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RANCHING AND RESEARCH GOOD MIX FOR UM STUDENT

by

Megan McNamer

UM Publications and Media Relations

MISSOULA--

When Ralph Nichols attends geology conventions people call him "Dr. Nichols" and assume he's a professor. While the longtime Big Hole rancher can't claim that particular title, there are many that fit. He's a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Montana and a published paleontologist, for example. And a very nice guy, according to those who know him.

His lighter side comes out in stories told by his friends and colleagues at the UM geology department. How he once sported a shoulder-length, blond, three-dollar wig to class, how he livens up cross-country geological treks with imaginative limericks at each water stop....

But when first met, Nichols appears to be a quiet, nicely familiar Montanan-type with that kind of scrubbed politeness always shown toward fellow ranchers' wives and daughters. He's a bit embarrassed to be quizzed about himself, until the discussion moves to his studies. Then the rest of what people say proves true.

Ralph Nichols knows a lot about fossils.

Little three-toed horses, camels and carnivores, oreodonts and ancient turtles-- parts of them all are in the trays of Nichols' collections. And they're looking amazingly well, considering their age of 10 to 20 million years.

(over)

RANCHING -- add one

Packed and preserved by geologic forces, the critters aren't easily gotten out of the earth and into recognizable form. Nevertheless, Nichols has been accomplishing that since he made a trip to the University at the age of 16 to ask half the geology faculty for advice. (Dr. Charles R. Deiss, a paleontologist, made up that half, with Dr. J.P. Rowe taking up the slack.)

Now Nichols exchanges information with the 13 geologists on the present UM faculty and has added over 1,200 carefully catalogued fossil specimens to the University's collection. They were all collected by Nichols between 1936 and 1980 from Lemhi County, Idaho, and Beaverhead County, Montana.

Dr. Robert Fields, the UM's Tertiary faunal expert, says that Ralph Nichols is one of the most conversant people he's ever met on the subject of fossil mammals. Nichols has had several papers published in the Idaho State University journal, *Tebewa*. He's recently completed a study of the Big Hole area with a geologist from the United States Geological Survey for the April 16 meeting of the Geological Society of America in Rapid City, S.D.

Even the uninitiated can become intrigued through his expertise. He'll take a gray rock with holes in it and call it a turtle's skull. And then the cranky curve of the mouth and chin appears, the sockets where the eyes used to be, the creature blinking in the pre-historic sun...

Imagination must be a plus for a paleontologist. Nichols talks about the feeling of making a find and then wondering about the countless more that may still be in the hills.

"It's like finding a piece of gold," he says.

While it's rare to hear-- "There's pre-historic rodent teeth in them thar hills"-- that doesn't mean that paleontologists don't have the prospecting spirit. Fossil fever has built the UM collection up from three pieces 26 years ago to what is presently

(more)

RANCHING-- add two

a national depository for nearly 9,000 fossils.

All those fossils were gathered piece by piece by UM faculty and students over the years-- Nichols' lump contribution of over 1,200 is the only one of its kind.

"It wouldn't make sense to keep fossils in a private collection," he said, when asked how he could part with the results of years of hard work. "They have a lot of scientific value and should be made available for study. They aren't just curiosities."

"Curiosities" wouldn't have caused Nichols to turn his ranch into a summer operation so he could come to the University each winter quarter for study. The bachelor's degree in geology that he earned in 1942 led to a master's degree in 1976 through this method.

It's a nice set-up-- he doesn't have to worry about putting up hay, and in a couple more years he expects to have his doctorate. He's not particularly pressed about it, though. After becoming Dr. Nichols he plans to continue research and ranching, as always.

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