

THE BONE DIGGER

Wesley Linster spends half the year—from the moment the ground thaws in the spring to the time his fingers start to numb in the late fall—a dozen or so feet deep in the earth. In the frigid Wyoming winters, as a carpenter and woodworker, Wes cuts and saws and whittles, etching something only he can see out of heavy blocks of nothing. During the warmer, occasionally sweltering months, he does much of the same, but with the earth as canvas: muddy red and unforgiving, baked into a hard crust by the high country heat.

OF TEN SLEEP

Words & Photos

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Nobody



As the temperature gauge creeps towards the triple digits, Wes sits there or lays there or stands there, from the early morning until the early afternoon, when it's time to return to town to help his wife wrangle the kids or serve customers in Dirty Sally's, the general store they run together. Occasionally, he steps away from his work to climb up a small hill above the pit to stare out towards the mountains with a pair of binoculars to spot elk or deer. Or to get a moment of cell service. (In the hole, he can't get so much as a text.) Sometimes, he ventures still further. Like last week, when it was raining and he told himself he needed to wait for the ground to dry a bit before returning to dig. And so he wandered off into the hills, found a pair of antlers, and got bit in the boot by a rattlesnake.

Most days, however, Wes stays down in the pit with his tools, prey to the horse flies and no-see-ums, slowly excavating the bones of Jurassic giants.

On a sunny fall day in 2018, Wes is pointing at one of these giants—or what will soon reveal itself as such—with an authority that feels both impossible and incontrovertible. He traces for me the skeleton of the animal, from jaw to tail. It was, he thinks, most likely a *Camarasaurus*... or a *Diplodocus* or an *Apatosaurus*. He can't yet be completely sure, but that's what the teeth are telling him. Besides the few bones that peek out from the ground, raised and dark, all I see is dirt. Wes, meanwhile, sees another in a long line of discoveries, which, like the rest, he will labor over, care for, and then send on its way—for others to claim as their own.

In the United States, fossils collected on private land can be excavated and sold at the discretion of the landowner. Wes works for one such operation: a farm with a rich vein of the Jurassic snaking through the property, a few miles outside of the town of Ten Sleep. In the eyes of professional paleontologists, digs like this—run without the oversight of scientists or public institutions—pose a significant threat to the field. They fear that the commercial trade of fossils—particularly fossils of importance—can result in a loss for science; irrevocable gaps in the evolutionary chain. Or worse, that amateur diggers will botch the excavations, damaging the bones with shoddy, inexperienced methods. At the same time, some of the world's most precious fossils have been discovered by hobbyist bone diggers—which is what Wes, despite his decades of work in the field, is still considered.



Since moving to Ten Sleep to dig, sometime in the mid-aughts, Wes estimates that he's removed—alongside various colleagues—fifteen nearly complete dinosaurs from this hole, which is called Dana Quarry, as well as from a second pit down the road. Almost immediately after Wes's arrival in Ten Sleep, in fact, they came across an articulated, 80-foot-long *Apatosaurus*: a discovery that turned the dig into one of the most important sites in the world for Jurassic-era excavation, practically overnight—or so Wes tells me.

Dana is also where the famous *Diplodocus* Misty was excavated and later sold at auction for over \$600,000 in late 2013 (before finding a home at the Natural History Museum of Denmark). Then there was the nearly complete *Apatosaurus*, with its skull and neck cervical still attached. (Extremely rare.) Or the *Allosaurus* and the *Stegosaurus* unearthed in uncomfortably close proximity. (Rarer still.) Such close proximity,

in fact, that they pulled one of the Stegosaurus's bones from the mouth of the Allosaurus. (A sign not, as one might hope, of some epic prehistoric battle, according to Wes, but of something much more banal, like water flow.)

At the time of my visit, Wes had spent the past five years almost exclusively in Dana. And most of that time, he'd been working alone. Rambling to his dinosaurs; cursing them; petting them; saying hello. Sure, occasionally he'll call over to the manager of the ranch who hired him, or to one of the ranch hands for help with the tractor, which they sometimes use to move great quantities of dirt. But for the most part, it's just Wes. Just Wes—handling the excavation and the bone mapping. Studying skulls and hip bones to try and identify what he's digging towards. Grumbling about disappearing ribs. (Always in the wrong place, ribs.) Periodically sending out an email or two, or checking his books if things remain a mystery.

Once the bones are out of the earth, Wes takes care of the plastering, too. Wrapping them in aluminum foil and burlap and then finding something stabilizing, like rebar or bits of old sprinkler systems or fence posts, before coating everything in a thick layer of chalky white paste to create a protective cast. After this, he sends them off to Utah, where a preparer cleans up the bones before they are marketed and sold by



the higher-ups over in New York. From there, Wes's dinosaurs make their way to auction houses across the world—and ultimately, into museums in Singapore, private collections in Florida, malls in Dubai. Not that Wes keeps close tabs. He knows that by the time any of this happens, his name will have been scrubbed from the bones like the remnants of earth he's carefully freed them from. And though he's happy that many of his 'critters' find their way to public institutions, he also knows he has no power over where, ultimately, they end up.

The field of paleontology is full of big shots, whose discoveries are often celebrated like album drops. In comparison, Wes's work more resembles that of a roadie—all grunt, no glory. And yet, it is also the role he feels most comfortable in. Whether his bones sell or not, he says, matters little to him. For him, it's about the act of finding them, of "saving" them. He doesn't let the rest get to him. Instead, he keeps his head down and his hands in the dirt, searching for his next discovery.



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The first time Wes Linster went hunting for dinosaurs, he was two months old, snug in a carrier on the backs of his parents as they scanned the ground for fossilized fish. Wes's father, Cliff, had his interest sparked while working on construction jobs, when tractors would occasionally unearth something eerie and thrilling: a bone from an ancient animal or a relic from a past civilization. Sandy, Wes's mother, caught the bug from her husband, but quickly became an expert in her own right, her sharp eyes constantly on the lookout for tiny claws and dusty vertebrae buried in the dirt.

When their seven children were still young, the Linsters turned their shared hobby into a familial pastime. Over the summers, they'd pile the kids into the Suburban and drive the four or five hours from their home in Glendive, in the east of Montana, across to a ranch on the edge of Glacier National Park, where they had permission to dig and camp. Eventually,

the rancher whose land the Linsters leased for their summer adventures agreed to sell them the site outright. Just like that, the Linster siblings became the only kids they knew who whiled away their summers digging up dinosaurs in the back of beyond, along a productive line of the Cretaceous.

On the ranch, the children would spend their mornings shoveling earth until they hit their daily quota of two buckets per head and their afternoons running feral in the trees, looking for grizzly bears. But while the kids played, the parents continued to dig, from morning until night.

Unlike many amateur fossil hunters, the Linsters didn't just hunt bones for sport and gain. They wanted to do it the right way. They traveled across the region, to universities and research centers to ask the experts how to catalog, map, and extract. But ultimately, they found that their improvised methods proved equal if not superior to many of those suggested by the professionals. What the academics had drawn up in theory, in the comfort of their bookish establishments, they had perfected in practice, day in and day out, their hands dirty and knees bruised.

The Linsters would eventually remove over 10,000 bones from that land, handling everything themselves, from the digging to the preparation, marketing, and selling. And yet, as the years passed, with museum after museum turning their nose up at their finds, Cliff and Sandy realized that, despite their extensive time in the field and the many creatures they'd dug up, very few of their discoveries would ever transcend the stigma of their status as amateurs.



In order to get the recognition of the establishment, the Linsters needed to be better than the rest. To not just find your average *Mauisaurus*, but to unearth something truly extraordinary. And one day in 1997, they did: a rare *Gorgosaurus*, one of the most intact and scientifically unique of its kind. While roughly a hundred *T. rex* have so far been discovered worldwide, just over twenty *Gorgosaurus* have ever been found. On top of this, the Linsters' creature boasted a 90% complete skull and 75% complete body—nothing short of a miracle in the world of paleontology.

Now on display at the Indianapolis Children's Museum, the Linsters' find was also potentially the first dinosaur found with evidence of a brain tumor, in addition to several broken bones. Peter Larson, president of the Black Hills Institute of Geological Research, once called the specimen "one of the most fantastic theropod dinosaurs that's been discovered." But save for the occasional praise or brief mentions in the footnotes of academic articles, even the *Gorgosaur* did not gain the Linsters the institutional acceptance, let alone international fame, that many paleontologists enjoy.

Paleontology is one of those rare disciplines where its superstars have superseded the admiration of their peers and entered, blazing, into the public consciousness. Parsing the origins of this fascination ultimately leads to the eternal question: What came first, our obsession with dinosaurs—and the people who study them—or *Jurassic Park*?

Jack Horner, famed for his discovery of dinosaur eggs, his scandal-ridden marriage at age 65 to his 19-year-old student, and his attempt to resurrect a dinosaur specimen from chicken embryos, served as the technical advisor for five *Jurassic Park* films, enjoyed a cameo in *Jurassic World*, and is said to have been the inspiration for the character of Dr. Alan Grant. Robert T. Bakker, meanwhile, who is revered for his role in instigating the resurgence of paleontological research in the 1970s—known as the dinosaur renaissance—also gets a mention in the movies, and finds a likeness in the character of Dr. Robert Burke, who falls victim to a *T. rex*. Philip J. Currie, another of the world's foremost paleontologists and a frequent talking head on dinosaur docuseries, served as a model for characters in the film as well.

Throughout the years, Cliff and Sandy rubbed shoulders with these men: poring over maps with Phil Currie and his family, who once spent the night at the Linster's home up in

Montana; sitting at breakfast tables across from Bob Bakker; collaborating with Peter Larson. Wes, however, who's watched his parents struggle to find recognition—and a home—for the bones they discovered, seems more inclined to keep the politics and personalities of paleontology at arm's length. So while paleontologists—many with less field experience than him—travel the world, overseeing groundbreaking digs and starring in Netflix documentaries, Wes appears content with remaining expert of this particular patch of earth. When asked to describe his average day he says, "I make big rocks into little rocks."

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It's morning in Ten Sleep, and we're on our way out to the pit. Wes is dressed in hunting pants, with a rip below the right pocket. He wears a red sweatshirt that reads "Ten Sleep Dirty Sally's" and falls loose and baggy over his thin, wiry torso. His eyes are oversized behind the thick lenses of his glasses and he's shoved a baseball cap over floppy brown hat hair. In summer, Wes typically lives in Crocs and digs barefoot. But this morning, frost has settled into the ground and onto the windshield of his truck, and so he's donned a pair of thick-soled construction boots. The end of digging season is nigh.

A couple of years ago, Wes totaled his Toyota 4Runner after crashing headfirst into a cow. He salvaged the truck, and patched it back together—as he's patched many other things back together, over the years. The 4Runner's back door doesn't close or open; it just rattles. To roll down the window on the driver's side, you need to open the door first. The air conditioner hasn't worked since he replaced the bonnet. Meanwhile, both inside and out, the car has been painted with a layer of dust—courtesy of Washakie County's notorious red dirt.

On our way out of town, Wes turns north off of the 16, the highway that cuts Ten Sleep in two, and along which one can find Dirty Sally's, the Big Horn Saloon, the Carter Inn, a Conoco gas station, and a playground with a purple plastic *Stegosaurus* and a green plastic *Triceratops*, both soft and rounded for play. Amid the town's narrow inner streets is the town hall, a church (or three), and a library, of which Wes is a frequent visitor—spending the dark winter months lost in accounts from pioneers, Native American chiefs, anything that will transport him back into worlds passed.





Nestled at the foot of the Bighorn Mountains, the town of Ten Sleep runs on ranching; most neighbors are separated by acres of fields. Backyards are graveyards for rusted-out farming equipment and broken-down trucks. Drivers yield to sheep and cows. Twenty years ago, visitors mainly consisted of men rolling into town for cattle runs and washing up at the Big Horn Saloon; today, they have been augmented, replaced by climbers seeking to bloody their fingers before washing up at the Ten Sleep Brewing Company.

The Bighorns themselves rose up during the era of mountain formation in the western US known as the Laramie orogeny, a period that lasted from 80 million years ago till roughly 35 million years ago. It's this era of mountain building that created the Black Hills of South Dakota, the Laramie Mountains of eastern Wyoming, and the building blocks of the Rocky Mountains, of which the Bighorns are a part. And it was during this time that the western US was territory to Hadrosaurs, Ceratopsians, and the *Tyrannosaurus rex*.

For this reason, this area has been a magnet for people like Wes for generations. Through a particular confluence of geological time and catastrophic events, the state is a trove of beautifully preserved fossils, many gathered in concentrated areas of mass death. Most American paleontologists will pass through the region at least once in their careers and many major national museums have semi-permanent digs on Wyoming turf.

The area's long tradition of institutional excavations started in 1870, when the paleontologist Othniel Charles Marsh led an expedition to an area of southeastern Wyoming known as Como Bluffs for Yale University. By the end of that decade, Marsh and his comrade-turned-rival, Edward Drinker Cope, had become embroiled and blinded by a desperate battle for scientific discovery later known as 'the Bone Wars,' whose histories read less like advancements in paleontology and more like mob novels, with warring sides often turning to theft, bribery, and the wilful destruction of fossils in pursuit of fame and fortune.

Today, more than a century later, the already existant bias of credentialed paleontologists against amateurs has only strengthened as commercial sales of fossils have fetched higher and higher prices. In 2020, a near-complete *T. rex* named Stan, dug up by an amateur paleontologist in South Dakota in the 1990s, sold at auction for a staggering \$31.8 million. Meanwhile, one of Wes's early dinosaurs, an 85-foot-long *Diplodocus* by the name of Apollo, sold for an asking price, according to the *Billings Gazette*, of roughly \$2.5 million. Wes, for one, sees little of this money. "I jokingly say I'm a bonafide ranch hand but I don't have to do any ranch work," he quips.

Back when Wes was just 14, digging up in Montana, not too far from where the *Gorgosaurus* was discovered, something caught his eye. He ran down the hill, calling after Sandy. "Mom, Mom, I found a dinosaur! I found a raptor!" Yeah right, his mom thought, convinced that all Wes had found was a creative way to get out of his buckets for the day. When the family returned to the dig after dinner, however, Sandy and Cliff indulged their son and went back to the site of his big 'find.' When the dirt fell away, there in the earth was an impression of a delicate, lower jaw. They worked over the weekend to remove Wes's critter, wrapping it up in two small plaster jackets. "He was a good digger even then," says Cliff.

The *Bambiraptor*—or "Bambi" as it came to be affectionately known—was a nearly complete skeleton of a bird-like



Dromaeosaurid theropod. It was not only Wes's first articulated dinosaur, but it was also his first important discovery: the only one of its kind and the most complete raptor skeleton ever discovered in America. Once the bones had made their way to a group of scientists for study, the Linsters issued a single stipulation: that the name their children had chosen for the specimen, Bambi, remain. The professionals weren't pleased, says Cliff ("It's too simple: you can pronounce it"), but eventually, they agreed.

Bambi was originally thought to be a juvenile *Saurornitholestes*—a genus of Cretaceous, raptor-like dinosaurs—but scientists eventually discovered that this was the holotype of a new genus altogether. Paleontologist John Ostrom, another leader of the dinosaur renaissance, said that Wes's find was a "jewel," while others called it The Rosetta Stone of Raptors—imbuing the specimen with the expectation that it might help scientists advance their understanding of the bridge between dinosaur and bird. Over the winter of 2005 to 2006, Bambi was included as part of the American Museum of Natural History's (AMNH) exhibition, "Dinosaurs: Ancient Fossils,

New Discoveries." In the description of the creature, Wes was referred to not by name but simply as "a 14-year-old boy." In other words, just another amateur.

A couple of years before my visit, the same museum flew some scientists over to Ten Sleep to see what they could find. Representatives from institutions such as AMNH are typically the only ones allowed to apply for permits to dig on public land—and as nearly a third of Wyoming is just such, many of the state's dinosaur sites fall on this protected territory. Through his 'wanderings,' Wes knew of a few spots, and directed the AMNH crew to where he thought they should start.

The museum ultimately compensated Wes for some of his time helping them out in the field—after which Wes jokingly tried to convince his wife that they should mount the check, "So I could say I worked for a bonafide institute once in my life." And when a visiting scholar to the AMNH site swung by Wes's dig with a troupe of PhD candidates in tow, he introduced Wes with a flourish: "This man probably has the most fieldwork under his belt of anyone working in paleontology today."

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For the first couple of years that Wes lived in Ten Sleep, few people bothered to learn his name. Instead, he was known to one and all as "The Bone Digger." Today, Wes and his family live behind their general store in a small, cozy home. The store itself offers coffee, ice cream, and basic groceries—but it attracts another crowd too: people who have heard about Wes, and what he does. They drop off rocks and ask his wife Leah if Wes will take them out on a tour of the pits. Sometimes he agrees. He knows that a lot of people are interested in this thing he does; think it's pretty neat. Until, that is, they see it for themselves. See the heat; the hard, unrelenting dirt; and Wes himself, barefoot and sweating, getting eaten alive by the flies and roasted in the summer sun. "You're fucking out of your mind," one of Wes's friends told him, when he visited him at the dig. Sometimes Wes thinks he is too.

Once we reach the pit, I stand above Wes as he rattles off the names of dinosaurs faster than my brain or pen can process. He tells me he first identified the creature he's currently at work on by one of its bones sticking out from beneath a house-sized mound of earth. Now he just calls it 'The Wicked Witch.' He has a name for lots of things. The Bighorns are the

'Gumdrop Mountains'. His brush is 'Wilson', from *Castaway*. His radio, the 'Ghetto Blaster,' only gets a signal on top of the tractor. He calls the strange calluses in the middle of his palms his stigmata. He's broken many a finger and claims to be one of very few individuals to discover and suffer from the funny bone of the hand.

Over the course of my visit, I ask Wes a few times why he does what he does. I do it again now. Sometimes, he dances around the question. "I kind of enjoy doing it," he'll say. But on this morning, as we sit—both a bit bleary-eyed from a night of drinking and bingo at the Ten Sleep Brewing Company—he gives me a different answer. "I guess it's just the whole fact of how cool it is, you know. Taking care of a critter that nobody's ever seen."

When the frost begins to thaw from the ground and our breath, Wes and I head off into the hills. Up on the ridge, we look down on slippery slopes comprised of ancient shells and creatures that once populated the bed of the Sundance Sea—an inland ocean that stretched across a vast expanse of the West during the mid-to-late Jurassic period.

Wes walks slowly, weaving slightly, along the slippery rock trail. From time to time, he bends down to pick something up and turns back, to put it in my hand. He's normally on the hunt for Native American artifacts or—more recently—signs of meteorites. But today, what he's mainly finding are the fossilized, cone-shaped calcitic guard of belemnites: squid-like creatures that, living, had ten hooked arms but in their fossilized state look like dull bullet casings.



This style of walking is a family trait. When Cliff, Sandy, Wes, and his brother Bob—who occasionally stops in town—head out on hikes together, they walk in just this way, eyes trained to the ground, moving slowly. When they were kids, Wes and his siblings were taught to keep their eye out for things that looked non-native. Things that didn't quite fit. "We all have neck problems, from looking down," laughs Cliff.

On our way back from the hike, Wes talks to me about cheatgrass. From where we are, up on the hill, all we can see is rolling waves of the stuff. It is, inarguably, a defining characteristic of the landscape. He tells me that it is also invasive and, like many introduced species, stubborn in the extreme. Range fires, stagnant water—nothing can keep cheatgrass at bay.

It was first brought out West in the wagons of homesteaders, who used the soft and fluffy grass to protect their pots and their glassware for the long journey ahead. Soon, however, it dominated the terrain. This is one of Wes's favorite hobbies: to imagine how this place looked in centuries, millenia past. Before the cheatgrass, the Bighorn Basin was covered in native grass, Wes says, hip-high. That would've been neat to see, he laments. "Need to get that time machine going." *





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