

News Release

Historic Bison Skull on Loan to U of M Crookston

By Dan Svedarsky, Elizabeth Tollefson on Thursday, February 15, 2007

CROOKSTON, Minn. (February 15, 2007) –Thanks to Dennis Nikolayson of rural Erskine, the University of Minnesota Crookston (UMC) has a piece of the past. Nikolayson and his father were working in a former peat bog on his farm west of Erskine in 1958 when they discovered an almost perfect skull of a bison and most of the skeleton along with remnants of 2 others. The skull is on display in the Natural History Collection on the second floor of Owen Hall on the campus.



Once estimated at 75 million animals ranging on the grasslands as far east as the Atlantic Ocean and as far south as the Gulf of Mexico, bison have been gone from Minnesota for some 170 years or so. The last bison records were recorded in northwest Minnesota. Wandering animals in small herds were still encountered in the state as late as 1880 according to an historical record from a Mr. A. Hawkins of Twin Valley. He recalled that, as a 9-year-old, he saw four animals heading west in June of that year as he was herding cattle. According to Gustav Swanson in *The Mammals of Minnesota*, this is apparently the last record of wild bison in the state.

Bison bones are not especially uncommon in peat bogs and river sediments in northwest Minnesota. "When the Red Lake River is low, one can find bison and elk bone fragments but it is rare to find an intact skull like the one on loan from Mr. Nikolayson," according to Dan Svedarsky, head of the Natural Resources Department at the Crookston campus. "It is intriguing to imagine the circumstances of how the adult bison came to be trapped in the boggy area."

According to Nikolayson, the peat was about 6-8 feet deep. Originally open water, the wetland would have originated after the retreat of the last glacial ice sheet and before the drainage of Glacial Lake Agassiz approximately 9,000 years ago. An accumulation of peat would have had to be present to trap the bison dating the skull to more than 1,000 years old, perhaps more.

"We are very grateful to Mr. Nikolayson for loaning us this unique piece of our history," Svedarsky said. For more information, contact Lab Services Coordinator Laura Bell of UMC's Natural Resources Department at 218-281-8131.

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