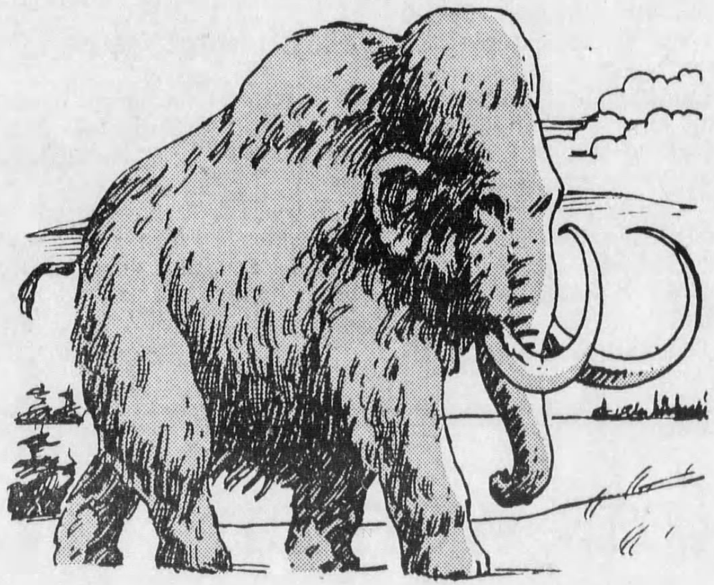
No doubt about it, it was a mammoth



Jim Conaway/The Pittsburgh Press

By William Mausteller
The Pittsburgh Press

A paleontologist he isn't, but farmer Walter Newton knows that a fossilized lower jawbone that's 32 inches long and weighs 30 pounds doesn't come from a cow or a horse.

"We knew right away it was too big for that," Newton said. "It was all covered with clay ... it had a tooth in it ... and it was in two segments, and when we put the segments together, they matched."

What Newton found on his farm near Wyalusing, Bradford County, was part of an extinct mammoth — either Jefferson or woolly — which scientists from Carnegie Institute of Pittsburgh believe is "probably the most complete ever to have been found in Pennsylvania."

So far, after 10 days of digging, the institute team led by Allen McCrady has recovered 32 items, including most of the vertebral column and ribs of the mammoth, and fragments of its feet.

The group is hoping to find part or all of the front and hind limbs, the pelvis and the skull of the hairy, elephant-sized animal.

What Newton found was "probably the most complete" skeleton of a mammoth ever found in Pennsylvania, researchers from Carnegie Institute believe.

When the excavating is completed within the next two weeks, the remains will be shipped to Carnegie Institute — the first segments will arrive this weekend — for reassembling or research.

Newton didn't realize it at the time, but the jawbone was actually dug up last summer when he and some helpers were draining a shallow, 60-acre lake on his property during "just a weekend project.".

"We were deepening the outlet channel and the guy on the drag-line was working in about 3 feet of water. The stuff he dug up we just put in a pile.

"In June, we started to haul the pile away and that was when we found the jawbone."

Dr. Leonard Krishtalka, associate curator of vertebrate fossils at Carnegie Institute, explained that mammoths became extinct about 11,000 years ago, when the last of four major glaciers receded from Pennsylvania.

Pennsylvania at that time, he said, was probably wooded, and the animals that roamed the area included mammoths and mastodons, muskox, bears, shrews, bats, rodents and other carnivores.

Mammoths were vegetarians, he said, existing on grass, twigs and leaves, and their tusks were probably used in defense, or in competition for mates or as instruments to break off tree branches.

They were the "total resource" of the early Indians of the period, Krishtalka said, and many scientists believe that overhunting and killing was a major factor in the demise of the huge beasts.

Another theory for their extinction, he said, was that the climate got warmer as the glacier retreated, and the mammoths, adapted to a much colder climate, could not change with their environment.

He said the Jefferson mammoth, less hairy than the woolly mammoth, was more common in areas of Pennsylvania's latitude than the woolly.

Krishtalka also noted that the mammoth found in Bradford County may have actually died elsewhere and then been carried by river or stream to the discovery site.

Besides McCrady, others in the institute's recovery team are Norman Wuerthele, Stan Lantz and Edmund Dlutowski.