# Transcript of The world’s most valuable T-Rex radio program

Host:

Hello and thank you for downloading Witness on the BBC World Service, with me, Dina Newman. And today, we’re going back to the 12th of August 1990, when the world’s most complete skeleton of a Tyrannosaurus Rex was discovered in South Dakota. It was a landmark discovery.

Peter Larsen:

Since I was a young child I loved collecting fossils and of course I never thought that I would be able to actually collect a Tyrannosaurus Rex. That’s like the dream of every child who loves dinosaurs!

Host:

Peter Larson is the founder of the Black Hills Institute, one of the biggest commercial exporters of fossils in the United States. He’s based in South Dakota, which due to its unique geology, is rich in fossils. Peter and his small team strike deals with private land owners and they sell fossils they find on private land, to museums and collectors all over the world.

Peter will never forget the day his colleague Sue Hendrickson, showed him two bone fragments she’d found on a nearby ranch on an Indian reservation.

It was from a very, very large vertebra, and it was filled with this honeycomb pattern, and the only animal with a vertabra that size would be Tyrannosaurus Rex. So of course I got very excited because we’d never collected a Tyrannosaurus Rex before and I asked her if there was more there and she said there’s lots more and so we ran the two miles back to where she had found it.

Host:

Breathless in the August heat they slowly made their way up the cliff. Below them was a vast area of grassland, with grass swaying gently in the wind. The rugged surface underfoot looked promising. As they moved on, they picked up oddly shaped rocks one by one and examined each of them carefully.

Peter:

The whole ground beneath this cliff face was covered with pieces of bone and there were three articulated vertebrae just poking out of the ground! I was absolutely sure that that was going to be a complete T-Rex because there was so much bone exposed on the surface there.

Host:

For the next 17 days, Peter and Sue stayed right there on the cliff, digging. Peter knew they were about to make history, so they filmed every stage of their laborious excavation.

Sounds of digging.

Peter:

We went 30 feet up above where the bones were coming out of the ground and started digging 30 feet above, knowing that a T-Rex is going to be about 40 feet long if it’s stretched out. This one shouldn’t be stretched out, but we needed to get back into that cliff face enough too and that’s a lot of rock to move and we did that all by hand.

Host:

Once they finally got to the skeleton, the challenge was to stop the bone fragments from breaking up, once they’re removed from the earth. To do that, they applied a special consolidant to the bones. And finally, they mapped the position of the fossil on paper.

Peter:

I actually laid these long strips of paper out on the surface of the fossil and mapped the position of each of the bones. That’s important to try to understand the series of events that led that fossil to be preserved that way.

Host:

As work went on, Peter and his team pieced together the story of the dinosaur. It was female, 66 million years old, and they called her Sue.

Peter:

It’s almost … this is going to sound kinda weird … but it’s almost like a religious experience for me to have the privilege to unearth something like this. This is not just a pile of bones. This was an individual animal that lived. She was this life form that was on this planet that occupied the same space that we were occupying as we were collecting her. She stood right there and died right there! If you don’t get that, I don’t think you should be digging dinosaurs.

Host:

The native American land owner too seemed excited about their amazing discovery.

Peter:

He was very happy that we’d found the T-Rex. We paid him $5000 for the skeleton.

Host:

But you must have understood at the time that this T-Rex was worth much, much more than $5000.

Peter:

No, well I … No, not really. No one had ever paid that kind of money for a dinosaur before.

Host:

In any case, Peter insists they never looked at Sue commercially.

Peter:

We have a museum in Hill City, South Dakota and we wanted something spectacular for that museum, and this, of course, fit the bill. What could be better than the largest and most complete tyrannosaurus rex skeleton that’s ever been discovered? So … And it was going to put us on the map as a major museum. And everybody in town was excited that it would bring more visitors to Hill City and they would buy gasoline in Hill City and they would shop at the grocery store and they would stay in the motels and the entire town was just ecstatic that this dinosaur was just going to be there.

Host:

Initially, Sue the dinosaur stayed at the Black Hills Institute while the researchers took the opportunity to learn more about her violent death.

Larsen:

We found, actually, parts of a couple of other T-Rex’s with her. You could see that the bones were broken when they were very fresh. Perhaps there were two family groups together, that came together and whether they were fighting over territory or fighting over a carcass we don’t know. But we do know that she and this other one were killed by other T-Rex’s.

Host:

But as the news spread of their extraordinary discovery, several legal objections were raised, by the land owner, by the government, and by some in the academic community. Finally, in May 1992, Peter got the knock on the door.

Peter:

Two FBI agents said that we were hiding this dinosaur on our premises, which was ridiculous because even in the back room where she was being prepared we had a little guest book and more than two thousand people had signed that guest book.

Host:

Despite Peter’s indignation, the T-Rex’s legal status was ambiguous. The land owner had changed his mind about the deal he had struck with the Black Hills Institute. Meanwhile his land was in government trust, and the government objected to a private fossil collector prospecting on its property, so Sue the T-Rex was confiscated, despite noisy protests from Hill City residents supporting Peter and his institute.

Crowd chanting.

Peter was charged with numerous offences to do with his trading in fossils in the USA and abroad. He was jailed for two years for two offences related to carrying foreign currency. Neither of his convictions was related to Sue the T-Rex, but the judge decided that the fossil belonged to the land owner. Eventually the T-Rex was auctioned off, for a staggering $8.6 million dollars, making her the most valuable dinosaur in the world.

Peter:

We had a friend who had offered to try to buy her back for us, and he had actually bid 1.2 million, or something like that, which was beyond, what his accountant told him he could do. When he was outbid I was sad. When the bidding went up and up I became more happy about it. I thought, you know, that’s really good because it shows that fossils really do have value. And it also showed that what a good job of preparators and collectors had done. And it was, you know, you guys did a really good job.

Host:

To everyone’s relief, Sue the T-Rex was purchased by the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago. Most academics would have hated to see her disappear into a private collection. Some scientists object to any commercial fossil collecting and trading, but Peter Larson remains unapologetic about his business. He points out that museums would not be able to provide without private prospectors.

Peter:

Museums these days do not have field crews that can do this. They don’t’ have people who can mount fossils. Some people I know think it’s amoral to see a fossil, but sorry, that’s the way the world works. To prepare, to clean, to mount, and all of this, a T-Rex takes about 25,000 hours of work. If we had not collected Sue, by now, just the rate of erosion on that cliff face, the pelvis, which was protecting the skull, would have been completely eroded away and the whole front of her face would be gone, would be completely gone.

Host:

After his release from prison, Peter Larsen completed his PhD in palaeontology. He still lives in Hill City, South Dakota and still runs the Black Hills Institute. Researcher Sue Hendricksen, who found Sue the dinosaur, now lives on an island off the coast of Honduras. Sue the T-Rex, the most complete T-Rex skeleton in the world, is on display at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago.

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