

Skeleton Found in Warren.

By F. DAVID HOFF

Warren Bureau

Excavation contractor Edward Hillyerd probably wasn't thinking about prehistoric animals four years ago when the bucket of his dragline turned up some old bones in a peat bog near Columbia.

It could have been someone's cow or horse that became mired in the bog and died.

But northern Warren County bogs have been known to yield the remains of such things as Ice Age mastodons.

Hillyerd moved his bucket over a few feet and continued dredging a drainage channel for the county Mosquito Extermination Commission, leaving the bones in the pile of muck he had scooped out.

In doing so, he helped make possible one of the area's most important paleontological discoveries.

Ralph Babcock, owner of the property, picked up a few pieces of bone and, being curious, kept them. Years passed and then several months ago Babcock ran into Gary Sawyer, a 23-year-old anthropology student from Paulina. Sawyer was in a Blirstown hardware store buying supplies for his mastodon restoration.

He told Sawyer he had some bones he might find interesting. Unable to identify them, Sawyer began digging in the pile of muck turned up by Hillyerd's dragline and found some more bones, including part of an antler.

Mike Brown of Yards Creek, a seventh grade pupil at North Warren Regional High School helping Sawyer with the digging, turned up the skull.

The New Jersey State Museum sent paleontologist David Paris to look into the discovery and he identified the find as fossil bones of a Cervales Americanus, a rare elk-moose of the Ice Age. The identification was confirmed by Dr. Donald Baird, curator of the Princeton University Museum, who termed it a "very important find."

Sawyer explains that the giant elk-moose — with features similar to both the present-day elk and moose — was unique to North America and was a contemporary of the saber-tooth tiger and the elephant-like mastodon 10,000 to 20,000 years ago.

It is only the third specimen to be found. The most complete one — discovered at Mount Hermon, a few miles from Babcock's property in the 1870's — is mounted in the Princeton Museum. There is another in Albany.

But with subsequent recovery of 75 to 80 per cent of the entire skeleton, Sawyer's cervalecs is now the second most complete specimen in existence.

Sawyer said Hillyerd's dragline bucket decapitated the prehistoric remains, dropping the skull and antlers in the pile of muck and leaving the skeleton of the body beneath his excavation. With directions from Hillyerd, Sawyer was able to find the rest of the body, which he says was in typical deposits of Ice Age vintage beneath the peat bog.

He explained it has been

THE EXPRESS
New Jersey
Phillipsburg, Warren & Hunterdon Counties
Page 10 Easton, Pa., Tues., June 5, 1973

preserved by the alkaline conditions of the lake bottom — the same conditions that preserved the elk-moose skeleton.

Some parts escaped deterioration miraculously, Sawyer reports, but some of the antler fragments were of the consistency of cheese when unearthed, and preservation and restoration of the specimen has been a painstaking task.

It appears that the Columbia elk-moose had an antler spread of about six feet and was a somewhat larger animal than the one in the Princeton Museum. The antlers have the palmate features of a moose but also the prongs of the elk.

Sawyer describes the project as a joint one of his Blirstown Natural Science Museum and the New Jersey State Museum. Both Paris and Steven Garot of the state

museum have spent many days helping with the excavation.

Sawyer says he has had help from many other individuals — including Herman Kleindienst Jr. who donated a pipeline to divert water from the excavation site; Mrs. Marie Wiederschein and her grandchildren, Robert and Doreen Robeski (who found an Ice-Age mastodon in Liberty Township, now mounted in the state museum); Mike Brown and his brother, Robert; Mike Olsyn Jr. and Mr. and Mrs. Ronald Hulse, all of whom found parts of the fossil.

Babcock has donated the cervalecs to Sawyer's museum, so that it will remain in the area.

Sawyer's museum, which he opened two years ago behind his home just east of Blirstown, is filled with parts of a mastodon he found in Fre-

linghuysen Township and which he is restoring, plus skulls and casts of historic anthropological discoveries he bought while stationed in Germany with the Army Medical Corps.

But he needs a larger place with high ceilings to mount his mastodon and elk-moose. He had hoped to acquire an abandoned creamery building on Route 94, but was unable to meet the asking price, and it has been leased to a bank.

So he continues to restore the pieces of his Ice-Age curiosity until he has a place to assemble them.

Sawyer, who is listed in Who's Who Among Students in American Junior Colleges and who works summers in the paleontology department of the Museum of Natural History, is receiving his associate degree from Queensboro College this month.



RESTORING ICE-AGE CURIOSITY — Gary Sawyer works on the fossil antlers of a rare Ice-Age elk-moose which he unearthed in a peat bog near Columbia.