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# The Mysteries Of Turkey Valley

LYLE PREHEIM

I stand in silence next to the window in the corner of the kitchen of our 120-year-old farmhouse. The rocker that made its home here for many years is gone. I remember my father dozing in it with a newspaper on his lap. I recall him touching my mom with affection when she walked past.

I am looking to the south and up to Turkey Ridge, 8 miles away. Haze partly obscures the scattered farms in the winter landscape. Snow drifts on top of the ridge and it blurs the horizon. It is always much windier up there.

I love looking out across the valley. This is my homeland, and these are my people.

The south slope of Turkey Valley is steep, dropping quickly from the 300-foot-high ridge down to the creek at the bottom. Over centuries deep ravines, “draws,” formed on the steep slopes of the valley. Some of the deeper cuts, or “gulches,” are wooded. Intermittent streams run in the draws during wet years. The north side of the valley has gentler slopes with fewer ravines interrupting miles of farmland.

In his book, *The History of Turner County*, W. H. Stoddard specifically notes the presence of timber in these Childstown Township gulches.<sup>1</sup> Unusual in the terrain of the prairie ecosystem, these unique areas of hills, deep draws, and trees are an oasis for prairie plants and wildlife no longer found in the adjacent cropland. There are three main gulch systems in the first five miles of the valley. Each has tributaries that converge into one main draw that carries large amounts of water during heavy rains. Each gulch system has oak, elm, and cottonwood trees as well as shrubs and other prairie plants. Some of the oaks are of significant stature and age (200 years or more). Known as the bur or mossy cup oak (*Quercus macrocarpa*), this venerable species produces quantities of acorns loved by deer, turkeys, blue jays, and small mammals. Thick corky bark protects the trees against the scorching heat of the prairie fires that were common before European settlers arrived.

In one of these gulch systems, on top of a hill, lies one of the great mysteries of Turkey Valley.

But the reason why Low German Mennonite immigrant Daniel Unruh

and his family first settled in this area is not a mystery. In 1873, coming over the ridge for the first time, Unruh immediately proclaimed: “This will be my home.” Although the prairie grasses grew taller in Turkey Valley than places nearby, it was the clear stream at the bottom of the valley that unlocked his dreams. Water was essential for a new home on the land and the continuously flowing Turkey Creek admirably met this need. A year later, in 1874, a large group of relatively poor Swiss Volhynian Mennonites joined the Unruh group. In the difficult early years, Unruh, who was wealthy, provided financial support.

This was of course not “new” land for the Native Americans who were once more pushed out of it. Prior to Unruh’s arrival, a segment of George Custer’s cavalry on their way to their last stand had a confrontation with Natives in Turkey Valley moving west to their last stand. The spilled blood was barely dry when the Mennonite group, historic Anabaptist pacifists, arrived. This is a story full of irony that those who live in the valley do not often speak of.

Daniel Unruh did not have permission, however, to cut the highly valued Turkey Ridge timber in the gulches even though the gulches were located only a couple of miles from his homestead. The Homestead Act stipulated that you could only cut timber on your personal claim. This made the timber in the gulches valuable since few claims had trees. A couple of men from outside of the community later suffered legal consequences for hauling two loads of timber out of the gulches.<sup>2</sup>

### **Picnics and the Thunderbird**

Since Turkey Valley timber was off limits to the new immigrants, the Native American “Thunderbird mosaic,” described below, remained unknown to Unruh and other early settlers.

When I was young, a one-room schoolhouse, Fairview District #96, was situated halfway down the north side of Turkey Valley. From the school, the Salem Mennonite Church was located a mile to the north and Turkey Creek, a mile to the south. The “South Church Gulches” were special to us as elementary school students because that wild wooded area was where we often had end-of-schoolyear picnics.

At a grassy spot at the bottom of one of the deep draws beneath the oak

trees, and beside the stream, blankets were spread out on the grass. While preparations for lunch were made, some of the girls and most of the boys explored. Following the winding, gurgling water, and watching for minnows, we crossed the creek on exposed stones or windfall bridges. We picked up shiny smooth stones in the water, and where the stream made a sharp turn, we climbed the high clay wall. This area was of great interest to us since it was so very different from the farmland around our homes. We never tired of exploring this fascinating landscape.

Putting school year tests behind us, and after eating hot dogs, chips, and cucumber pickles, the highlight of the day--dam-building--began. Unless it was an unusually dry May, when the stream dries up, it was now time to build a dam. We slipped off our shoes, rolled up pants, and stepped into the cool spring-fed water. With sticks, stones, and mud and our engineering blood pumping strong, we toiled away.

The water rose behind the growing barrier.

“Hurry up! The water’s gonna’ break through!”

Often, the water did take away what we had built, and we had to start all over with a modified engineering plan. We worked until success was declared.

The spring picnics in the gulches were never-forgotten celebrations. Summer lay before us!

Many years later, Jason Aanenson and his young son Tryg and I drove up the hardtop road past the church and the old schoolhouse site (marked now only by a few trees), over the creek and halfway up the south side of the valley towards the Ridge. Parking our cars on the shoulder of the road, we followed an old barb wire fence separating a corn field from the native prairie.

After about a quarter of a mile walk, we came to a ring of stones. Flat sided rocks, about the size of dinner plates, were laid about twelve inches apart, forming a perfect circle. Some of the stones were partially covered by sod, but the twenty-one-foot diameter ring was clearly visible. A few missing stones formed an opening on the northeast side. Was this a teepee ring or a ceremonial site?

Moving past the ring, we began our descent into a deep draw, sometimes grabbing the low hanging branch of an oak to keep from losing balance. At

the bottom of the draw, down fifty feet or more, the shaded air was cool and damp. The trees here were larger and acorns were scattered here and there. Since it had rained recently, a small stream ran all the way to the larger Turkey Creek at the bottom of the valley. “It was near here by a bend in the stream, we used to have our school picnics,” I told my friends.

Following a cow trail, we scrambled up the other side of the draw into a wilderness of sumac thickets and cedar trees. Up and down and around bends, we finally arrived at the archeologically significant “Thunderbird Mosaic.”

The Thunderbird mosaic stones protrude from the prairie sod and are spaced about a foot apart, as in the ring described above, but this time they form the distinctive shape of a bird. The outstretched wings are 16 feet across with a red granite heart in the center. The elongated body of the bird creates the image. We stand in silence, taking in an important symbol for Native American culture. Once seen, the Thunderbird is not easily forgotten.



Daniel Unruh never saw the Thunderbird but we know that it was later “discovered” by a local farmer, Gerald Theodore Hanson, in the early 1900s. He passed this information on to his children and grandchildren, one of whom was my classmate in grade school, Garth Kauffman.

The location of this rare mosaic, the only such artifact found in South Dakota, is nestled on a high ridge between two deep draws. It is remote and nearly inaccessible. Even when one knows where it is, the Thunderbird can easily be missed. Trees and thick sumac cover the area and unless the site is cleared regularly, prairie grasses and rapidly growing sumac hide the treasure. It disappears.

Who created the Thunderbird mosaic? What was its purpose? This is a mystery.

Jeff Buechler, a South Dakota archaeologist, shared this legend:

*The Thunderbird is defined as the spirit of the rain clouds. The flapping of its wings was the crashing of the thunder; from its nostrils issued flames of lightning; the heavens darkened and as the Thunderbird proceeded eastward the rain poured down in torrents.<sup>4</sup>*

Perhaps it is pointing toward sources of water, a gravesite or an important lookout. The southern side of the valley with the steep slopes has panoramic views that would likely have been important for Native Americans, and the continuously flowing Turkey Creek below was an oasis of food and water.

We left the Thunderbird. Walking through another draw and upward to an open area to the west, we reached some of the highest ground on Turkey Ridge. We turned north to a high and prominent knoll. The view was breathtaking.

On top of this knoll is a well-defined depression that does not seem natural. Animals have been digging in the soft, black soil and small stones lie scattered here and there. On one trip, I found a tool, a scraper used for preserving hides. This place has always felt sacred to me. Perhaps it was a burial site.

I shared my thoughts with my friends. We stood in silence looking to the north across a vast landscape, a 180-degree view of miles of open country. On a clear day, one can see 20-30 miles to the north and east. In my mind's eye, I see buffalo herds spread out across the plains, coming down to drink in the creek below. Near that spot another friend, Monte Waltner, once found a buffalo skull protruding from the sand.



After a few moments of silence, we turned eastward to a long slope, continuously and gently running about three miles down to the bottom of the valley. In earlier times this was a perfect place for horse-drawn, high-wheeled wagons to make the long haul to the top of the ridge and beyond. Before railroad lines were built in 1889, prairie settlers had to travel to Yankton (on the Missouri River) to deliver farm goods and bring back supplies. This slope was the best route up the valley for that arduous 35-mile trip. Wagon wheel tracks in the prairie sod show ruts from those early years of portage. Now towards evening, the slanted rays of the sun illuminated the remnants of the trail.

We turned back to the southeast to retrace our steps, but this time we stopped near the bleached skeleton of an old cow. Tryg is fascinated. He stoops down to pick up the lower jawbone of the animal. The teeth, still there, glint ivory in the evening light. "Take it with you if you like," I say. He does.

Reflecting on what had been seen, we were quiet on the long walk back to our vehicles. My mind flashed back to boyhood years in the gulches. I seldom left this enchanting place without pockets filled with mementos. Colorful stones from the creek, acorns scattered among the oaks, or one of my favorite prairie plants--the silky scurf pea--these were the treasures Mom found when it was time to do the laundry.

That day, when we arrived at our cars, Tryg grasped his memento, the old jawbone tightly as he slid into the front seat next to his father. Years later, after Tryg left the community, his father told me that the jawbone was still hanging in his garage.

We do not always know which experiences will be swept away by the passage of time. Mementos help us remember what often become treasures of the mind.

### **The Confluence of Streams and the Close Companions**

Early land surveys of what became eastern South Dakota as well as those in adjoining states were platted in quarter sections and square miles. Roads built around every square were important for access to farmstead driveways.

On the south slope of Turkey Valley there are a few places where there are no mile line roads, in what locals call "rough country." With no intersecting

roads, it is an almost treeless expanse, except for some small cedars, with hills and four deep draws. These draws converge in a large area of marshy lowland covered with cattails. With spring snow melt or heavy rain, the four draws carry significant amounts of water.

Gazing across the open area of hills and draws, it becomes apparent that the land formation, separated by a small ridge, mirrors in microcosm the huge Turkey Valley running adjacent to the north. Only a mile and a half of drainage leads to a marshy lowland. It is a unique ecosystem within itself.

During our teen-age years, my twin brother, Gayle and I, close companions, often explored an area near the Thunderbird that we called “the confluence of streams.”

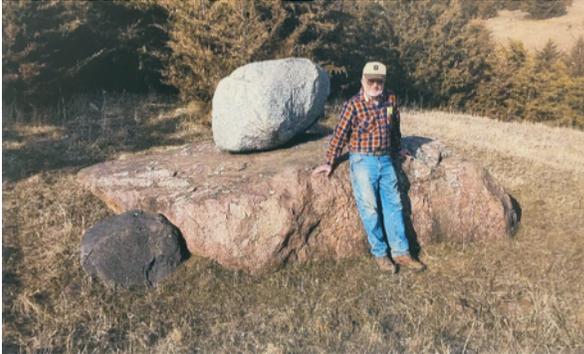
It was in one of the long draws halfway down to the marsh that we first saw some very unusual, enigmatic stones. Our attention was first drawn to a large, rounded gray granite boulder resting on top of another, even larger, stone. As farm boys, we were interested in size and weight. At about five feet in diameter, we estimated that the top stone weighed about eight thousand pounds.

We then began to comprehend the enormous size of the stone beneath the gray boulder. Half buried in the virgin soil of the steep hillside the stone was mammoth in proportion. Stood on end, if that were possible, the reddish colored granite monolith--at over 12 feet in height--would have towered over us. We were stunned. Our estimate was 120,000 pounds.

We also noticed a smaller coal-black stone, perhaps three or four hundred pounds, nestled against the side of the huge slab. Where exactly did these unique stones come from? Representing three different colored compositions, it is as if the three stones--the “close companions”--were a blended family.

We understood that the stones had been brought into the valley on the cutting edge of the last glacier. But how likely was it that the retreating glacier had left the large round stone resting directly on top of its huge partner? The typically erratic distribution of stones remaining after the retreat of the ice made such an occurrence unlikely.

Might Native individuals have moved the smaller rounded boulder with leverage tools onto the flat face of the much larger behemoth? If so, why? This is an enduring mystery.



### Grandpa and the Sandpit

The straining team of horses came to a stop. “*Alle auf!*” (Everybody off), he yelled. At the age of 10, my father, Otto Preheim was sitting beside his father, Jacob J. Preheim, on a seat in the front bottom section of the triple box wagon. “*Pass auf,*” (Be careful), he said, reaching out and touching the shoulder of my father, just before he leapt to the ground to join his two older brothers. They left their round-ended shovels sticking up in the sand of the heavily loaded wagon.

With their shoulders to the rear of the wagon and the horses once more pulling hard, the wooden wheeled vehicle lurched forward. Sand was heavy and after they left the pit, it was always a big challenge to get the wagon up the steep hill. The remaining three miles home was more manageable.

Grandpa, often with a hand-rolled cigarette hanging from his mouth, was lean and wiry and not one for a lot of small talk. With his favorite horse and buggy, however, he often stopped halfway to town, seven miles away, to see Will Senner, a good friend. The two could kill a good share of the afternoon.

In general, Grandpa went about his business and he did well enough to give each of his six boys 80 acres of land. Grandpa was a wheeler dealer in the business world, but he could also be generous. When the financial turmoil and drought of the 1930s hit hard in this rural community, it was Grandpa who paid for the emergency surgery of a friend’s wife, at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota.

“Pa,” as we called my father, often accompanied my grandfather on business and social trips, usually by wagon, and once, by train (to take a load of cattle to Chicago). But even though Pa spent a lot of time with his father,

his closest bond was with his mother. She was the one that comforted him when his father was a little too gruff or his older brothers teased him too much or told him he did not know what he was talking about. Pa sometimes felt a bit inferior to others. But he had a musical gift (probably inherited from his mother). He could sing better than any of the others.

In later years when Grandpa was gone and my father owned the original home place and when it was time to mix and pour concrete, Pa and I went back to the Turkey Valley sand pit. Just three miles away, it was a short trip for our old stock truck. In preparation, we cleaned the truck bed and took out the end gate and two rear side panels.

Once we were in the pit, we watched the Caterpillar go deep into the sandy bottom, push the scoop into the almost vertical wall of sand and bring the load up, dumping it into a moving belt conveyor. At the top of the conveyer, the sand dropped onto a shaking screen that shook off stones and other unwanted material.

From under the screen, the light brown sand poured down clean and fine and moist. It was beautiful, like sand from a beach. After weighing the heavy load at the scale house, we walked into the small structure to make payment. I noticed odd-shaped stones on the windowsill and counter. The scale man said that they were dinosaur bones. At the time, that statement had little impact.

I never tired of going to the 10-acre sand pit, a place of endless fascination. Around the perimeter of the pit, and on top of undisturbed land, there were always piles of dirt and stones (some quite large) scattered about. The scale man explained that they had to push off layers of dirt and stone to get to pure sand.

To the north and east of the sand pit, the land sloped down to a large slough full of cattails. To the west, the land gradually levelled off. The sand pit and slough were the beginning of Turkey Valley. From early on I was told never to go into the cattail area because of the danger of quicksand. This added to the mystery of the place. And I never forgot about the dinosaur bones in the scale house.

### **The Duckbills and the Mosasaur**

Let us go back in time and imagine what Turkey Valley may have been like

in prehistoric ages.

One of the most common inhabitants of the late Cretaceous period was the duckbill. Imagine a female duckbill (about the size of a large turkey) sitting on a nest of eggs when the wind suddenly changes, the relative calm turned into a roaring monster. Blowing sand hits the young mother and stings her eyes. Finally, she leaves her nest in the Turkey Valley sand dune in what would eventually become the Turkey Valley and runs for the shelter of a large tussock.

In some ways this is a mistake. Once the wind dies down, the mother duckbill returns to find that her nest has disappeared, the dunes completely rearranged by hurricane force winds, the nest covered by deep sand.

This duckbill was one of the smallest members of the *Hadrosauridae* family. All hadrosaurs were prolific and often a half dozen eggs, or more, were found in a nest. After female duckbills hatched a clutch of eggs, they became attentive and protective. Before the chicks were old enough to forage for themselves, their mothers, after grazing, returned to the nest, and much as a cow brings up her cud to chew, brought up up masticated and nutritionally enhanced plant material for the chicks. With open jaws, the mother lay her head on the edge of the nest, while her chicks enthusiastically helped themselves.

6



During the Cretaceous period (that ended 66 million years ago), the Western Interior Seaway, also known as the Niobrara, covered a large section

of what would become the western part of the United States. The ice sheets melted, and sea levels around the world rose dramatically. The climate was warm, almost tropical and there was an explosion of life. This was the age of dinosaurs, T. Rex and all the rest.

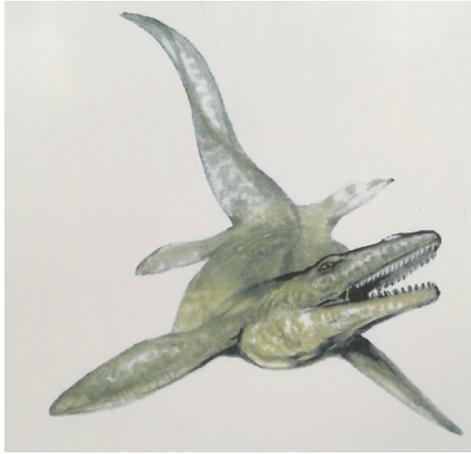
As noted, duckbills were some of the most ubiquitous herbivores of that time period-- the cattle of the Cretaceous, a valuable part of that era's ecosystem. They feasted not only on upland plants but also cattails, bulrushes, and sedges that grew in shallow water along the edge of the sea. Plants growing along the shoreline did carry a high level of silica (from the salty sea) resulting in less nutrition per bite and causing greater wear on teeth. Duckbills were thus known to have dozens of teeth set into comb-like rows. They even chewed as they slept. When the teeth wore out, they were organically replaced with new ones.

Imagine that just beneath the surface of the Niobrara, a mosasaur (*mosasaurus*) is swimming back and forth along the shoreline. He is keenly aware of the duckbills feeding in the water close to the shore. The forty-foot-long predator is listening and waiting.

Most of the foraging group of duckbills are peaceful and content. Two males, however, are eyeing each other and posturing. There is competition for the females. Suddenly a fight breaks out. The noisy, intense squabble diverts the attention of the duckbill herd. For a few minutes, they are distracted and forget to periodically raise their heads to look around for predators.

The mosasaur picks up on this opportunity. Quickly, he turns toward the group and increases his swimming speed. As the sea becomes shallower and his head breaks the surface of the water, his powerful tail becomes a blur of propulsion. With speed and mouth agape, he attacks. Thrusting his long snapping jaws side to side and up and down, the rows of sharp knifelike teeth do their work. The attack is quick and violent.

In the chaos and confusion that results--the screaming and scrambling for safety--things do not go well for the overwhelmed duckbills. Some, injured and maimed, make it to shore. Others do not. And still others, wide eyed and traumatized, escape intact. The young mother is spared but blood in the water tells of a different fate for the other duckbills. The fecundity and fragility of life in the Cretaceous was basic and astonishing and not for the faint of heart.



Over time all things change gradually. But the Cretaceous period ended with a bang. The asteroid that created the Chicxulub Crater near the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico, struck with an impact that literally changed the face of the earth. As large as Mt. Everest and traveling at a velocity 20 times that of a speeding bullet, the asteroid strike was cataclysmic in the truest sense of the word. The globe convulsed and vibrated like a bell.

Of the millions of creatures that existed at that time only a few species survived after the Cretaceous extinction: some birds, a few small underground mammals, and some crocodylians.

Time passed. Uplift of the western portion of the continent continued and the Niobrara Sea drained and disappeared. Sand kept drifting along the edge of the old seabed. The sand hills in western Nebraska are one result of this drift as are the dunes found in Colorado. The Rocky Mountains were created and new life forms emerged.<sup>8</sup>

### **Lake Charles**

It was June 1942. The rain kept falling. The storm did not move. The land was covered in sheets as the water rose higher and higher in Lake Charles, which had only been in existence for seven years. The spillway, a wall 2 ½ feet thick, 40 feet wide and 12 feet high, made of rebar, concrete, and field stone, had never had this much water pour over the top. As the torrent rushed in a massive waterfall, the layered stones below the spillway began to move.

Soon, the underlying sand was exposed and quickly the torrent cut down deep.

The sand base on the lake side of the barrier had no buffered support from the outside and it started whooshing through, sand and water exploding from underneath the wall. With no support, the spillway wall collapsed, and the Lake Charles flood began. The long earthen dam (butting up against the destroyed spillway) remained intact, but with the water gone, it was useless.

The dam and spillway, creating Lake Charles, were constructed in 1935 as part of the Depression-era WPA program. For seven years, Lake Charles was a favorite weekend pleasure spot for people living in the Turkey Valley area. Especially during the drought years, people wanted to be near water. When it did not come from the sky and crops were drying up, there was still plenty of cool water in the lake.

On weekends, the East Freeman Band often played on the hillside above the lake. Kids played games and went swimming. Adults relaxed and talked, getting away from the stress of farming without rainfall. They always felt better afterward, not so alone. But, after only a few years, Lake Charles disappeared.

The old Lake Charles area was a favorite haunt for my brother, Gayle and me as we were growing up. Just a couple of miles to the southwest of our farm, it was quick trip on bicycles. We scrambled down the steep bank to the broken spillway. The twisted rebar, covered with rust, protruded from the shattered wall, and crumbling concrete lay among the stones. All of it presented another mystery. What kind of power could push that great stone wall over?

Water now tumbled in strong rivulets over the broken pieces of the wall and down into the valley. Turkey Creek had broken free of the temporary lakebed. Near the broken wall, we picked our way over stones protruding from the water and walked to the west beside the long tree-covered dam, following the winding creek.

Willow and cottonwood trees grew in the old lakebed. Over the years, beavers moved in and built a series of low dams. We marveled at their ability to cut down big trees. “When the trees fell, they had to be careful to get out of the way. It’s amazing that some didn’t get killed.”

Minnnows darted in the pools of crystalline water. Red-winged and yellow-

headed blackbirds chattered everywhere in a big area of cattail that we stayed away from because of the quicksand nearby. There were springs among the cattails. This is where Turkey Creek began.

Stories in the community indicated that some cows had once gotten stuck in the sand and died and that a man had been pulled down--up to his armpits--before being saved by a friend. It was said that another man was found dead at the edge of the cattails.

This was a strange and fascinating place. It was wild and beautiful. It was mysterious and it was a little scary, too.

### **Shared Experience**

In our lives as twins, before we separated to go to various places --- college, Viet Nam, graduate school --- Gayle and I not only explored the Lake Charles area and the sand pit nearby, but the hills and wooded draws on the south side of Turkey Valley. We visited the Thunderbird and the lookout area and “the confluence of streams”, and we found the “stone companions” and other big rocks that the glacier had left. We knew where the biggest oak trees were and where the spring pasque flowers bloomed best.

We knew the location of a fishing hole where small sand pike and bullheads were easily caught. Pa told us that when he was a kid, one of his brothers came back from the creek with a fish as long as the kitchen table! Pa said for a fish to be that big, the creek was likely much deeper and wider in the past. We were not so sure. In the 1980s it was said that a man checking his cattle by the creek had caught a seven-pound northern pike. He thought that it had moved upstream with the high water that often occurred after a heavy rain. That fish too would have been as long as the kitchen table.

All these things of the sky, the land, and the water. This was our home.

The last time Gayle and I went to the Lake Charles area was during our high school years. We parked our car close to the old lakebed. After crossing the creek by the broken spillway, we walked to the west, as usual, alongside the stream and the adjacent dam. This time, however, we decided to walk beyond the dam, crossed a fence, and continued to the northwest to a large bowl-shaped depression in the hillside. We had seen it in earlier years but did not know then what the strange landform was or why it was there. It did not seem natural.

It was in fact a “borrow pit.” The earth had been “borrowed” to build the dam a short distance away. 1930s-era dam-builders created the massive bowl-shaped depression with small earth-moving equipment. To prevent erosion, they also “rip wrapped” the water side of the dam with stone. The reason for the existence of quicksand in the area was the welling of the springs in the cattails. This kept the sand from being packed down, keeping it in semi-fluid state. It is as if there was no bottom and that is why it is so dangerous.

During this early 1960s walk, on top of the hillside near the borrow pit and with farmland behind us, my brother and I looked southwest across the deep draw where the dry stream bed lie and the tail waters of Lake Charles once splashed. And we looked across to the old sand pit where the scale house sat. All that remained was old rusting machinery and sand.

What we did not know was that in that pit, in that place, was another important unsolved mystery of Turkey Valley.

### **Discovery in the Sand**

In November 2020, a friend told me that agronomist Terry Waterman had recently moved to Freeman. Waterman, a crop consultant, studies human fossils and artifacts. Nationally known in archaeology, Waterman is also interested in paleontology (animal fossils). Waterman had found some mosasaur fossils. I wanted to know more about this.

Because of the covid-19 crisis, I met Terry on a Sunday afternoon under a tree in front of our farmhouse. The late November sun was warm and in the shelter of the farmyard, we barely felt a cool north wind. I handed Terry some photographs and watched intently as he scanned the pictures.

“Where did you get these?”

I told him the following story.

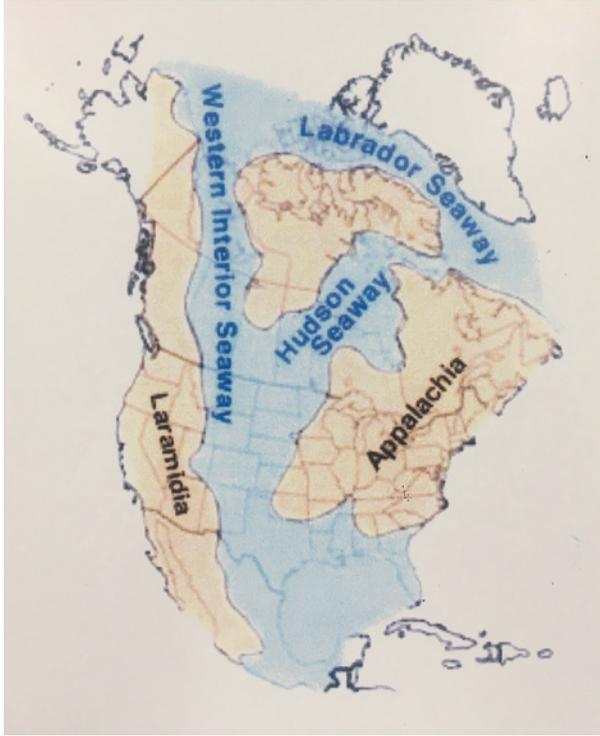


About seven years ago, Mike Peterson a private contractor and neighbor, needed sand. He took his flatbed truck and Bobcat skid loader down to the sandpit once owned by my grandfather. Down in the pit, as he lifted the Bobcat's bucket, filled with sand, a strange looking stone fell to the side. His interest piqued, Mike dismounted and picked it up. A few days later, Mike called me. "I think I found some dinosaur eggs down in the pit."

I was skeptical I knew the valley was glaciated as recently as 40,000 years ago. And I knew that glacial till--the soil, stone and gravel remaining after a glacier retreated-- covered the land here in southeast South Dakota. Dinosaur fossils are not found on land that has been glaciated.

"Can I see them?" I asked hesitantly. "No," he said, "I gave them to my mother. She likes arrow heads and other Indian stuff, and she lives in Idaho." My heart sank. "Could she send some pictures?" I asked. A couple of weeks later, I received the photographs, and I was stunned. To me they looked like fossilized eggs. This was another mystery.

I knew that 66 million years ago, the eastern boundary of the ancient Niobrara Sea had cut through the area of what is now southeast South Dakota, where I live. Could the sand in the pit have come from the dunes along the shoreline of that inland sea, the home of my imagined duckbill?



Or might the large amount of sand simply be a part of the glacial till, the outwash, that remained after the glacier retreated more recently (40,000 years ago)? I asked an earth mover specialist, James Werdel: “Does a retreating glacier leave behind pure sand?” He responded, “Glacial outwash never leaves behind pure sand. Glaciers only leave soil, stone, and gravel--never pure sand.”<sup>10</sup>

There might therefore be a relationship between the dinosaur bones in the scale house, the newly discovered eggs, the position of the great inland sea, and the pure sand in the pit, and in the old Lake Charles bed. During the last glaciation (40,000 years ago), streams of water from the melting, retreating glacier might have cut down through the overburden of glacial till and into the sand that had been deposited millions of years earlier during the Cretaceous period. Perhaps these eggs were messengers from that much earlier period.

## Confirmation

“So, what do you think, Terry?” I asked my new archeologist friend. I worried as he scanned the photographs. But without hesitation, he said, “These absolutely look like dinosaur eggs.” My body relaxed as if a great weight had been lifted. I told Terry that I thought that the eggs, about three inches long, might have been laid by a duckbill. He agreed, saying that there were a lot of duckbills in the area during the Cretaceous period. Waterman then returned to his pickup and produced two pieces of a fossil he believed were part of the upper and lower jaw of a mosasaur, one of the predators that lived in the Niobrara Sea. Broken rows of teeth roots were clearly visible. I sensed Terry’s excitement and shared his enthusiasm.

“So, exactly, where did you find these?” I asked him. He told me that he had discovered them at the Heritage Hall Museum in Freeman. This museum was started in the late 1920s when students of agriculture instructor, Ben P. Waltner, started bringing him interesting rocks and fossils for evaluation.<sup>11</sup> In 2020, Marnette Ortman, present director of the museum, asked Waterman to assess the rock collection for anything of value. Most of the collection was not valuable, but Waterman also found the mosasaur fossils that are extremely rare.

“Where do you think they came from?”

“I don’t know.”

“Could they have come from the sand pit?”

“Yes, possibly, or at least from another place of sand along the edge of the Niobrara Sea or from the seabed itself. Can we go to the sand pit?”

For me, a great mystery had been solved and I felt an unforgettable sense of euphoria. To know that an ancient sea and what it held were virtually in my backyard was a humbling experience. Not only were the eggs evidence of terrestrial life in the Cretaceous period, but the *Mosasaurus* fossils found in the Heritage Hall collection were evidence of aquatic life during that same period.<sup>12</sup> The museum fossils and the dinosaur eggs suggested the scenario of the hunter and the hunted, the prey and the predator. I hoped my imagined young duckbill mother had lived a long and fruitful life.

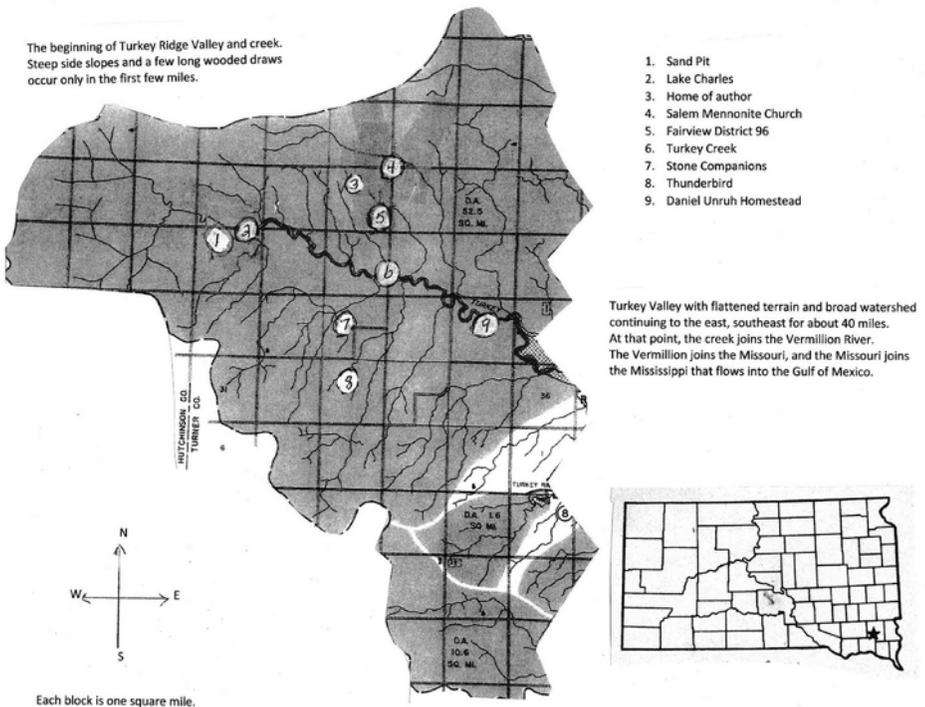
I have always wanted to go back in time to witness the creation of the valley, to see the glacier retreating, to see the first plants, the arctic willows, and the early grasses. I wish that I could experience life before the Europeans

arrived, to experience the Native American sojourn on the land, and to go back even further to the time when dinosaurs walked the land; to experience that wild and astonishing world. Never did I dream my life would encompass and become part of so many of these perceived realities.

At the sand pit, Waterman and I parted ways and as my vehicle climbed the hill on the familiar sand pit road, I felt the warm glow of the coming-to-an-end of an extraordinary journey. It has taken me most of my life--the picnics in the gulches, the mysteries of the Thunderbird, the hikes with my brother, and so many other adventures in the Turkey Valley--to come face to face with ancient history in the uncovered secrets of the sand.

Family, earth, and water and the mysteries of Turkey Valley--these are so much a part of who I am.

I stand again at the kitchen window where my father sat. He lived to be 102. Now, in the last quarter century of my own life, the valley stretches out before me. Memories wash over me in waves, and I am grateful.



## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Stoddard, W. H. *Turner County Pioneer History*. Brown & Sanger: Sioux Falls, SD, 1931. Reprinted by Pine Hill Press, SD, 1975, 291.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 291.
- <sup>3</sup> Photographer is unknown. The person seated by the Thunderbird is Lloyd Kauffman. The property where the Thunderbird is located is now owned by James Miller. Lime was placed on the stones prior to the photograph being taken.
- <sup>4</sup> Jeff Buechler, "Boulder Outlines as Recorded in Turner County," 11, undated manuscript, Heritage Hall Archives, Freeman, South Dakota.
- <sup>5</sup> Photograph by S. Roy Kaufman, March 6, 2021. Picture shows the author with the "stone companions."
- <sup>6</sup> Lessem, Don. *Dinosaurs to Dodos: An Encyclopedia of Extinct Animals*. Illus. by Jan Sovak. Scholastic, Inc.: New York, 1999, 66.
- <sup>7</sup> Lessem, 75.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.
- <sup>9</sup> Photograph of eggs by Mary Ann Huffman, Mike Peterson's mother.
- <sup>10</sup> Conversation with James Werdel, Viborg, SD, 2019.
- <sup>11</sup> Waldner, Marie J. and Hofer, Marnette D. Ortman, *Many Hands, Minds and Hearts: A History of Freeman Junior College and Freeman Academy 1900-2000*. Sioux Falls, SD: Pine Hill Press, 2000, 79.
- <sup>12</sup> The Mosasaurus fossil label indicates that it was found in "Pierre shale" northwest of Freeman near Eureka, SD. It was given to the Heritage Hall Museum by Dr. Isaac P. and Katie Tieszen who received it from an unnamed patient.