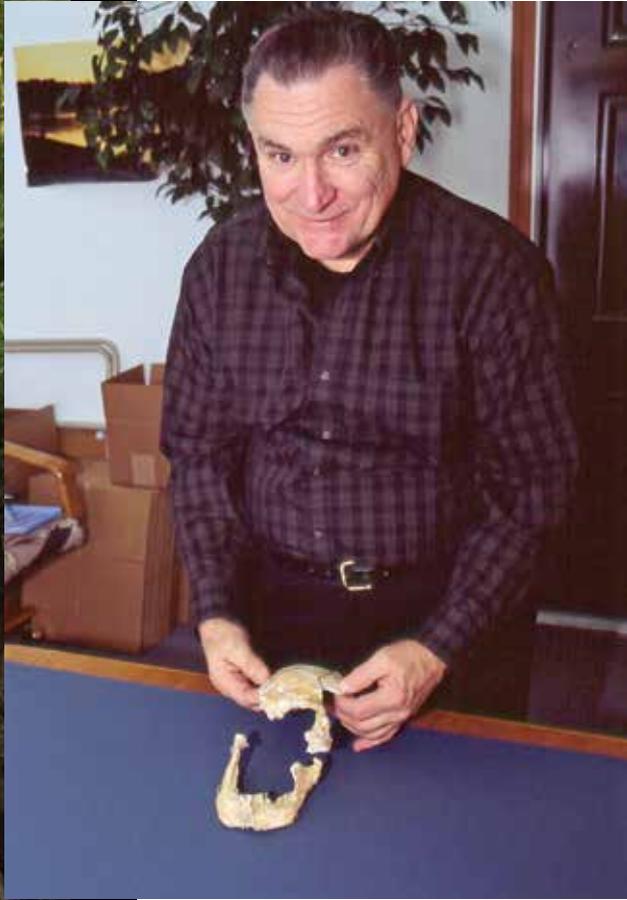


A Look at Ancient Remains

with Robert “Bob” Pyle

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Bob Pyle's interests in the physical world around him have always been extensive. From the study of fossils found along the Potomac River as a child to advanced studies of archeological sites and petroglyphs as a professional, Bob's curiosity lead him to discover a world rich in adventure.

Bob Pyle's natural curiosity became evident as a youngster growing up in Kitzmiller, Maryland, a small coal mining community along the upper Potomac River Valley in Garrett County, Maryland. His father walked to work in the Wolf Den coal mine at Shallmar and noticed fossils that were present in the underground surroundings;

Top photo: Bob Pyle displays an early prehistoric 1,240 year old human skull found in Wyoming County, WV.

Photos at left (left to right): 1. Matrix with fossilized brachiopod shell life native to Cumberland, MD, lived in the area under the ocean millions of years ago. 2. Fern fossils in slate. 3. Peacock coal is a high sulfur coal which is a result of solidification of ancient vegetation, especially trees. The Peacock coal colors come from mineral impurities.

he would sometimes bring samples home for examination. "My father knew the presence of the fossils but not the scientific names and data," recalls Bob.

Unproductive fishing expeditions along the Potomac River also lead to further studies of fossils. "If the fish weren't biting, I would look for fossils along the river bank. Later I also started looking in shale banks for fossils. We didn't have money to spend on entertainment, so I invented my own excitement by collecting fossils."

Early formal education did not provide much support to the fledgling fossil hunter. "My teacher said she wasn't too familiar with fossils, so I started to teach myself. Books were unavailable at the time but later I read encyclopedias we acquired from the A&P market. The encyclopedias were a major resource with pictures that helped to identify the fossils. Dictionaries helped too."

Moving from Kitzmiller, to near Morgantown, WV, in 1951 brought additional discovery opportunities. "I found abandoned glass factories that stimulated my interest in digging for artifacts, but I never stopped collecting fossils."

During junior high school unusual advanced opportunities became available. A graduate student under the direction of Dr. Paul Price, state geologist, was assigned to mentor Bob. Dr. Price proved to be a resource in other ways by providing materials and conversation to the youngster. "He even showed me a map collection and offered to give me one. So, I took an oil and gas map. Dr. Price took an interest in me and was a positive influence."

Evidence of Pre-Historic Growth



Convenient access on Shallmar Road made it easy to study fossils close up. Above Bob points out fossilized wood that fell millions of years ago. The orange/brown stain is from high sulfur content that is leaching from the strata.

The positive educational experiences culminated in a college level class that seventh grader Bob was permitted to audit. He scored 90% on a test, the highest mark in the class.

Another door opened in high school when the principal permitted Bob to be absent on Fridays, so he could participate in scientific work associated with the collection of bats for rabies testing. “The Pittsburgh and Morgantown grotto groups allowed me to be a guest and have the opportunity to collect marine fossils in Pendleton County, WV. The fossils were lying on the cave floors; I just picked them up.”

Interest in fossils eventually lead to a formal education in geology that paved the way for employment with the West Virginia Department of Transportation State Roads division where he tested and sampled all items used in road

construction. Core drilling to identify rock strata was a key component of his responsibilities. A stint as archeologist for the state engineering group also provided valuable experiences.

Private sector work occupied a major portion of his geological career. Consulting for coal companies, natural gas companies, the federal government, and law enforcement continued for decades. One request for assistance from the Marietta Ohio Sheriff’s Department in 1991 carried emotional and legal consequences. A 13-year-old murder victim had been listed as missing for more than a decade when Bob was contacted. Using a lifetime of knowledge, skills, and techniques, he was able to locate the victim’s body which ultimately led to a conviction in the unsolved murder.



A better detail of the fossilized wood in a roadside exposure. The highlighted area above shows the detail of the wood.

Inset photo: “Dig It,” a hands-on program, was created by Bob Pyle to challenge students to dig, discover, identify and analyze their finds.



While employed as an adult, Bob never forgot the experiences he had with fossils as a youngster in Kitzmiller and Morgantown. In fact, the crinoids, trilobites, and archeological discoveries that generated so much enthusiasm remained an important part of his professional life through educational programming. According to Bob, it is a pleasure to witness the excitement of students as they, too, are engaged in making discoveries.

Presentations on rocks, fossils, minerals, and artifacts occurred regularly and made Bob a popular speaker to recreational camps, civic groups, and schools around the state. The programming became more formal when the assistant superintendent of schools in Marshal County West Virginia requested that Bob create a program to enrich standard educational programs. The result was “Dig It,” an affordable hands-on program that combined science and history. Students immediately engaged in discovering fossilized dinosaur bones, eggs, embryos, and artifacts (depending on the subject being studied) while in a school setting. The “surplus” fossils and artifacts that Bob had acquired over the years were hidden in the soil and students were challenged to dig, discover, identify, analyze, and interpret their finds. Student engagement and use of higher order thinking skills brought praise

from teachers. “My goal in creating “Dig It” was to create programming that would motivate students and stimulate conversations at home,” recalled Bob.

“Dig It” directly benefitted hundreds of students and was incorporated into classroom settings through teacher workshops in West Virginia, Kentucky, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Allegany County, Maryland. Of particular note was Bob’s interest in reaching an at risk student population in the state of Maryland. Students enrolled in the western region of the Maryland Juvenile Justice system participated in outdoor, hands-on programming that resulted in several interesting discoveries and a renewed interest in formal schooling.

Bob remained especially interested in those students who did not respond to traditional teaching methods. One of the most rewarding instances occurred in Flintstone, Maryland, when an elementary student, upon discovering an unusual stone, was put in touch with Bob Pyle for assistance. Bob assisted the student with technical advice,



The historical General Store, Post Office, and Wolf Den Coal Company Office was made of local sandstone and cut by Italian stone masons. The building features a tin ceiling, freezers, original counters, and old brass lighting. Built in 1920, this is one of the most historical buildings in Shallmar, Maryland.

presented him with an amateur paleontologist certificate and, most importantly, engaged him in the learning process. The story was told in newspapers and later resulted in the student's appearance on the Today Show.

After completing more than 300 archeological surveys, amassing a collection of artifacts requiring outbuildings to store, conducting extensive studies of petroglyph sites, and submissions of five papers to the West Virginia Academy of Science, Bob continues his quest to discover.

A recent dig revealed fossil tree roots embedded in a shale bank at Kitzmiller, the small town that started it all. Additional search quickly uncovered additional fossils in a short period of time.

Bob points out that a great feature of fossil hunting is the thrift involved in carrying it out; it is generally free of financial expenses and results may come quickly. In fact, students may be on an equal footing with paleontologists when it comes to making discoveries; one never knows when and where a discovery will happen.

Trilobites and crinoids, Bob's early favorites are easily found and make for interesting conversations. "You can hunt for fossils anywhere that you have permission to look for them. And fossils are not covered under various antiquities laws, like Native American sites, so any discoveries belong to the finder," Bob notes.

With experience comes knowledge; hunters will soon learn the rock types in which plants are typically found and search accordingly. One guideline for novices to follow is to know that plant fossils may be found in shales, a common rock in the Tri-State region.

Fossil hunting may stimulate an interest in academic studies and eventually provide employment opportunities. According to Bob, however, pursuit of financial rewards was never a primary reason to search. As Bob states, hunting fossils and satisfying his curiosity was not simply about making money, rather it satisfied a higher calling. "My best life experiences were the result of being able to share the excitement of making discoveries with others."

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