



# Principia College Holds Commemoration of Mammoth Excavation Site

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Principia College will commemorate one of the most significant vertebrate paleontologic finds in the central United States on Wednesday, May 1 at 1 p.m. While digging a manhole for remodeling needs in 1999, Principia College's facilities crew hit a small, hard, white chunk. Realizing they had found something unusual, they took it to Principia science faculty, who along with experts from the Illinois State Museum, identified it to be a mammoth tooth. Principia's mammoth was soon named "Benny" in honor of the backhoe operator who was part of the crew that made the discovery.

Benny was buried within several yards of Principia College buildings for about 17,500 years. He measured about 11 feet tall at the shoulder, weighed approximately six tons, and ate 400 pounds of vegetation each day. His enormous tusks were 6.5 feet long. Benny was submerged in wind-blown silt—loess—derived from glacial outwash deposits left behind in the waning days of the Ice Age some 25,000 to 12,000 years ago. From 2002-2012 Principia College students excavated the mammoth remains as part of a geology class taught by Dr. Janis Treworgy. Students learned and practiced such skills as excavating with trowels and bamboo skewers, pedestaling bones in preparation for removal, mapping (using a grid system), wet sieving the matrix (dirt) samples, and cleaning and consolidating the skeletal elements in the lab.

The most exciting—and challenging—excavation event happened during the summer of 2005 when Treworgy, along with Principia staff and students, removed the skull block, a delicate procedure requiring tremendous care. Students have since worked on the skull block, revealing Benny's magnificent structure and articulated cranium, tusks, and upper teeth. Other significant skeletal elements that have been excavated include both upper arm and leg bones, a lower arm and a lower leg bone, both shoulder blades, and a number of vertebrae and ribs.

More than 9,000 visitors, including university students, elementary through high school groups, Girl and Boy Scouts, geology clubs, and a variety of adult groups, have toured

the site to learn more about Benny. Scientists have visited Principia to see Benny and advise Treworgy on aspects of the project. He has been featured in major print, radio, and television news media, as well as scientific literature.

“It has been an opportunity of a lifetime for me, not only to be able to excavate a mammoth, but to involve college students in the project through the course I have taught,” Treworgy says. “Nearly all the field and lab work has been done by students, and they have done a great job. I love teaching in the field with an experiential focus, so I will miss this project. I will continue to give tours to extend the educational benefits of the project. Benny is a gift to education that can keep on giving.”

#### About Principia College:

Principia College is a century-old co-educational institution whose campus, designed by Bernard Maybeck and located on 300-foot bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River in Elsah, Illinois, has been designated a National Historic Landmark. Historically, the College has placed significant emphasis on educating its students for global citizenship. Today’s student body represents 35 states and 25 nations. Principia College is a NCAA Division III school.