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Dinosaur museum in small-town Alberta hopes to hit the big time

Extinction has done little to diminish the popularity of dinosaurs. Around the world dinosaur exhibits are big draws.

In northwestern Alberta, a now placid creek called the River of Death has provided a wealth of dinosaur fossils that locals are hoping to turn into a tourism gold mine.

After years of planning and persuasion, the [Philip J. Currie Dinosaur Museum](#) is about to open in [Wembley](#), a town of 1,383, just a short drive from the bone bed.

On Sept. 26 the museum is hosting a grand opening gala, featuring Jim Cuddy and Colin James as entertainment, as well as hosting Dan Aykroyd and a group of Hollywood celebrities.

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The state-of-the-art \$34-million museum is a gamble the region is willing to take, hoping for international attention.



George Jacob, the museum's director, has helped develop museums around the world. (Terry Reith/CBC)

"It's a small town which has tremendous potential for international presence," says George Jacob, the museum's director.

Jacob knows a thing or two about international presence, having helped develop museums in 11 countries including Dubai, Egypt, France and the United States. He's also authored a book on museum design for the future. He joined the project in Wembley as it hit a critical stage last fall.

Jacob sees challenge and opportunity in attempting such a grand project in a small, somewhat isolated part of the world.

"Site-specific museums always have the challenge of attracting visitors and so on, but also have the opportunity of attracting those visitors because people want to go to a site that they can associate with the collections."

It helps that this museum was built close to one of the world's richest deposits of dinosaur fossils, with many discoveries still buried there. There's also an amazing back story, a strong local character, a renowned paleontologist, and the patronage of a beloved film and television star.

The teacher and the bones



Al Lakusta discovered the bone bed in the 1970s, and began carrying home dinosaur bones, cleaning them in his bathtub, and storing them in his basement. (Terry Reith/CBC)

The bone bed on Pipestone Creek was discovered by a high school teacher in 1973.

Al Lakusta would stuff the fossils into his backpack, take them home and clean them in his bathtub. As his basement filled with bones, real-life paleontologists took notice, and eventually Lakusta had to turn over his collection.

The discovery turned out to be one of the richest deposits of *Pachyrhinosaurus* bones in North America. Thousands of bones and fragments were recovered from the site. But much of Lakusta's original collection was relegated to a storage room at Grande

Prairie's museum.

"There really was no space in the local museum," Lakusta recalls.

"It didn't surprise me, the bone had to go somewhere, I'd just as soon it stayed here rather than go down south to Drumheller, or Edmonton or somewhere."

But many of the best fossils did make their way to Drumheller and the Royal Tyrrell Museum of paleontology, and to Edmonton's University of Alberta where paleontologist Dr. Philip Currie is based.

The very model of a paleontologist

If Hollywood went looking for the very model of a modern paleontologist, Currie would be it. Sporting a mop of grey hair on a weathered face and with calloused hands, Currie has the rugged look of a well travelled explorer. He has a supporting resume, professional respect, and the passport stamps to back it up.

He's been part of fossil discoveries in Mongolia, Argentina and the Arctic, is co-director of the Canada-China Dinosaur Project, and helped found the Royal Tyrrell.

When Currie arrived at the River of Death in 1985, it was overwhelming.

Seventy-five million years ago, tiny Pipestone Creek was a torrent in a land of active volcanoes and lumbering dinosaurs. During a

flash flood thousands of the creatures were swept down river, their carcasses collecting at a bend in the river. The fossils grew into the landscape until Lakusta got curious and went out one day with a shovel.

"There was so much bone coming out of that one bone bed that really I, as a provincial paleontologist, couldn't do much about it at first," Currie recalls. "Because we didn't have the budget to handle what we were trying to do already in places like Drumheller and Dinosaur Park."

When Currie and his team finally began digging they made astonishing discoveries, including a unique species of *Pachyrhinosaurus*. It was clear the site had international significance.

"The more we looked at it, the more remarkable it seemed."

As more fossils were pulled from the ground, the idea of building a museum to showcase the findings took on a greater sense of urgency.

"The idea was developed way back in the 1970s," explains Currie. "People started talking about it: 'Well, we've got these dinosaur resources up here, we should have a better display.'"

If we build it, will they come?

Building a dinosaur museum in a small town posed significant challenges. Who would build it? Who would pay? Who would come?

The location is off the beaten track, about a 20-minute drive west of Grande Prairie. And they didn't want something that looked small town cheap. They wanted world class.

When a farm family carved off a corner of their canola field at the side of the highway and donated it as a site for the museum, the possibilities took hold.

The local museum board felt that a gleaming architectural gem of a building would convince a few of those travellers to stop. Besides, the Royal Tyrrell draws about 380,000 visitors a year from 150 countries.

Dinosaurs won't just stop traffic, they'll bring more. A lot more, the reasoning goes.

Initially, they set a budget of \$26 million and an opening date of 2012. Both [proved outrageously unrealistic](#). So did expectations that the federal government would fork over \$10 million. It was a big dream with little capital.

Undaunted, they began a modest fundraising drive, collecting a few thousand here and there from businesses and individuals. The

students at Wembley Elementary School managed to raise \$1,000 but it was clear that bake sales and raffles wouldn't finance a world-class museum.



Dan Aykroyd (left) with Dr. Phillip Currie at the Pipestone Creek bone bed. (Sean Trostom)

Who you gonna call?

Aykroyd brought considerable star power to the project after his dinosaur-obsessed daughter Danielle and wife Donna Dixon joined Currie on a dig at the site in 2010.

The [following year the Ghostbusters star returned](#) with fellow actor Matthew Gray Gubler, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., and mystery writer Patricia Cornwell. Suddenly the struggling local project took on the international profile its supporters had long craved.

By the time sod was turned on the museum in 2013, the cost had ballooned to \$34 million, and the federal government had balked at putting up millions.

In the end it was local governments, the city and county that paid most of the cost.

Is it a good investment?

"I think that discussion is still taking place," says Kevin O'Toole, a Grande Prairie city councillor who is a member of the museum's board. "There's a number of people who felt that amount of money being spent on a project like this was far-fetched."

Far-fetched or not, the gamble is that thousands of others will travel to that corner of Alberta, spend their money and spread the word.



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