
Larry Dean Martin (1943-2013) - Renaissance Paleontologist

MICHAEL J. EVERHART

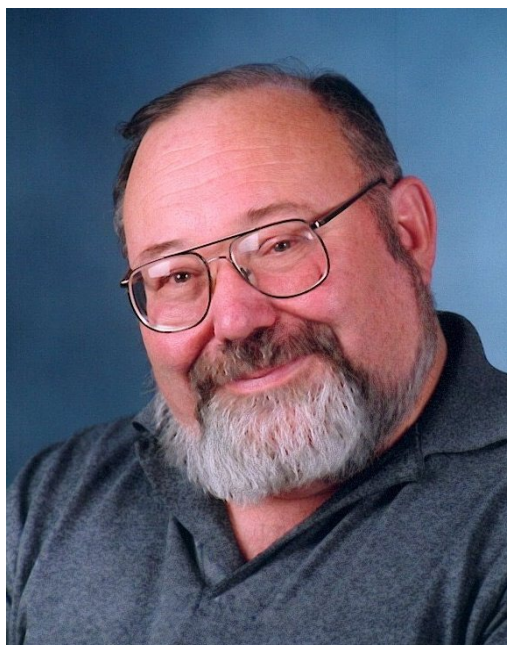
*Sternberg Museum of Natural History, Fort Hays State University, Hays, Kansas
meverhar@fhsu.edu*

Larry Dean Martin, the son of Orval and Nellie Martin, was born December 8, 1943 in Bartlett, a small town in the Sand Hills of northeastern Nebraska. Larry played football in high school and worked on a cattle ranch as a cowboy, but his real game was wrestling. Larry attended the University of Nebraska – Lincoln as a State Merit Scholar, where he met his future wife Jean. He earned his B.S. and Master's degrees there, doing his graduate work under the supervision of Dr. Bertrand Schultz, Director of the University of Nebraska State Museum. He subsequently entered the University of Kansas where he earned his Ph.D. After receiving his degree in 1972, Larry immediately went to work as the Curator of Vertebrate Paleontology at KU. Under his direction as Professor of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, the university's paleontology program became one of the best in the United States.

Larry Martin passed away on Saturday, March 9, 2013 in Rochester, Minnesota after an extended illness. His unexpected death was a shock to everyone who knew him. Stories in the Lawrence Journal and Wichita Eagle (see links following) provide details about his accomplishments in paleontology and his many other areas of interest. As long time friend and co-author Alan Feduccia put it, Larry was a not only a world-class paleontologist, but a Renaissance man, someone who knew a lot about everything. Leonard Krishtalka, former classmate and the Director of the Biodiversity Institute at KU noted that Larry “was really good at bringing science to life, for both a practitioner as well as the public.”

I met Larry for the first time almost 23 years ago at the 50th Annual Meeting of the Society of Vertebrate Paleontology which was held on

the campus of the University of Kansas. The 1990 SVP meeting was much smaller than today's mega-meetings, and it was easy to meet and talk to lots of people. As I recall, my wife and I were introduced by one of Larry's former students, J.D. Stewart, who was our co-author on a talk regarding the fossil remains of small coelacanth that my wife had discovered in the Smoky Hill Chalk. I mentioned to Larry that I was very interested in mosasaurs. Larry and Bruce Rothschild (1989) had just published a paper describing the paleopathology of a specimen of fused mosasaur caudal vertebrae that had been bitten by a shark (Fig. 3). Sensing an opportunity, Larry pulled out the specimen and then explained to me in great detail what had happened when the shark bit the mosasaur's tail and the bones became infected.



Larry Martin (12/08/1943 - 03/09/2013)

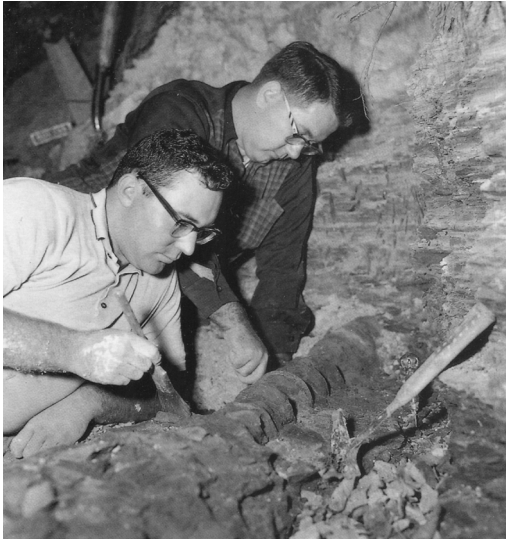


Figure 2. Digging for bones in "... a shale bank on North Oak Creek, Larry and Don Martin uncover a string of vertebrae of the Valparaiso plesiosaur in 1964. The Martins and other museum workers joined volunteers from the Lincoln Gem and Mineral Club in excavating this fossil treasure." (From "The Cellars of Time" in Voorhies et al., 1994). The specimen was identified as the elasmosaur *Thalassomedon haningtoni* (UNSM 50132). It is currently on display in the University of Nebraska State Museum at Lincoln. Used with permission of the University of Nebraska State Museum.

That conversation with Larry opened a door for me to Kansas paleontology. At some point at the 1990 meeting, Larry generously told me that I was free to come up and visit the collections anytime I wanted. Looking back, I now think that Larry had several ulterior motives, the first of which was to allow me to help spread the word about the wealth of fossil specimens in the KU collection. His second was to have another person with which to share his ideas.

Over the years, I cannot remember a time when I visited the KU Museum of Natural History without talking to Larry at some length on a far ranging array of subjects. Those were always very enjoyable conversations and many times left me thinking about research ideas that I had overlooked.



Figure 3. Larry Martin holding a cast of a Late Cretaceous mosasaur caudal vertebrae, fused together as the result of an infection from a shark bite. (Panorama, Spring, 1990, University of Kansas Museum of Natural History).

And, just as important, from the very start of our relationship, Larry essentially "gave me the key" to the collections of fossils in his charge. Of course, I always had to sign the book outside his office door that kept track of all of the visitors to the collections, and "return the key" when I left, but I was able to examine and work with a fabulous array of fossils that had been collected from Kansas since the 1870s. Browsing through the collections, it was not unusual to see the original notes penned by S.W. Williston, B.F. Mudge, H.T. Martin, C.H. Sternberg and other pioneers in Kansas paleontology.

On one occasion when I commented about accidentally damaging a specimen I was collecting, Larry told me, "Don't worry about it. Go and find a better one." Although I was initially surprised by the remark, I eventually understood that Larry was not condoning the mis-handling or destruction of fossils, but rather encouraging me to continue collecting and finding better specimens. As a corollary, he would often remind me, "There is no shortage of fossils. There is only a shortage of paleontologists to study them."

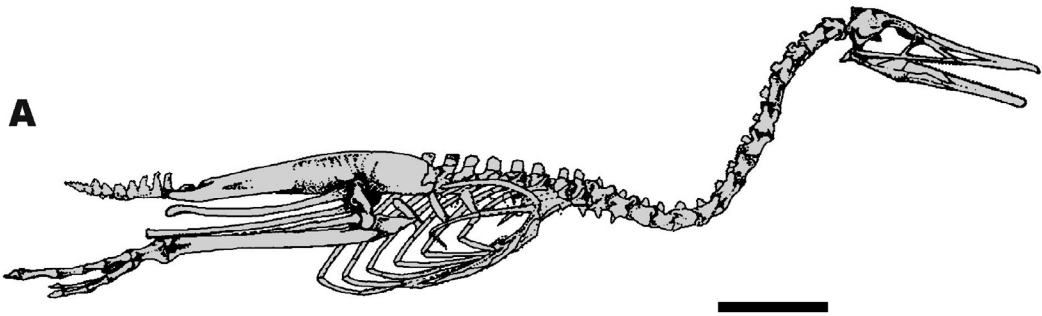


Figure 4. Skeletal drawing of *Parahesperornis alexi* KUV 2287, a new genus and species of toothed bird from the Late Cretaceous of Kansas, adapted from Martin (1984, fig. 4A). Scale = 10 cm.

In 2000, I organized the first Paleontology Symposium in conjunction with the Annual Meeting of the Kansas Academy of Science. When Larry found out that I was doing it, he was excited and promised to support the effort. In the thirteen symposia that have followed, Larry encouraged his students to participate and many times was a presenter himself. The KAS Paleontology Symposium has continued to be an annual event in no small part due to Larry's behind the scenes efforts.

According to the University of Kansas, Larry Martin published over 170 scientific articles in a variety of prestigious journals during his career, many of them products of collaborations with more than 160 co-authors. One of his first papers was published in the Transactions of the Kansas Academy of Science in 1984, naming a new genus and species of Late Cretaceous toothed bird (*Parahesperornis alexi*; Fig. 4) from Kansas.

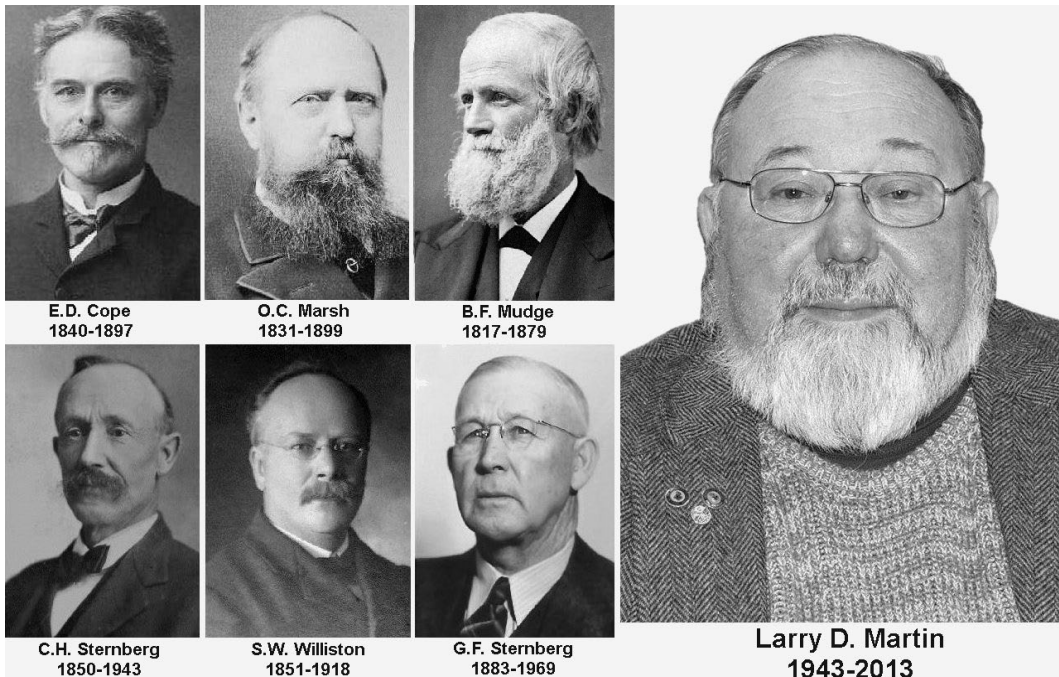


Figure 5. Well-known paleontologists who worked in Kansas (1870-2013)

A close associate of Larry at KU, Bruce Rothschild, remarked that Larry's long list of publications only provides a glimpse of his contributions in such disparate fields as anthropology, linguistics, ecology, aeronautics, astrophysics, paleopathology, art, science fiction and, of course, paleontology. Leonard Krishtalka noted that Martin's paleontology expertise ranged from "the evolution and behavior of dinosaurs, extinct sea monsters and fossil birds, to the anatomy and history of saber-toothed cats, to the changing environments of North America during the past 30 million years and how animals adapted to those changes."

David Burnham, Martin's former student, colleague, and collaborator since 1998, said that Larry liked to tell stories about the creatures that roamed Earth millions of years ago to anyone who would listen. And he did so like few others could do it. "He wanted to bring these things back to life," Burnham said, "And he certainly did."

Larry Martin's passing leaves a big hole in the paleontology community in Kansas and around the world, and in the hearts of his many friends. He will be missed.

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