

Sand Hills Experience III, July 12-14, 2004

By Richard Albrecht, Secretary

Sand Hills Discovery and Visitor Center Foundation.

The Sand Hills Discovery Foundation is excited about the results of this year's Conference. It was our third annual Conference. It took place at the Ainsworth Community Schools, Tuesday, July 13 with field trips offered Monday, the day before and Wednesday the day after. Registration started at 8:30 a.m. in the Commons area of the school where we had 88 registered and about 100 in attendance when counting our board, participants and others who were there to present. The total cost for the full day conference was \$35.

We had five excellent presenters who each gave a 50-minute presentation followed by time for questions and answers. The speakers were all recognized experts in their fields.

Dr. Paul Johnsgard is a Foundation Professor Emeritus of Biological Sciences at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln, where he taught for 40 years, from 1961 through 2001. He is famous for his many publications. This *Fragile Land: A Natural History of the Nebraska Sandhills*, and the *Nature of Nebraska: Ecology and Biodiversity* are only two that deal directly with this area. He has over 42 books in print and is by far the most prolific writer of non-fiction or fiction books in Nebraska's history, and also correspondingly the world's most prolific author of ornithological literature.

The next speaker on the program was Mike Voorhies. Mike is a native of Orchard, Nebraska. He is an eminent Geologist and Paleontologist from the University of Nebraska at Lincoln and he is famous for his work at a fossil site that he discovered and developed called Ashfall. It is located near Royal, Nebraska. This site has received attention from all over the world. It was featured in *National Geographic* magazine. Mike is no stranger to Ainsworth. He is a close friend of the Skinner family. As a young man he studied and worked with Morris Skinner. He has a wealth of information to share and is a delightful person to meet. He spoke about Fossil Trails through this region and tied the collection of fossils in with the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

The 3rd speaker was the highly recognized instructor of Lakota studies from Sinte Gleska University at Mission, SD, Albert White Hat, Sr. His experience varies from working as a college professor, government consultant, to being the script translator and cultural consultant to the famous movie "Dances with Wolves. Among his publications is the unique "Reading and Writing the Lakota Language."

After a lunch James B. Swinehart of the department of Conservation and Survey from the University of Nebraska at Lincoln gave his talk on "Little Dunes on Big Dunes – More Tall Tales From the Sand Hills". Jim had spoken in Ainsworth before and is a masterful speaker who blends humor with his in depth presentation of research findings about the Sand Hills region of Nebraska.

This year we offered three half hour mini sessions. Bruce Bailey, the highway salvage paleontologist with the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, and Shane Tucker, a fossil preparator with that department, hosted a booth where they displayed some fossils and also identified fossils that the general public chooses to bring in. On Monday and Wednesday they directed tours to a fossil quarry, which they are working on located North of Bassett. Participants in the field trip had the opportunity to screen for fossils. The field trip experience started at the NCDC/Chamber office and participants were driven by van to the site. On Wednesday morning

there were 33 people at the site. Almost everyone found some type of fossils. Articles in local papers, the Norfolk Daily News and the Omaha World Herald reported on this adventure. People will receive credit for their discoveries by having their name associated with the specimen in the University collection. The fossil site was discovered by highway employ Rick Irwin. It was the thesis site for Shane Tucker's research and graduate degree from UNL.

Another mini session featured Carolyn Hall. She gave a review of the historic tour that she lead on Wednesday. It was a driving tour to the early trails in Keya Paha and Rock Counties. Participants heard about and saw the Niobrara – Virginia City, Mt. Wagon Road from 1865-66. They also saw the Black Hills and State Boundary Wagon Road of 1878, Morris Bridge at Carns, Nebraska, and the Military Trail from the 1880's from Fort Niobrara near present day Valentine to Niobrara, NE.

The third mini session featured work done by the Ainsworth Middle School students. Science displays were available. Kyle Klammer had a display on figuring the age of fish; Brandon Painter gave a talk on West Nile Virus. They also had a display and discussion of work they have done on trails at the State Recreation area at Long Pine Nebraska.

The fifth speaker was Dennis Bauer, BKR Extension Educator headquartered in the Brown County Court House. Dennis presented "A History of Agricultural Practices in Brown, Keya Paha, and Rock Counties," His presentation tied together our theme for the conference, which is Sand Hills Trails: Ancient, Historic, and Modern.

The day finished with a steak and shrimp dinner at the Ainsworth Elks Club. Wally Bazyn, locally known retired radio announcer from Valentine, Nebraska, was the featured speaker/entertainer. He had the whole audience singing along to their favorite western songs.

Other featured tour included a Monday morning Sand Hills Ranch Tour. This was a driving tour that took participants through the Sand Hills ranch country to see vast prairies, wild flowers, and lots of windmills. Experts, Sid Salzman and Blair Williams guided the tour.

Once again, the Sand Hills Discovery Center Foundation hosted a successful event where participants could increase their knowledge of the Sand Hills, encounter the prairie and trails and genuinely enjoy themselves.