

L E O N A R D B R A N D

SECRETS UNCOVERED

STORIES FROM
A CHRISTIAN
FOSSIL
HUNTER



Pacific Press[®]
Publishing Association

Nampa, Idaho | www.pacificpress.com

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A JOURNEY BEGINS

During my undergrad years, I took a class on biological origins from Lloyd Downs, a professor of biology at La Sierra College (now La Sierra University), in which he compared creationist and non-creationist views of earth history. The topic was fascinating to me, and I determined then that I would contribute to this challenging field somehow. I had no idea how it would happen.

Perhaps, I thought, I could honor the Creator as a scientist employed in some museum, showing that a believer can do high-quality scientific work. I remember sitting in a business meeting of the American Society of Mammalogists, watching the society president and thinking, *Will I need to be up there in that position someday in order to honor God?*

I knew one thing for sure: I would never be a teacher. I could not imagine myself ever giving lectures to a room full of people.

While earning a master's degree in biology at Loma Linda University (LLU) in Southern California, I decided on Cornell University in upstate New York as the best place to study for a doctorate in biology. I became acquainted with Dr. McClain, a biology professor, and my future advisor

at Cornell. My parents were very supportive of advanced education but reminded me they didn't have the money to finance my continued graduate work. I put my optimism to work and applied to the National Science Foundation (NSF) for a graduate fellowship to fund my doctoral studies.

The scene is still etched in my memory—I sat in the LLU campus snack bar on a Sunday morning after I found in my mailbox an envelope from the NSF. I ate a leisurely breakfast before opening the envelope because, having received the fat envelope and not the skinny rejection letter, I knew it meant the NSF had granted me a fellowship for my doctoral program.

That summer, after finishing my master's degree, I had an opportunity to take a six-week field course in paleontology. It required a choice between dating a girl who interested me or taking the class. I chose the class—and someone else married the girl.

The summer class traveled from Texas through Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, and Arizona, studying rocks and fossils and discussing how the biblical story of earth history can explain the evidence. On this trip, we had opportunities to hunt for fossils.

My road to becoming a paleontologist was not a smooth journey. For some unknown reason, I seemed to be the person who had trouble finding fossils, and I concluded that paleontology was fascinating but perhaps not the right field for me. After an unsuccessful hunt for fossil fish near Fossil, Wyoming (now part of Fossil Butte National Monument), I sneaked away from the group, got out my shotgun, and collected, skinned, and stuffed a chipmunk—something I could do better than finding those elusive fossils!

A vivid memory from that trip was the night we camped on top of Polecat Bench, a rich fossil locality in Wyoming, with little fossil skulls “all over the place”—or so we were told. A fierce wind began blowing during the night, not leaving much possibility for sleep. In the morning, we carefully got up, holding our sleeping bags with one hand and pants with the other so they wouldn't be blown across the prairie to South Dakota. We did get to see fellow student Gershon running across Polecat Bench after the lid to his ice chest as it soared gracefully out of reach over the sagebrush. To this day, the name Polecat Bench suggests to me an aura of

something wild and full of potential and yet unpleasant.

I learned later that when a vertebrate paleontologist says a fossil site has fossil skulls *all over the place*, that usually means he searched all day and found three or four little skulls (where I found none).

After the Wyoming trip, I started across the country in a Volkswagen Beetle full of my belongings with thirty dollars in my pocket. My hope was to get to Cornell and find my first NSF fellowship check before running out of money. That trip was feasible at the time, with gasoline at twenty-nine cents a gallon. I arrived in Ithaca, New York, and spent the first night in a motel room for about five dollars. The clerk questioned me when I said that I would be the only one in the room. It seems they got that story often from students when there would actually be two in the room—my first indication that the values there were different from mine.

The next morning it became evident that Cornell was not the friendly little place Loma Linda University had been. The administrator insistently followed a set plan, and I would not get my first fellowship check for several weeks.

It was raining hard that day, and after spending a few dollars for supper, I walked along under the shelter of a mall canopy, wondering what to do about my thin wallet. My last dollar went for a call home to ask my parents to send some money, which my beloved father was happy to do the next day. The problem remained that evening as to where I could spend the night. I drove north along Cayuga Lake to Taughannock Falls State Park and drove into the parking lot. Setting up a tent in the driving rain didn't seem inviting, so I slept sitting up in the front seat of my VW, among all my earthly belongings. That parking lot, it turned out, was a favorite place for student couples to park and "watch the submarine races," which made it all the more lonely for me.

My doctoral studies were in ecology and evolutionary biology. It turned out that it wasn't possible for me to get away from the fossils, as my graduate advisor spent a lot of time on vertebrate paleontology in his vertebrate biology classes. That was a good introduction, as it turned out, to areas of future study for me.

The three faculty members on my guidance committee were supportive, and I had a good relationship with my advisor, who was very friendly. When he came down the hall past my student office, he would stop to say hello and chat a little.

I had things all planned out in my mind to eventually deal with my unwillingness to attend classes on Saturday, which is my Sabbath, but not until the teachers knew and respected me and would not be so bothered by such issues. It seemed like a good plan, but it didn't work out that way. By the end of the first week, it became clear that my advisor's mammalogy lab would be on Saturday. Friday afternoon, with considerable palpitation of heart, I went to his office and explained the situation.

"That's not a problem," he said. "The lab material will still be out on Sunday, and you can study it then." However, he no longer stopped by to say hello when he passed my office, and not to be on speaking terms with your advisor is not good news in graduate school. The problem was not only my habit of observing the Sabbath. Once he knew my religious views, he also knew I was a creationist.

As winter set in, the weather turned very cold in upstate New York. One morning I drove to school and parked in the lot beside the football practice field. To reduce the amount of time spent walking in the bitter ten-degree weather, I cut across the football field and up a steep bank covered with about two feet of snow. The bank was slippery, and I stepped and shuffled up the fifteen-foot-high slope. In the classroom, I discovered my keys were not in my pocket—they must have fallen out somewhere on the steep bank. The thought of trying to deal with lost keys under those winter conditions was very discouraging to me, only adding to the weight of the still-discouraging relations with my advisor.

I prayed as I went out to look for the keys. At the top of the slope, the situation looked bleak, just like my mood. My tracks up the slope were evident, but I thought the keys could be anywhere under the deep snow. I would have to try searching anyway, and reluctantly I began the search right there at the top of the slope. My hand went down, seemingly forever, through the snow, and on that first try, it closed around the keys! God

knew I needed encouragement that day. My advisor noticed my obvious happiness as I reentered the classroom, but I didn't have the courage to tell him why I was so jubilant.

After about a month, my advisor became friendly again. It's possible the change came after he read my LLU master's thesis, which he thought was well done. He suggested I write up part of it and submit it for the "best student paper" competition at the upcoming American Society of Mammalogists annual meetings. I did write the paper—and won the award. This increased my appreciation for Professor Ryckman at Loma Linda, who had pushed me to do so much work on that master's thesis, beyond what seemed necessary at the time.



Loma Linda University, where Leonard Brand is employed.

The Cornell years rolled by, and finally, it was time to defend my doctoral dissertation on a cold day in December. The exam would decide the outcome of three years of graduate study. My three guidance committee members and I sat in a circle in the Laboratory of Ornithology while they asked many questions. In spite of the tension of the moment, pleasantness

prevailed, with a lovely winter scene outside the window, and inside, three gentlemanly professors who had become my friends.

The exam was not a pushover. I had to defend my research and convince my professors that the evidence supported my conclusions about chipmunk biology. They accepted my dissertation and the rest of my graduate work, even though I was a creationist—and it was finished!

That Friday evening, waiting outside a hotel for friends to take me to a meeting at my church, I entertained myself by running and sliding on the icy sidewalk. I was wondering, *Are PhDs supposed to act this way?* But I didn't care—the doctoral study was completed, and I was happy.

About two years after I came to Loma Linda, Harold Coffin brought me a handful of scientific papers on ancient fossilized reptile tracks in Arizona and asked if I would give a short report on them at some meetings.

“Sure,” I said, not having any idea of the journey that was beginning. In time, I would learn a whole new field—geology—through taking geology classes and in field research with geologists.