

# THE PTERANODON

NOVEMBER 2023

LATEST NEWS & UPCOMING EVENTS



FORT HAYS STATE UNIVERSITY'S  
STERNBERG MUSEUM  
OF NATURAL HISTORY



## NATIONAL FOSSIL DAY

### 571 visitors enjoy activities at the Sternberg Museum



Five hundred and seventy-one people enjoyed free admission to the Sternberg Museum in celebration of National Fossil Day on Oct. 15.

National Fossil Day was started by the National Park Service as an annual celebration held to highlight the scientific and educational value of paleontology and the importance of preserving fossils for future generations.

This year's theme at the Sternberg Museum was "Dinosaurs of Kansas" with special displays and activities from 1-5 p.m. The free event featured dinosaur-theme displays, activities and crafts appropriate for all ages.

Tables were set-up throughout the museum, which enabled visitors to explore the dinosaur fossil record of Kansas, discover why dinosaur fossils are so rare here, and learn about ongoing dinosaur research at the Museum. Visitors also learned more about Kansas dinosaurs still around today.

In addition, people got to see the new Exhibition Dinosaurs: Rise of the Mammals exhibit now at the museum until Dec. 21.





Free admission on National Fossil Day  
enabled visitors to experience existing exhibits  
as well as special displays







# VISITOR SERVICES

Brad Penka leads a group of volunteers and student employees to provide Sternberg visitors a positive experience

The initial point of contact often dictates the success or failure of an organization. And nobody knows that better than Brad Penka, manager of visitor services.

Penka is responsible for several areas, including the admissions desk, the Excavations gift shop and the membership program. So essentially, he not only is responsible for making sure visitors are welcome when they arrive, but also that they have a pleasant experience on the way out when they visit the store.

Penka started working at the Sternberg in 1998 as a student attending Fort Hays State University. One of his first jobs was to provide tours of the museum while it was under construction.

"We called them construction tours because there were so many local people that were curious about what was going on in this place," Penka said. "As a result, they decided they were going to start offering tours of the building - the empty building. We took people through this construction zone and say, 'Well, this is where this is going to be and this where's that

going to be.' At that time, the diorama was pretty much done as was much of the third floor. Everything else was bare studs."

Penka shared an interesting experience prior to hosting construction tours for the public.

"When we had our first meeting to discuss doing these tours, we were going through the diorama with a huge storm outside," Penka recalled. "Right as we came up the ramp to the diorama, the power went out and it was pitch black in the building, so we had to stand there and wait for somebody to go find a flashlight. It was hailing and we had all this pounding on the roof while we went through the diorama on a flashlight tour. The first time I saw the T-Rex was with a flashlight shined on his head."

In addition to tours, Penka was handed the responsibility of helping start the membership program. While construction was underway, he noted that museum staff was housed in Custer Hall on campus.

"The assistant director actually started the program, but they needed somebody to handle the day-to-day responsibilities," Penka said. "I got hired on as a student at first and

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**BRAD PENKA - MANAGER VISITOR SERVICES**



**The gift shop was originally run by Barnes & Noble but was eventually taken over by the museum.**

then hired by the state in what was a temporary position.”

When the museum opened, Penka said the offices weren't finished. Greg Walters' current office was the museum temporary office, and Penka shared it with the director (Jerry Choate) and a secretary.

“We all kind of squeezed in one room together while they were finishing the offices next door,” he said. “Greg was upstairs in what is now the resource room. So, it was a haphazard conglomeration for a little while, but after a couple of months they finished construction and we moved to our present location.”

When he was named manager of visitor services, his primary duty was membership program along with the admissions desk.

“At first, I did not have anything to do with the store,” Penka said. “When we first opened, the store was actually farmed out to Barnes and Noble, who had the bookstore on campus at the time. The administration initially decided it didn't want to mess with trying to figure out how to run a store as well as the museum, so they gave it to Barnes and Noble.”

Penka said Barnes and Noble ran the gift shop until

2001.

“They just didn't know what they were doing,” Penka said. “They know how to sell books, but not the kind of things needed in a museum store. Our first gift shop manager was the same person who was working with Barnes and Noble at the time. We went through a couple

of other managers until I inherited the job in 2003 due to some layoffs.”

Penka said he was given the position primarily because he had some retail experience prior to joining the museum staff.

“It's changed enormously since I started; some good changes, some bad,” Penka said. “When I first started, I remember we sold a lot of videotapes and DVDs. We also sold a lot more books than we do now primarily because there's so much online information readily available.”

Currently, Penka said the store tries to carry a little bit of everything and solve the difficult problem of figuring out what customers want. T-shirts

are currently his biggest seller, along with other typical souvenir items like magnets.

“When you're on vacation, tourists want things that are easy to carry home with them,” he said.

Holiday traffic is also good for local business, Penka said, as residents come to the store looking for gift ideas.

“Rocks and minerals sell pretty well, and that's more

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**BRAD PENKA**  
MANAGER VISITOR SERVICES



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**BRAD PENKA - MANAGER VISITOR SERVICES**

local because I don't know a rock shop anywhere close to us," Penka said. "I don't order a lot of rocks because shipping is so expensive because of the weight. So, I have to wait until they come to me. I have a couple of vendors that come through who basically bring a van loaded full of rocks. I dig through the back of the van and pick what I want for the store."

Deciding what to stock in the store became more difficult during COVID, when one of his market options was the Denver Mart.

"It was a great, fantastic place to go," Penka said. "It was a big, regional, like a six-story building, and they sold every gift thing you could think of. That was great. That was very helpful because I could go there and see what items were trending."

In order for things to run smoothly at the front desk and in the store, Penka said he relies on volunteers and student employees.

"We have more dependence on volunteers at the admissions desk than at the store," Penka said. "We can put students in the store, which is a bit more involved; whereas, at the admission desk, there's some training, but our new point of sale system pretty much walks you through it. We are very volunteer dependent at the admissions desk, especially during the day times. Students obviously aren't available to work in the daytime because they are in class. Most of my students come in around 3 p.m., or if I'm lucky enough, I sometimes find students with a gap in their schedules."

Finding volunteers to work is always difficult, Penka said, a task which recently became even more challenging.

"We previously had a volunteer who served as a volunteer coordinator," he said. "When we had somebody in that role, they would interview people to determine a person's interests and assess their knowledge and skill level. We would then train them and put them to work."

Although Penka indicated he currently has a good group of volunteers and student help, he said that can change quickly.

"It gets desperate," he said. "I think it's going to get desperate again after the holidays. Fortunately, or unfortunately, students graduate and that can leave us short-handed."

Penka said the importance of volunteers cannot be stressed enough.

"We are heavily dependent on volunteers and we could not operate without them," Penka said. "I feel like they are probably under-appreciated for what we get out of them. Volunteers bring a much different level of knowledge. With some of the skill sets that the volunteers bring in, we would never be able to afford to hire people with that skill level."

Collectively, Penka said the staff, the volunteers and the student employees make the Sternberg Museum



**Lavonne Fink (above) and Larry Feldt are two of the volunteers who assist Penka at the front desk and in the gift shop, respectively.**



um a great place for Hays.

"I mean for a town the size of Hays, Kansas to have a museum – a world-class museum at the level – is a very unique situation. There's not very many towns in the country or probably in the world of this size that has this type of museum. I think Hays should be really proud."

**Dr. Michael Gruenstaeudl  
views a plant specimen in  
front of an open herbar-  
ium cabinet at Sternberg  
Museum of Natural  
History.**



FHSU students accompany  
professor to view the large  
collection of plant samples  
at Sternberg Museum's

# HERBARIUM

**F**ort Hays State University students and their profes-  
sor enjoyed a successful and somewhat surprising  
visit to Sternberg's herbarium in mid-October.

Dr. Michael Gruenstaeudl said the purpose of the  
visit was to explain to his students how a herbarium is  
organized and teach them  
how they can find target  
plants safely and without  
damaging the plants among  
the thousands of records  
that reside at the Sternberg  
Museum.

"An important and often  
overlooked aspect of bot-  
any is the use of pressed  
and dried plant samples, which are typically collected,  
catalogued, and stored in a herbarium," he said. "Most  
natural history museums and major universities own a  
herbarium because botanical research heavily relies on  
such dried plant collections.

"After all, it is virtually impossible to study the dif-

ferent species of a plant lineage purely in their live and  
fresh forms, because such species often inhabit different  
countries, bloom at different times, and occur in differ-  
ent abundances. A greenhouse could hold, at most, a few  
hundred live samples. A herbarium, by contrast, often

holds tens of thousands of  
samples, albeit dried ones."

Gruenstaeudl joined the  
FHSU faculty in January  
as an assistant professor in  
the Department of Biologi-  
cal Sciences with a research  
focus on genetics, bioinfor-  
matics, and plant biology.

He received his PhD at the  
University of Texas in Austin in 2013 and has since been  
a postdoctoral researcher and lecturer at the Ohio State  
University and the Freie Universiaet Berlin, Germany.

The nine students who accompanied Gruenstaeudl on  
his visit to Sternberg are all enrolled in a botany and bot-  
any lab course. The students have diverse major concen-

*"Several students were surprised  
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the late 1800s and early 1900s."*

**DR. MICHAEL GRUENSTAEUDL  
FORT HAYS STATE UNIVERSITY**



trations, from science education to natural resources.

“By attending the course, they all want to receive a general overview of the field of botany,” Gruenstaeudl said.

The visit to the herbarium was a success, Gruenstaeudl said, as the students were amazed and surprised at Sternberg’s large collection of dried plant specimens from across the mid-western United States.

“Several students were surprised and somewhat incredulous to find well-preserved plant specimens from the late 1800s and early 1900s among the dried plant specimens,” he said. “However, the students did have difficulties reading the mostly hand-written information that accompanied these plant samples, as many voucher specimens were annotated in cursive handwriting.”

Gruenstaeudl added that one student remarked that such an herbarium probably holds more botanical specimens than any single person could visit in a lifetime.

“In short, the students very much enjoyed the visit, and I will very likely include a visit to the Sternberg Museum in future iterations of this course,” he said.

After the visit to the Sternberg Museum, Gruenstaeudl said the students were so excited regarding plant identification that they did a brief impromptu plant identification session upon arriving back on campus.

“It is experiences such as these that render botany intelligible and exciting to many of today’s students,” he said.



**ABOVE:** Example of the herbarium voucher (i.e., a dried plant specimen, mounted on a herbarium sheet) of the rare plant *Oenothera fremontii* (Fremont’s Evening Primrose; Onagraceae).

**LEFT:** The class upon returning from its visit during a plant identification session.





# Vertebrate paleontologists take over

# CINCINNATI

by Dr. Laura Wilson  
Chief Curator

This October, paleontologists from around the world met in Cincinnati, Ohio for the Society of Vertebrate Paleontology annual meeting.

This meeting always provides an opportunity for students, professionals, and advocational paleontologists to share ideas, catch up, and expand their networks

But after two years with the meeting outside of the U.S. and two years of online meetings, the enthusiasm for fossils, science, and making personal connections was unparalleled.

Joining in on the fun, 14 Fort Hays State/Sternberg Museum students, alumni, and associates were able to attend the meeting in Cincinnati, including five current paleontology graduate students from the Department of Geosciences.

Curator of Paleontology Dr. Laura Wilson presented with two FHSU Geosciences undergraduate students, recent alumnus Kaiden O'Dell and sophomore Kale Link, and Geoscience department chair Dr. Todd Moore.

Their presentation shared ongoing research on teaching science communication skills to FHSU students. Recent graduate Brynn Wooten, who is now pursuing a Ph.D. at Vanderbilt, presented on her



Fourteen Fort Hays State/Sternberg Museum students, alumni and associates attended the Society of Vertebrate Paleontology annual meeting in Cincinnati.

undergraduate research studying the fossils found at the Sternberg Museum's 8 million year old mammal quarry.

Chris Kingwill, who recently graduated from the Department of Geosciences with his master's degree, gave a talk on Amazon Parrot dispersal across the Caribbean. Other FHSU alumni going back 35 years were also in attendance and happily reminisced with current students.

Another successful conference in the book where FHSU proudly upheld its reputation as a leader in Western Interior Seaway research, museum studies, and science education. We are immensely proud of all our students and alumni!