

DOME SWEET DOME

Present location of Sternberg Museum to
celebrate 25th Anniversary in March



Dome Sweet Dome” is how one magazine dubbed Fort Hays State University’s plan to relocate Sternberg Museum from the campus to its present location next to I-70. Others referred to it as “Dome on the Range.”

But no matter what it is/was called, the present location of Sternberg Museum has stood the test of time, and in March of 2024, it will celebrate its 25th anniversary.

Of course, numerous activities and celebrations are being planned and will be announced at a later date.

Although it officially opened on March 13, 1999, the journey to the new Sternberg Museum began in 1990 when FHSU purchased the building from the Chrysler Corpora-

tion for \$1.

Originally built as a sports club in 1983-84, it went bankrupt three years later. With the exception of small amounts of space occupied in subsequent years, the dome remained empty, costing Chrysler Credit Corporation, the financing firm thousands of dollars a year in taxes and maintenance.

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Then FHSU President Edward Hammond and other university authorities worked with Chrysler to purchase the building, which at the time was valued at \$4.5 million. Hammond commented that the new museum would “serve as a bonafide complement” to other

Kansas tourist attractions. In fact, Hammond estimated that museum officials expected more than 250,000 visitors in its first year and as many as 350,000 annually by its third year of operation. At the time, the Sternberg museum on campus

drew around 20,000 annual visitors.

When FHSU assumed ownership of the building, it was in bad shape. According to the book “Dinosaurs To Dung Beetles: Expeditions Through Time,” author Gregory Liggett reported that the roof leaked, the pool had not been drained, pipes were broken, mold and mildew permeated the structure, and vandals had broken in and left considerable damage. The entire building was gutted, and university crews worked to stabilize the building.

Fundraising

Planning began immediately on the new building, and the process of raising funds began. At the time, it was estimated that the renovation costs would run around \$6.5 million. The price tag swelled to \$9.7 million due to escalating construction costs, the cost of education programs, and the installation of a sprinkler system that had to be custom-built to protect displays of computer-controlled dinosaurs. The funding shortfall delayed the project, but in early 1998, Hammond announced that the needed funding had been obtained and the opening date was set for March of 1999.

The project received funds from many sources in the private sector. Ross and Marianna Beach of Hays gave \$1 million in 1993, followed by Darrell and Marilyn Seibel with a \$700,000 donation of cash and land located near the new facility. Other benefactors included the family of Rick and Gail Kuehl, Don and Cecilia Bickle, the Fleharty Family Partnership, and numerous other large and small donations from the people of Hays and surrounding area.

The last six months of 1997 saw the greatest influx of funds for the project. The State Finance Council of the State of Kansas answered FHSU’s request for funds for the project with a matching grant of \$250,000. The Hansen Foundation in



Pre-renovation photos show the bowling alley, the swimming pool (which is now the lobby) and the tennis courts. Initial renovation costs were estimated at \$6.5 million but that swelled to \$9.7 million due to escalating construction costs, the cost of education programs, and the installation of a custom sprinkler system.



Logan matched the grant and a snowball effect followed. Hansen later provided another \$150,000 donation.

Other financial support came from John and Susan Sykes of Tampa, FL; A.B. Engel of Ellis; Paul Miller of Hays; Jim and Pat Bartel of Hays; the Dreiling Charitable Trust Fund of Hays; and a \$250,000 commitment from Bob and Pat Schmidt of Hays.

Museum First Organized 1926

Sternberg has a long history at FHSU. Formally organized in 1926, the museum was named in 1969 for a family of famed fossil hunters, including George Sternberg, who served as museum curator for many years, and who in 1952,

TOP: Work on the diorama.

MIDDLE: The bridge and diorama under construction.

ABOVE: Work on one of the dinosaurs that found a new home in the diorama.



An artist creates the paintings on the walls of the diorama.

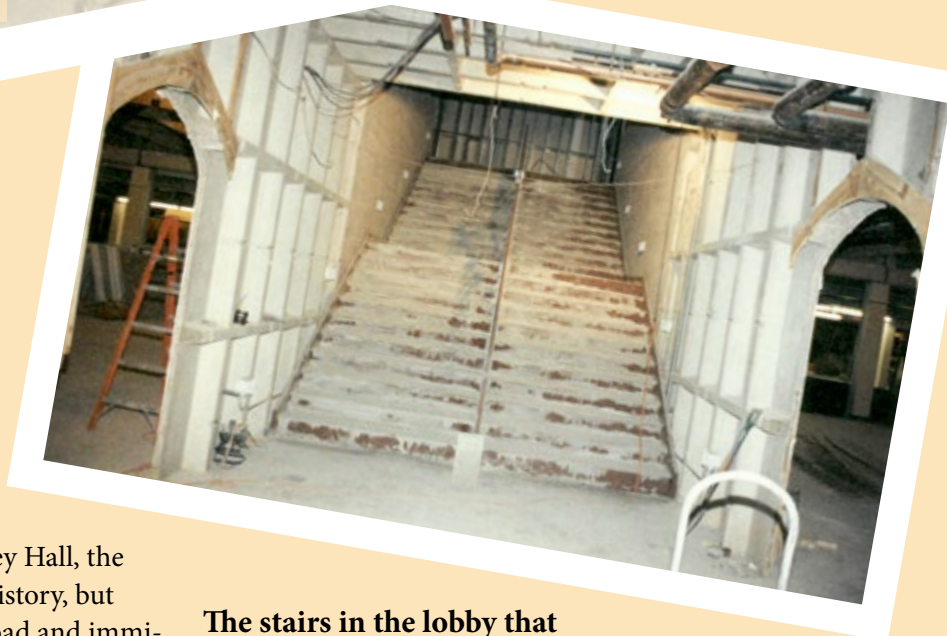
collected the now world-famous “fish with a fish” from an area fossil bed.

Sternberg’s collection not only includes remains of giant fishes and reptiles that lived in the Kansas seas, but also the elephants, camels, bison and other creatures that roamed the land after the seas receded.

When the museum was located at McCartney Hall, the holdings not only reflected the area’s natural history, but also the human history of Fort Hays, the railroad and immigrant settlers. Archeological and ethnological artifacts from Indian and other cultures were also found at the museum.

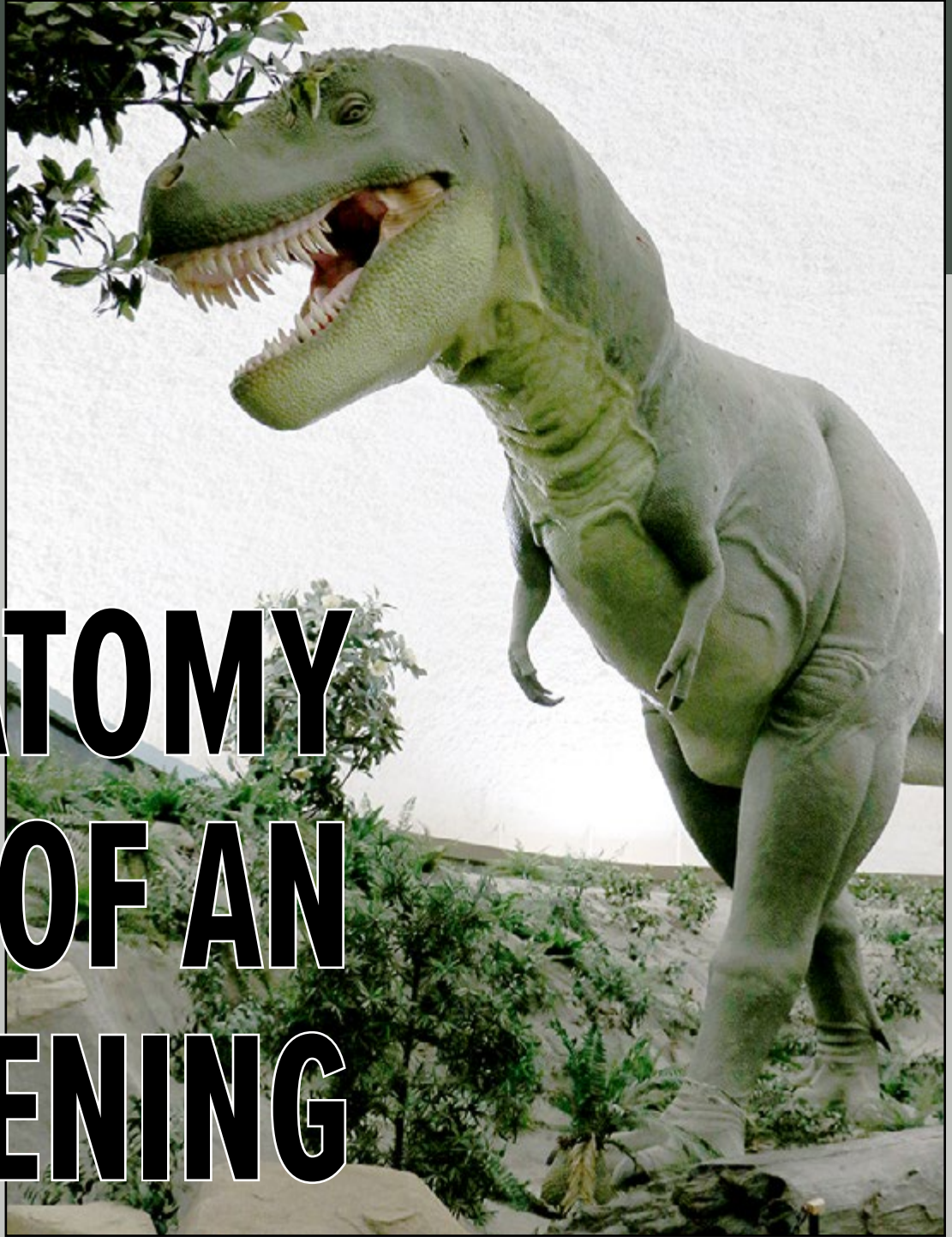
When the new museum was completed, the decision was made to make it a natural history museum. The human history collections were donated to area museums such as the Ellis County Historical Society.

“It’s important for people to know that those collections were not disposed of but are in fact at other museums,” said Brad Penka, manager of visitor services. “For example the



The stairs in the lobby that lead to the main floor of the museum prior to final renovation.

gun collection, which many people are familiar with, is still owned by Sternberg but is now located at Ellis County Historical Society as are other local artifacts. The coin collection went to the bank museum in Rush County, while all the art went to the art department. Those collections are still out there and being cared for. They are just at a different place.”



ANATOMY OF AN OPENING

**Even though 11 inches of snow fell the night before,
Sternberg Museum opened on March 13, 1999**

(Note: The following was excerpted from an article published in the 1999 Edition of the Reveille, Fort Hays State University's yearbook.)

by Rebecca Blocksome

Saturday, March 13, 1999

8:30 a.m.

The morning of the big day dawned cold and bright – the sun reflecting off the nearly 11 inches of snow Hays received

overnight. Even as the snow continued to fall softly, preparations were already well underway for the much-vaunted grand opening of Sternberg Museum.

Out at the dome, three snowplows and a grader worked diligently to clear the parking lot before guest arrived. Security was tight for the by-invitation-only dedicated. In an anomalous sight, black suit-clad VIPs disembarked from pick-ups, four-wheel drives, and any other vehicles that could make it through the snowy streets.

Inside the building, museum workers checked and rechecked every last detail, compelled to action by habit rather than necessity. After years of planning and months of 16-hour days, the big moment had arrived.

9 a.m.

The long-awaited grand opening had to wait a little longer. Although slated for 9 a.m., the dedication was delayed over 20 minutes because of the weather. In the meantime, the lobby swelled to capacity with journalists, government officials and top FHSU brass.

Even though the lobby was standing-room-only, the weather caused several notable absences, including Gov. Bill Graves, Lt. Gov. Gary Sherrer, and Kansas Board of Regents Chair William Docking.

9:30 a.m.

And finally, the moment everyone had been wait for:

Ken Havner, vice chair of the Kansas Board of Regents, drew a laugh from the crowd as he reminisced about his tenure as mayor in Hays, during which time he had a favorite saying: "It's a beautiful day in Hays, Kansas."

Master of Ceremonies Bob Lowen cleared his throat and the festivities began. First up on the agenda was the dedication of the Seibel Lobby, named after Darrell and Marilyn Seibel, who donated the land surrounding the museum

"This facility ... is the finest use of property that Marilynn and I could possible imagine," Darrell Seibel

said.

The Seibel's contribution was marked by the unveiling of a portrait of them done by Mick Jilg, professor of art.

The dedication of Ross and Marianna Beach Hall- the actual building the museum is housed in- was opened by Ken Havner, vice chair of the Kansas Board of Regents. Havner drew a laugh from the crowd as he reminisced about his tenure as mayor of Hays, during which time he had a favorite saying: "It's a beautiful day in Hays, Kansas."

"And folks, it's beautiful day in Hays, Kansas," Havner said as snow swirled behind him. He paid tribute to the new

Time capsule contents to be revealed

When Sternberg Museum celebrates its 25th anniversary this spring, one of the activities will be to open up the large T-Rex located in the museum's diorama.

Upon opening the 45-foot-long dinosaur will reveal an unusual time capsule that was created when the museum was opened.

Personal mementos, which included family photographs, recipes, financial certificates of deposit, and boxes and envelopes stuffed with personal belongings, were among the many items that were sealed in the gullet of the T-Rex.

At the time, Gregg Liggett, administrative director

of the museum, said the idea behind the time capsule was to get the public involved in the museum's new facility. For as little as \$10, people were allowed to add to the items of the time capsule.

The museum provided envelopes or cardboard boxes for the time capsule at the following rates: \$10 for a 6 x 9 envelope; \$30 for a 9 x 12 envelope; \$50 for a 3 x 5 x 12 box; and \$100 for a 2.5 x 10 x 12 box.

Liggett said the T-rex time capsule wasn't designed to raise a lot of money, but rather to serve as a reminder that they had items at the museum each time they visited.

Sternberg, calling it the “crown jewel of the Regents system for natural history.”

FHSU President Edward H. Hammond recognized the Beaches for their \$1 million donation, saying they have come to be known as the “godfather and godmother of the Regents system for their generous donations to FHSU, the University of Kansas, and Kansas State University.

“We didn’t make it all possible,” Ross Beach said. “Maybe we helped get it started.”

10 a.m.

After the flowery speeches concluded, all that was left to be done was the ribbon-cutting ceremony itself. Shutters clicked and applause rang out as the over-sized scissors sliced neatly through 12 feet of yellow ribbon, officially opening the Sternberg collections to the outside world.

Lowen futilely requested everyone to remain in place as impatient guests strained to get a glimpse of the dome. Hammond himself led the first tour through the Uplands diorama, designed to look like a moment in the Cretaceous period 70 million years ago.

Tasteful black and gold plaques throughout the museum commemorated donors, while outstanding gifts merited a whole room being named after the donor - the Schmidt and Hansen galleries, Engel Educational Center and Ronald McDonald Discovery Room.

FHSU students were well represented among the workers, taking tickets and leading tours. “I was excited to see what this place had and kind of wanted to get a sneak peek for myself,” said Brian Cole, Minneapolis sophomore, of why he decided to be a tour guide. “It’s just amazing how a group of people can pull together to create something this absolutely spectacular.”

1 p.m.

The first of the general public began to arrive, forming a line which stretched across the lobby to the outside doors. The morning’s suits and ties were replaced by jeans and sneakers, and carefully orchestrated photo opportunities by casual snapshots with the woolly mammoth skeleton. People of all ages, especially families, waited patiently for their guided tour. Conspicuously absent from the line, however, were FHSU students themselves; only three or four seemed to be present at any one time.

Those who did go through had only good things to say about the museum.

“I was pretty impressed,” Amy Koehn, Louisburg senior, said. “It was so realistic.”

Sally Leatherman, Pawnee City, Neb., senior, agreed. “We heard so much talk about it,” she said. “We were just curious.”

No Hammond project would be complete without the latest in modern technology, and Sternberg was certainly no exception. In addition to robotic dinosaurs and special effects lighting in the museum itself, videos chronicling Sternberg Museum and ‘Ellis County were projected onto a lobby wall using the same technology found in mediated classrooms. However, they seemed to be falling onto deaf ears; most attention was directed to the ticket-takers and beyond.

8:30 p.m.

As the long day wound down, a few yawns could be seen in the sparsely populated lobby. The excited chatter of visitors had mostly died out to be replaced by the hum of vacuum cleaners and the twang of banjo music from the video soundtrack.

“It was a fun day,” Kurt Beyers, assistant director of University Relations, said. “It was long and tiring, but it was interesting. There were a lot of great people here today.”

Beyers’ count, 1,900 “great people” braved the weather to visit the museum, an average of 200 per hour. The museum bookstore also had a good day. General Manager Scott Dickey estimated that 90 percent of the museum’s visitors also stopped by the bookstore, and said they had sold out of several small items. Employee Michelle Hertel, Hays junior, also expressed enthusiasm about sales and said she expected Sunday to be even better if the weather cleared up.

“Tomorrow, I hope they can find their cars,” she said.

9:15 p.m.

The last visitors trickled out as museum workers turned out lights and locked doors, only 15 minutes past the official closing time. The videos play insistently onward to a row of empty chairs, this time set to something reminiscent of space music from National Public Radio. Outside, broad blue searchlight beams cut through the icy starlit night, highlighting the museum’s location even after dark.



James Helget leads a staff of three employees who perform various custodial and maintenance duties.

KEEPING UP **APPEARANCES**

Building operations department strives to maintain 'showroom appearance' throughout the museum

People who frequent museums come to see the various exhibits and artifacts, not to experience building maintenance issues or overall uncleanliness.

Those areas are certainly not an issue at Sternberg Museum as most visitors would attest that the facility is extremely well kept.

Leading that effort is James Helget, who serves as the physical plant coordinator and buildings operations manager. A 26-year veteran of Sternberg Museum, Helget spends part of his time on the FHSU campus where he oversees the campus and residential custodial depart-

ments.

“We do a little bit of everything from custodial to building maintenance to security to grounds,” Helget said. “We do what’s needed to make sure the museum is successful.”

Helget supervises three employees at Sternberg, including custodian Rosemary Johnson, who has worked at the museum for 30 years. Johnson works mornings, while Mike Bartell, another 30-year veteran, works in the afternoons. Greg Meder works in the maintenance area and previously worked for the university for 15 years and has been at Sternberg for one year.



Completing work on a light fixture is Greg Meder, who handles a variety of maintenance responsibilities.



Mike Bartell and Rosemary Johnson take care of the many custodial duties at the museum. Both have worked for Sternberg for 30 years.

“Mike and Rose take care of the bathrooms, which as you know are very clean, spotless and detail oriented,” Helget said. “Mike also takes care of all the floors and the back room and he does carpet extracting and running the auto scrubber and pretty much whatever we ask of him. We have a good group of staff members and they all give 100 percent. We strive for showroom appearance, which is what we’re all about.”

Helget and Meder, meanwhile, take care of the many maintenance duties throughout the museum. That includes heating and air, plumbing, electrical and all the other things that crop up during the day.

“We’re happy to take care of the place and provide good customer service. We want people to come back, and if you have a clean functional facility, that always helps.”

**JAMES HELGET
STERNBERG OPERATIONS
MANAGER**

“We can’t always fix everything, but Greg and I will troubleshoot it, and if we can

fix it, we’ll fix it and go from there,” Helget said. “We do rely on campout from time to time when we run against something we can’t handle. I mean, we’re not full-fledged electrician and plumbers, but we probably do 90 percent of all the work.”

When asked about some of the challenges faced during his tenure, Helget said every day is different.

“You never know what you’re gonna run against,” he said. “You know, it might be an electrical problem with the ballasts or lights, or the AC system or the boiler system. Every day is different and we just do the best we can and keep moving forward. But the bottom line is we want to make sure the place is successful by doing our part to make sure the museum is clean and functional.”

Cleaning and maintenance of such a large facility is a huge job, and Helget was asked if he had assistance from volunteers or other part-time help.

“We don’t have any volunteers for the operations department,” he said. “Over the years we’ve been cut back quite a bit on staffing and we just haven’t had any volunteers or students call us. We used to hire college students when we first opened but not anymore. It’s a big job that’s for sure. But we all work together to make that place successful. It’s a team effort and we do the best we can and keep moving forward. We’re happy to take care of the place and provide good customer service. We want people to come back, and if you have a clean functional facility, that always helps.”



Holidays bring
kid-friendly
activities
to Sternberg

AT THE MUSEUM



