BURDEN’S PRONGHORN: AN ARIZONA STORY

Discovering a New Species

In 1936, two young boys from New York, Joseph W. Burden (left) and Quentin Roosevelt (right), visited southern Arizona during their summer vacation while students at the Groton School in Massachusetts. While staying at Rancho Los Encinos near Sonoita, they explored a cave known as Papago Springs Cave. There they found a few fossil bones embedded in the rock deposits. They contacted paleontologists at the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH), who encouraged them to find more bones. They returned to the cave a second time, collecting about 70 specimens, which they sent to the museum in New York. Later, Childs Frick, a paleontologist at the Museum, helped the boys write up and publish their findings. The next year, Morris Skinner of the AMNH spent the winter excavating Papago Springs Cave, recovering thousands of fossils, including more than 50 individual pronghorns.

The fossil pronghorn was named Stockoceros onusrosagris. Roosevelt and Burden made up the species name, onusrosagris, in honor of their two families. ‘Onus’ is Latin for a burden, and ‘rosagris’ loosely means red fields, the same as Roosevelt in Dutch.

Stockoceros is known from three localities in Arizona. Besides the original discovery in Papgo Springs Cave, it was also found at Ventana Cave on the Tohono O’odham Reservation, and most recently, at a construction site in Gilbert, Arizona. The Arizona Museum of Natural History, in Mesa, recovered a single tooth of Stockoceros along with a partial mammoth and other fossils.

Stockoceros is also known from a very large sample in San Josecito Cave in Nuevo Leon, Mexico. Other finds are known from California, Colorado, Nebraska, New Mexico, Texas and from Baja California and Sonora, Mexico.

In 1995, Nick Czaplewski and Jim Mead, who had been graduate students in Arizona, returned to Papago Springs Cave to conduct further excavations, look for small fossils which had not been collected previously, and gather information to date the cave’s deposits.

The Accidental Paleontologists

Quentin Roosevelt was the son of Teddy Roosevelt Jr. and a grandson of President Theodore Roosevelt. His friend, Joseph Burden, was the son of Joseph Burden, an investment banker, and Margery Maude Burden, a well-known British actress from a famous theatrical family. Quentin was killed shortly after WWII in an airplane crash in Hong Kong harbor, and Joseph was killed in France shortly after the invasion. He served as a member of the prestigious Scots Guards unit of the British Army.