

# VERY OLD BONES

BY JUDY ISACOFF

Digging in the dirt is always interesting. Unearthing many kinds of worms, beetles, rocks, and whatever else we might uncover, is fascinating. In our place on earth it is not unusual for gardeners and farmers, while cultivating the land, to find arrowheads made by



Native American people long ago. Just twenty years ago, a Berkshire farmer noticed “white flecks” in the heaps of wet ground he dug out while making a pond. Looking closely, he recognized them as pieces of large bones and ivory. Brought to Yale University in Connecticut, they were identified as parts of the bones and tusks of a mastodon, an ancient elephant-like animal that once lived here!

The American mastodon, scientific name *Mammot americanum*, roamed over North America from about 4 million to 10,000 years ago. Mastodons, along with mammoths and modern elephants, are members of the grouping of animals called Proboscidea, which means “having a trunk.” As adults they stood between eight and ten feet tall at the shoulder and weighed four to six tons (one ton equals 2,000 pounds!). Their teeth—also found in the Berkshire excavation—were like blunt cones. Mastodons probably used these teeth to browse on herbs, shrubs, and trees. Remains of *Mammot americanum* had been found previously in Claverack, NY, in Columbia County, on the western side of the Taconic Range.



The Colossal Mastodon, as set up in the old Geological Hall. In front, from left to right, are Carole K. Gilbert, James Hall, Jr., M.S., and Edwin E. Howell. (By courtesy of Prof. W. M. Davis.)



In order to find out when the animal lived here, a sample of the bone fragments found in 1982 was sent to a laboratory in Cambridge, MA. A “Carbon-14” test dated the great mammal at about 11,500 years old! The climate was colder then. Imagine a landscape that included low



green plants, as well as swampy ground and evergreen trees, like those that grow farther north and on high, cold mountains today. A spruce tree cone was found with the mastodon, dated 11,630 years B.P., which means “before the present.” Researchers have evidence that humans traveled through this landscape hunting the huge animals.

Scientists who study signs of humans who lived long ago are called archaeologists. It is the paleontologists who study all the other living things that in turn help us to understand the Earth’s

past environment, climate, and living organisms. Aside from being alert to the possibility of finding objects from long ago while digging in the dirt near home, consider museum visits. The Berkshire Museum in Pittsfield, MA, has a Dino Dig where visitors search for reproduction dinosaur bones. The famous Cohoes mastodon, 2/3 of its bones recovered, is prominently displayed in the lobby of the NYS Museum in Albany, NY. There is also a diorama of a mother with her young mastodon, in what scientists believe to be an accurate picture of our region as it was thousands of years ago.

*Judy Isacoff, MA, is a writer, environmental educator, and arts-education consultant. She can be contacted at Nature’s Turn, 413-528-1335.*

This article comes to you in part from **The Nature Conservancy**, whose mission is to protect the diversity of life on earth by protecting her most precious and endangered natural places, and all the plants and animals that depend upon them, forever. The Berkshire Taconic Landscape Program works in partnership with local communities, groups, and individuals in MA, CT and NY to protect the Berkshire Taconic landscape, one of the most ecologically significant landscapes of the Northeastern US. For more information, contact them at PO Box 268, Sheffield, MA 01257, or visit [www.nature.org/berkshiretaconic](http://www.nature.org/berkshiretaconic).

