



SANDY BENSON/CORRESPONDENT

**EXAMINING FOSSIL FRAGMENTS** found earlier this week during a dig near Bassett are (from left) Richard Albrecht, Sand Hills Discovery Center Foundation chairman; Debrenee Atkisson; Barbara Lamb of Ainsworth, daughter of the late paleontologist Morris Skinner; and Mike Voorhies, geologist and paleontologist with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

# Professionals, amateurs unearth Sandhills fossils

By **SANDY BENSON**  
News Correspondent

**BASSETT** — The leg bone of a large mammal, part of a rhino jaw and the tooth of a three-horned deer were among fossils unearthed north of here earlier this week.

People attending the third annual Sand Hills Discovery Experience had the opportunity for hands-on learning using shovels, trowels, brushes and screens to find the fossil remains of mammals that roamed the area millions of years ago.

The leg bone from the large mammal may have come from a three-toed horse or camel.

**MIKE VOORHIES**, a paleontologist with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, pointed to a grayish layer of sediment visible in the hillside.

"This ash layer is 6.6 million years old," he said.

As he scooped shovels full of sand from the hillside into a sifting screen, he explained that the site was once a river

bed that had filled in, eroded and filled in again many times.

Because it was a river, it attracted a variety of animals. The river also caused their fossilized remains to be scattered widely and broken into many fragments.

Complete skeletons are rarely found in the area, due to the nature of fluvial deposits. Although there are many beautifully preserved skulls, jaws and individual bones, it is more common to find pieces and fragments.

**THE SITE** was originally discovered by a Nebraska Department of Roads employee during highway construction in the early 1990s.

Since then, paleontologists have quarried and screened the area over several years, and they have recovered nearly 15,000 identifiable remains of mammals, reptiles, amphibians and fish. Most of the remains are microfossils.

Shane Tucker, highway salvage preparator with the Uni-

versity of Nebraska State Museum in Lincoln, received his master's degree in science in paleontology from UNL this year.

His thesis focused on this particular site.

**HE WAS ON HAND** to give the background of the project and to help the diggers identify their finds.

"So far we have found 17 types of carnivore here, which makes it the most diverse carnivore site in North America," he said.

"The site is significant because it fills a partial gap in the rock record in this portion of the Niobrara River Valley."

Barbara Lamb of Ainsworth, daughter of the late, world-renowned paleontologist and Ainsworth resident, Morris Skinner, was present and shared stories of her father's many discoveries.

The annual event is sponsored by the Sand Hills Discovery Center Foundation.