

# *Life in the Cretaceous*



KEN BARNES

Ken Barnes had no idea when his car broke down in Terlingua in 1969 that he would never leave. “I was working for an engineering company out of Corpus Christi when I came out here to do a land survey. I’m still waiting on parts,” Ken laughs.

He was born in Mission, Texas, in the Rio Grande Valley. He was educated as an engineer. When he decided to remain in the Big Bend, he went to work as a boatman, on a rubber raft at the Villa de la Mina. Gil Felts and Glenn Pepper purchased the Waldron Mine in the 1960s and renovated the ruins, naming the property Casas de las Minas, now Villa de la Mina. Felts built and owned the well-known la Kiva Restaurant and Bar in Terlingua.

“I was a boatman off and on for a year or two doing mechanic work, then I became a county surveyor. First I was a deputy county surveyor, then I got elected county surveyor. I was county surveyor for eight years,” Ken says. “In 1981, I got reelected, but the Surveyors Association took over all the surveying, including the licensed land surveyors and all the county surveyors. They wouldn’t let me take the office. So that was a big mess.”

Ken went from a career in engineering to

becoming what he calls a “self-made” paleontologist. “It all started about 1987 or 1988. I went out to a friend’s property to see some petrified stumps that he told me he found out there. I wanted to see them, and he told me they were still standing up in place,” Ken says. “I never found them, but in the process I found a few fossils on another friend’s property, so I called her and asked if I could collect those few fossils and put them on display around here as something to do. In the process of digging up those, I found about ten more, so then I had to go study and figure out what they were, and then it just grew from that.” The fossil that drew Ken’s attention was a large femur sticking up out of the ground. That bone started his quest to become a self-educated paleontologist.

Ken first displayed his fossils in part of a store in Study Butte, then in a school bus. “I had them in there for a long time, and then I went to Lajitas with it,” says Ken. “Then they needed that space which was right next to their main office, and they wanted to give me a bigger space. And they couldn’t find a bigger space, so they built this for me.” The space is named the Mosasaur Ranch Museum. The website ([www.mosasaur-ranchmuseum.com](http://www.mosasaur-ranchmuseum.com)) calls the exhibit “Seas and



Shores of the Big Bend of Texas: From Mosasaurs to Dinosaurs.” Ken is the founder and curator. The museum displays fossils of mosasaurs, dinosaurs, primeval clams, and ancient shark teeth.

The museum is also a laboratory for processing the fossils. The operation receives no outside funding, except small fees for groups, usually students, and donations. Since Ken supports the museum on his Social Security retirement money, with some rental property income, he also works part time on call to drive a bus for the fire crews in Big Bend National Park in the fall and spring. During mid-May to the first of August, Ken drives

a shuttle for Far Flung Adventures in Taos, N.M., to continue to support the museum.

His interest in the terrain started immediately when he arrived. “The geology is fantastic out here, so I went studying it on my own, and a geologist worked for me for several years while I was surveying. You have to know the geology, so you know where to look and which geological formation,” Ken says. “We don’t just go out here and say, Let’s dig over here, let’s dig over there. We have to find something eroded out on the surface, and then we follow that up and find out where that eroded out from and see if we can find

out where it came from.” All the fossils come from private property with permission from the owners for the excavation; nothing comes from the parks or public land. Ken explains which periods the fossils came from: “There are not any Jurassic or Triassic here in this area. It’s just Cretaceous, about one hundred million years to sixty-five million years old, and below that we’ve got three-hundred-million-year-old Paleozoic rocks.”

The first time we visited Ken, we were given a tour of the impressive fossil collection in the museum. The displays are very informative, and more dinosaur bones line the shelves waiting to be displayed. During our visit, there were two faculty members from Southern Methodist University, working on computers. Now that Ken is seventy, he is making arrangements for his fossils. “Myself and the landowner made an agreement with Texas Memorial Museum to donate the dinosaur fossils to them, but I would stay in control of them as long as I was able,” Ken says. “The problem is that they make me number them now, and I’ve got to do all that paperwork, and that’s not to my liking.”

“I am donating my marine fossils—the mosasaurs, the fish, and the sharks—to SMU for their final destination, and they’re taking them,” Ken says. “Most of them haven’t been prepared yet, and they are preparing them. I’ve got one skull, there’s a cast of it in that case. My high school teachers from Abilene and students made a cast of it.” He will give the dinosaurs to the Texas Natural Science Center at the University of Texas. The Grace Museum in Abilene had an exhibition of Ken’s fossils for fifteen months.

Ken has hosted groups from schools in Abilene and Austin. Larry Millar, an artist from Abilene, and Scott Clark, a teacher from Jim Ned School

in Tuscola, have accompanied the Abilene groups for years. Both members and officers of the West Texas Science Center, located in Abilene, they first met Ken in 1999, when all his files and fossils were in a school bus. “There was a group of students from Cooper High School,” says Larry. “That became our first school because they were smart kids, and they wanted to go. We had fifteen, and we weren’t sure how kids would react to Ken or how Ken would react to students. We’d talked to Ken a number of times, and he is a mellow kind of guy, and we figured this would be just great. Sure enough, it really was!”

The students and adults camped in the basin, then drove to Terlingua. “We met him at the Starlight, as we still do, and then drove out to the dig site and started working,” Larry says. “We discovered he was very patient with the students, as he is with most people, I think, but he really likes kids.” Since Ken’s first career was not in education, he did not have much experience in working with students; however, they responded quite well to him. “In the dig pit,” Larry remembers, “when we were working on bones, students were pretty tentative. He would always tell them, ‘No, you’ve got to dig hard and if you break a fossil, we can usually repair it. We have to dig to find them.’ His level of patience with students never really changed, and we have been doing that for fourteen years,” says Larry.

Besides gaining invaluable hands-on experience, the students learned about the importance of paleontology from Ken. “Every time we went out with a new group,” Larry continues, “he would always want to stop on the drive out to a couple of locations to talk about the paleoenvironment because this was part of the interior seaway,” says Larry. “He talked to the kids a lot

about what was going on with these bones and why the bones were important.”

Larry first met Ken when he was on a UT dig in Big Bend Park. “He taught us everything we know about that place. We went in with absolutely zero knowledge. The first time we met him, he took us into the school bus. We had heard about him. One of the people on the dig mentioned there was this guy in Terlingua who’s got these bones in a school bus. His name is Ken Barnes,” says Larry. “He is the guy who surveyed the whole Terlingua Ranch, so he knows that place like the back of his hand. He took us over to the bus, and that was the first look. That was exciting! It really was, because it was just chock full. We have a lot more bones now because of thirteen years of digging.”

The students came away from the trips with more than new knowledge about paleontology. “I think the kids all saw Ken doing something he loved and was passionate about. We’ve talked to our kids about doing what you want and doing something that you’re passionate about, and they saw that in Ken,” Larry says. “He came to that late in life, and I think that’s a really good example that getting older is not the end of the world. There are things you can do.”

Larry has read of other paleontologists who became interested in the subject later in life. He remembers the *Time* magazine cover of a dinosaur that older paleontologists cite as their inspiration to continue with the subject. “I always say to the students, ‘I didn’t do paleontology for the first time until I was forty-nine.’ They all think that’s old,” Larry says.

Ken has found his experience with students very rewarding. “Since 1999, when I started working with those guys from Abilene, they get together high school groups and they bring them

out here. We’ve got one school that’s been coming out here for years and years now—St. Stephen’s out of Austin. Close to half of the dinosaur bones out here were dug up by those kids under supervision,” says Ken.

He finds all his discoveries exciting, but one that is drawing attention is a type of dinosaur. “We’ve got a little bitty dinosaur . . . actually a fellow from Yale is writing a paper on it, and we’re going to name it after the Gaddis family. It’s a little oviraptor. The beak is very bird-like, and we’ve only got the beak and one claw, but there’s never been one found this far south,” says Ken. “In Canada and Montana there’s been about five of the species found up there. He claims this one is a new species. There’s the sacrum and little femurs over there. We have to write papers on that.”

That is why it is important that the fossils are identified by repository numbers since scientific papers cannot be written as long as the fossils are privately owned, Ken explained to us. He decided to get this done so he could assign numbers to them and start writing papers. “There’s not anybody in Texas that has that much of one individual big duck-billed dinosaur like the ones we have out here, so they have to be identified with a correct repository.”

He has been working with Mike Polcyn from SMU for years on the mosasaur fossils. “We’ve got papers we are going to be putting out on that pretty quick. I’ll be involved with the papers we write,” says Ken. Space in the museum has become an issue. “I’ve run out of space already. All of these shelves are full, mostly parts they are working on, but I could use a lot more space because I’ve got shelves full of stuff out here,” he says.

He most enjoys unearthing the fossils and the research, rather than the paper writing. He has



twelve pages written on a recent find. “I’ve got a baby *Ceratops* skull parts and part of a full grown one that we are trying to describe, but it’s getting complicated because it doesn’t seem to match any of them that’s been found in the Big Bend area so far. It’s more like what they find all up in New Mexico. So it’s getting complicated,” Ken says. While he works in Taos during the summer, it is always an opportunity to continue his fossil work. “I can go out to Colorado and look at stuff in museums up there in Denver or maybe go down to Albuquerque or fly out of Albuquerque and go somewhere else to do some research work,” he says. “While I’m there, I’ll be doing paperwork

on my computer all the time. I’ll still be doing research.”

Ken married and divorced while living in Terlingua. His thirty-two-year-old son, Charlie Barnes, his wife Julia, and his four-year-old granddaughter, Shauna, live nearby. Charlie works for Eco Minerals, a company that bags lignite and other materials. Although Ken likes Shauna being raised in Terlingua, since there are few young families, there are drawbacks. “There aren’t enough kids for her to be associated with until she starts in school. She may start kindergarten next year,” he says. Charlie has been building a house he started when he was fifteen years old.

“He’s rebuilding an old ruin near my house and he’s been working on it ever since. It’s in Ghost Town, I’ve got a whole bunch of ruins down on that property,” says Ken.

He does not characterize himself as antisocial, but he does not enjoy having a lot of people around. “There used to be not too many people here, but it’s getting to where we have too many people again. We’ve got city water now and all that stuff, and people got houses built all over the place out there now where there weren’t any before. They call it progress,” he says. “I’m a real independent person that doesn’t thrive on having a lot of people around me or anything like that. I just do my own thing. It’s just a different way of life. I don’t like the crowds. . . . I’m not very good at small talk for one thing, and I’m a bit of a narcissist for one thing, everything’s got to go my way. I’m a hoarder.”

Like many other longtime residents of the Big Bend, Ken is not concerned with the availability of medical care now that he is older. His philosophy is simple. “Whatever happens is going to happen. So no, that doesn’t bother me right now,” he says. Since the majority of new residents are retirees, he finds that many move away again because of limited health care.

The younger new residents also find it difficult to make Terlingua their permanent home. “They come down here and they are going to set the world on fire. Then it turns out it’s not that easy getting a job and keeping a job around here. There’s not that much work going on except for tourist business. There’s a whole bunch of people that just do tourist things, like guides,” he says. The annual event that draws the largest number of tourists at one time every year is the Terlingua

Chili Cook-Off. “While they are here, it puts a cramp on a lot of us, because there’s a highway patrolman every quarter mile up the highway, just about, stopping everybody for anything. Most of the people who come to the cook-off want to stay at the cook-off, so we don’t have too much problem with that. It’s only one week and it brings some money into town,” Ken says.

We ask if he misses Walmart. “No, not at all. Of course when I leave here, the first place I go is a Walmart,” Ken laughs. He usually travels to Midland/Odessa for bulk shopping, and can order his special glues and supplies through the Internet.

In comparison to the other communities of the Big Bend, Ken finds the people of Terlingua to be more independent. “They are all willing to live on a little less amenities and don’t need to go to the store every day. It is tougher, but in some ways it is easier, though,” Ken says.

Now that Ken is older, he does find that he does not explore as much as he once did. “I’ve gotten to where I don’t get out as much as I used to. I used to hike around all over these hills looking for fossils and just hiking around looking at things and places, but as I got older and older I don’t do that as much anymore,” he says. He does some fly-fishing when he spends the summer in Taos, escaping the blistering heat of Terlingua.

Ken spends his time living in a long-ago past. He appreciates the breathtaking aboveground landscape that draws residents and tourists to the Big Bend but acknowledges that his landscape is underground: “Yes, mostly right now,” Ken says. “But I like the landscape above, too. We still have the same sunsets every afternoon that everyone loves because they’ve never seen one like it. I have roots here.”

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&  
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===== *Authentic* =====

TEXAS

★ **PEOPLE OF THE BIG BEND** ★

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS, AUSTIN



Trent Jones, Olga Jones, Anna Jones and Ken Barns sitting in front of the new school house.

Ken Barns acting as the general contractor.

The school house was built from adobe bricks that were created onsite by day labors from across the Rio Grand River