feet long, with heavy, powerful legs and foreclaws that could rip its prey apart at one stroke, *Coelophysis* slithered across the continent almost 200,000,000 years ago.

Working on Ghost Ranch all summer, the expedition gathered together a dozen complete skeletons and evidence of possibly six more buried nearby. When reassembled from skull to tail, they will furnish the first proof of what paleontologists have hitherto been able only to guess at.

In the summer of 1948 Colbert yielded to invitations from numerous international scientific organizations to attend their meetings in Europe. The experience was gratifying, but could not compensate him for his absence from his beloved hunting grounds. The summer of 1949 had not yet begun when Colbert was back at Ghost Ranch digging for *Coelophyses*. He is happy in the thought of trying to determine what made them tick, during the next decade or two. What are decades to a man who measures time in millenniums?

THE END



"Doesn't look appetizing—I'll have . . ."