

From Digs to Dreams:

A dinosaur lover's prehistoric pursuit

by Andrea Deering | photos courtesy of Joe Kchodl



Growing up in New York State as the only child within a square mile, Joseph Kchodl spent hours exploring his neighborhood, searching for butterflies, leaves, minerals, and, his favorite, fossils. What began as a boy's hunt for treasure turned into Kchodl's life-long, passionate pursuit. Along the way, Kchodl took on many roles on his journey to realizing his dreams.



caught on. Over the years, Kchodl has shared his love of paleontology with tens of thousands of children in Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa, and northern Ohio. "Just seeing the look on kids' faces and hearing the questions they ask" brings PaleoJoe great satisfaction. "I revel in the fact that kids want to talk to me and that I'm imparting knowledge to a new generation."

PaleoJoe doesn't want kids just to learn about dinosaurs. "I want kids to be excited about science, not just paleontology," Kchodl says. He says on one occasion a little boy "showed up looking just like me" with his wide-brimmed hat, vest, and hiking boots. "It's just great to inspire kids and get them to want to read and learn," he continues. "I just want them to be the best they can be."

Teachers and parents alike appreciate PaleoJoe's programs. All of his presentations follow Michigan curriculum standards and help kids become excited about learning.



The author

Along with taking his paleontology show on the road, Kchodl has written several books after a publisher sought him out. His first two books, *A Pictorial Guide to North American Trilobites* (available only in museums that host his collection) and *A Complete Guide to Michigan Fossils*, are geared toward adults. His most recent writings are for children in second through sixth grades. The children's chapter book series, *PaleoJoe's Dinosaur Detective Club*, follows the adventures of two children who help PaleoJoe solve prehistoric mysteries. The young characters are the heroes. *The Mysterious Mammoth*, the fifth out of the 16-book series, is due out fall 2008.

PaleoJoe also appears in libraries during the school summer break. His pint-sized fans love dinosaurs and PaleoJoe. In fact, last year PaleoJoe fans turned out for a book signing in a Wisconsin library with a crowd so large that it was only surpassed by a crowd of fans for Super Bowl champ and former Green Bay Packer quarterback, Brett Favre.

The radio personality

Kchodl also finds time to share his expertise on a monthly radio show on WGUV's Morning Show with Shelly Irwin. The show airs every second Friday at 9:30 a.m. on 1480 AM or 88.5 FM out of Grand Valley State University in Grand Rapids. Tri-City residents can listen live online at www.wgvu.org/radio.

The collector

Kchodl [pronounced KOH-dill] learned as much as he could about fossils and began gathering them for his own collection. Fortunate for him, his own backyard near Niagara Falls was fossil-rich. He assembled a collection of marine invertebrates called trilobites and many other fossils, which he donated to the Schoelkopf Geological Museum of Niagara Falls. Trilobites were ancient saltwater sea creatures that once thrived in the tropical seas that covered Michigan, New York, and Ohio.

The educator

After completing his tour of duty in the Army in 1993, Kchodl and his wife, Phyllis, who is from Midland, returned to her hometown. With a degree in education and a desire to share his passion of prehistoric creatures, Kchodl began presenting educational paleontology programs in local schools.

Playing the role of a "digger" dressed in Indiana Jones fashion, Kchodl became known as PaleoJoe. His entertaining educating style

The hunter

Kchodl doesn't just speak and write about fossils and dinosaurs. He continues to dig with world-renowned paleontologists including Dr. Robert T. Bakker and Michael Voorhies. Kchodl has discovered ribs of an 11 million-year-old rhino in Nebraska, remains of a 60-foot-long *Camerasaurus* in Utah, and helped a team recover a *Tyrannosaurus Rex* in Montana. Kchodl says unearthing a dinosaur is "like no other feeling in the world. It's like Christmas everyday. I've been the first person in millions of years to see it."

The guide

For fossil hunters in the Tri-Cities, Kchodl suggests that you search in the Golden Crescent—from Alpena to Traverse City—or northern Michigan and the southern shore of the Upper Peninsula. A bit closer to home, Kchodl has uncovered fossils in the stone quarry near Bay Port. "Basically, anywhere you have rocky outcroppings, you're apt to find fossils," advises Kchodl.

The dreamer

Kchodl loves what he does and is living his dreams. He wants his students to share the same success. "Follow your dreams. Never say no and go after what you want," advises Kchodl. "The worst someone can say is no." He confesses that "everything I wanted to do as a kid, I have done." That doesn't mean he doesn't have new dreams. Kchodl hopes to discover a new species of dinosaur as well as a new system for finding bones without digging.

Kchodl is many things. One thing is certain, by living his dreams and sharing his passion of paleontology, thousands of kids love dinosaurs and learning just like he does.

For more information about PaleoJoe, visit www.paleojoe.com. *Trilobite Treasures: Arthropods of the Ancient Seas*, a traveling exhibit containing fossils from Kchodl's collection, will return to the Bay County Historical Museum in 2010. 📺

