

## SPECIAL REPORT

Stories by MIKE HANLEY  
The Spectator  
BEAMSVILLE

**T**hey work long hours at Research Casting International Ltd. And they don't have a cafeteria.

That might explain the skeletons in the company's boardroom.

"No, not at all," says Carla Mackie, while squeezing a chair between her boney friends. "They're part of a project we're working on."

Mackie is exhibit co-ordinator with RCI, a company that is light-years behind the times — and proud of it.

Their specialty is dinosaurs. Not dinky toys, but life-size dinos, some made from the bones of the real thing.

Their work can be found in museums around the world, and a couple played starring roles in Jurassic Park — the mega-movie that was box-office champion until Titanic surfaced.

RCI is the brainchild of Peter May, who was born in England but moved to Hamilton when he was eight.

After graduating from Sir Wilfrid Laurier secondary school, he had to choose between his dream of being an artist or a steady salary in the steel industry.

"Growing up in Hamilton, steel seemed a pretty good bet," he says.

He decided to chase his dream and studied fine art and sculpture at the University of Guelph. He graduated but learned there wasn't a big demand for artists.

May went to work with a surveying company, marking out building blocks for Stelco at their new Nanticoke site.

Then he spotted a newspaper ad for a junior technician in the paleontology department at the Royal Ontario Museum. The museum wanted someone who could mould, cast, sculpt, fix small engines, and enjoyed camping.

"It sounded like a dream come true."

#### Crash course

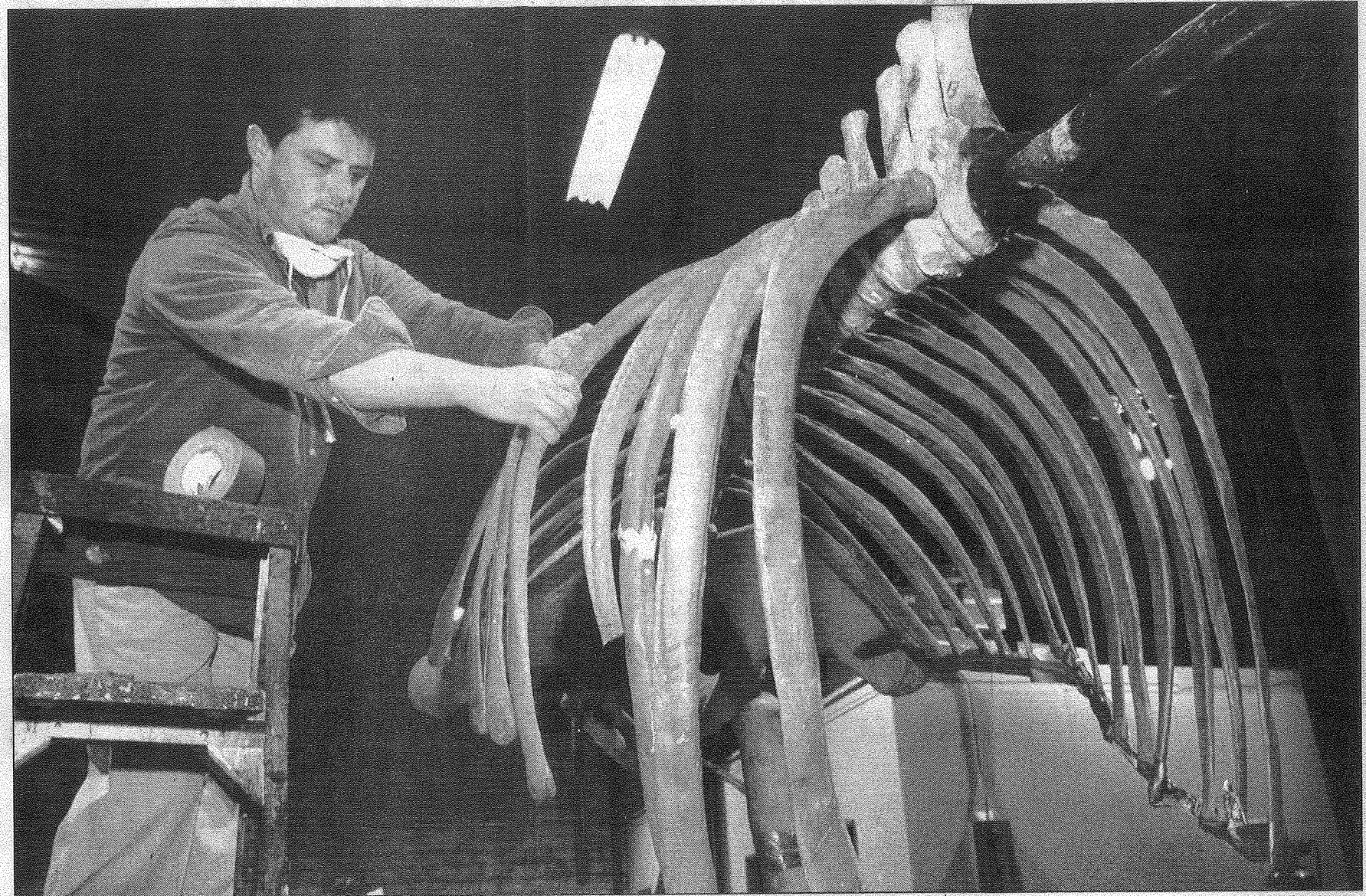
But he feared paleontologists might lean toward a candidate with at least a passing knowledge of dinosaurs.

"I didn't know anything about dinosaurs. I guess they were studying them in Canada while I was living in England. And they must have been studying them in England after I'd moved to Canada.

"There was a real void in my life."

A day before his job interview, he turned to the encyclopedia for a crash course.

"I fell asleep after one paragraph. I decided to wing it."



Employee Drazen Binicki assembles the rib section of the skeleton of a prehistoric rhinoceros.

Photos by John Rennison, The Spectator

# Building brontos

Beamsville company is world leader in piecing together dinosaur bones

film's stars. May gave Jurassic Park one thumb up and one thumb down.

"Good movie. Bad ending."

That's because his creations were knocked to smithereens during the climactic dinosaur duel.

"It wasn't pretty," says May, who

before moving west to the Royal Tyrell Museum in Drumheller, Alta.

He was at Tyrell when he was bitten by the dinosaur bug.

The museum has one of the world's largest collection of dinosaur bones and fossils and has a field station at Dinosaur Provincial Park, near Calgary.

May was helping to build exhibits at Tyrell until 1986, when he returned to ROM as head of the Vertebrate Paleontology Department, preparing fossils and moulding and casting mountings of skeletons.

He earned a reputation in the field and was getting calls from paleontologists who wanted him to build and mount dinosaurs in their museums.

"I started moonlighting out of a garage. When the calls kept coming, I started a floating shop, sending a crew to the site."

Before long, his sideline had grown into a full-time job and he left ROM in 1987 to open RCI in Oakville. It wasn't long before he was getting orders from museums around the world.

### Outgrow facilities

"It's a small community," explains May, 43. "There's about 2,200 paleontologists in the world and only about 45 who work full-time on dinosaurs."

There are only four companies in the world that reproduce, reconstruct and piece together full-scale dinosaur skeletons — and RCI is the biggest.

"We outgrew our spot in Oakville. But I guess you have to expect that in the dinosaur business. You keep getting bigger."

RCI moved to Beamsville early this year, taking over a nondescript 1,620-square-metre factory in an industrial park.

"It's about three times as big as our other spot," May says.

The building is bulging with a collection of skeletons, skulls and limbs, with a 10-metre-long brontosaurus that will head to a museum in Tokyo later this month.

RCI's work is in museums across North America, Japan, Australia, New Zealand and Europe. The prestigious British Museum of Natural History commissioned RCI to craft a large albertosaurus along with several smaller dinosaurs.

One of their more spectacular dis-



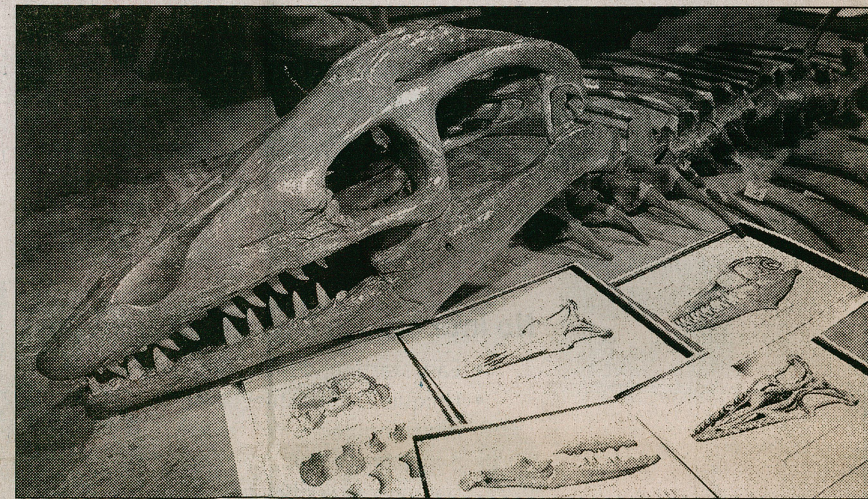
**Above, Jane MacLeod takes a power sander to smooth out a dinosaur leg bone prior to reconstruction of the skeleton. Right, the skull and spine of a mososaur rests on a table surrounded by assorted drawings of other parts of its body.**

rearing barosaurus defending its youngster from an attacking allosaurus. The display is in the rotunda of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City.

The museum supplied RCI with almost 80 per cent of the original bones and their technicians were able to duplicate them with a lightweight polyurethane foam. They completed the project by sculpting the missing bones including the skull and part of the tail.

"It's the tallest free-standing dinosaur mount in the world," says May.

While most of their work is sold to



nosaurus on a five-year tour. The show is now at the Brazos Valley Museum of Natural History in Bryan, Tex.

"They break down into small enough pieces to travel by truck," says May. "The customs officers are getting used

The dinosaur craze started after the release of Jurassic Park, but May can hardly be accused of riding the coat tails of director Steven Spielberg's thriller. His company was in high gear long before the movie hit the screen,

rubbed shoulders with Spielberg while in Hollywood to assemble his dinos. "They took a bad beating, but we were prepared for it."

The broken pieces were shipped back to RCI where they were patched together. They recently were trucked to Universal Studios in Florida, where they will highlight a theme park now under construction.

Matt Fair was likely happy to see the last of the company's silent movie stars.

"I couldn't tell you how many times I've seen that movie. It gets a little tiresome," he says.

Fair, who lives in Hamilton and studied fine art at Mount Allison University, joined RCI in 1991 and is now the production manager.

### Hectic schedule

He'll be part of an RCI crew traveling to Hawaii, Scotland, Italy, Portugal, the Alps and the Grand Canyon, making moulds of the badlands and unique rock formations.

"They'll be used to make bases for exhibits," he says. "It's a departure from dinosaurs."

RCI recently added staff and now has 15 employees.

"We've been busy," says May, "almost out-of-hand hectic."

And they're likely to get busier.

Mackie is in the early stages of a marketing blitz, using the Internet and a mailing campaign to promote their work to museums around the world.

The company might not be a household word in these parts, but it has been featured on Good Morning America, American PBS and National Geographic Magazine.

That might be the reason they haven't bothered to put a sign on the building or a welcome mat at the door.

"We're not set up for tours," says Mackie. "It would be too dangerous."

But some of the company's handiwork will be on display at Bronte Creek Provincial Park. The display, called The Ice Age: It's Mammoth, opens Saturday and runs until Oct. 17.

It will include life-size replicas of extinct mammals including a cave bear, sabre tooth cat, davistor deer, giant beavers, and an ice-age elephant, along with a selection of ice-age tools, art and shelters. The park is on Burloak

# Jurassic Park hoopla was good PR, but brought little new business

**I**t's not like Steven Spielberg invented dinosaurs. They were around tens of millions of years ago.

But Spielberg managed to turn us dinosaur daffy with Jurassic Park.

The movie was wildly successful. After taking North America by storm, it headed to Europe, then Asia. It won three Oscars and was the world's top-grossing film until sunk by the Titanic.

The movie hit parts of Alberta with the financial force of an oil boom, drawing a gush of tourists to Dinosaur Provincial Park and the Royal Tyrell Museum.

The park, north of Calgary, was designated a World Heritage Site by the United Nations. They have real dinosaur digs at the park, along with

rafting and fossil hunting expeditions down the Red Deer River.

Their displays include skeletons of five different dinosaur specimens, and the park attracts 75,000 visitors a year.

The museum draws 400,000 visitors a year and boasts one of the world's largest dino displays, with 35 complete skeletons and more than 800 fossils.

"The movie really pumped things up," says Marty Hickie, the museum's media officer. "Our numbers went up 35 per cent in the two months following (the movie's) release. And we got a lot of spinoff publicity."

Not everyone prospered by the movie, however. Not even the world's biggest dinosaur builder.

Research Casting International built T-Rex and an alamosaurus for the

movie, and both were smashed during a battle with velociraptors.

The dinos were sent back to RCI to be re-assembled, then trucked to Universal Studios in Florida to be used in a theme park, now under construction.

"It was an exciting project because it was so high profile," says Carla Mackie, exhibit co-ordinator at RCI. "But I can't say it brought us any additional business."

But shed no tears for the Beamsville dino builders. The company is very busy. And they're not cheap. One of their skulls will fetch \$1,000, while a full-scale brontosaurus can demand as much as \$180,000. But parking is free.

The Canadian-made dinosaurs will get lots of attention at Universal's theme park in Florida, which is sched-

uled to open next summer. There's a similar park at Universal's Hollywood studio and the Jurassic Park exhibition is clearly one of its highlights.

Visitors to the Hollywood park can tour the facility on a \$100-million ride that puts them nose-to-nose with a collection of life-like, mammoth dinosaurs, including a five-story high ultrasaurus.

"It's very popular," says Eliot Sekuler, a Universal spokesman, "it's our most successful attraction."

Dino madness is alive and well in Philadelphia where about 500,000 dinosaurs fans and experts showed up for last-month's Dinofest.

Just when they thought they knew everything, along came Karen Chin.

The California paleontologist is an

expert on dinosaur droppings.

She spread her wisdom during the festival, explaining to her breathless audience that the study of dino doo-doo gives us a good idea of the dinosaur's dining habits.

Her samples, sometimes called petrified poop or endangered feces, were discovered during dino digs, possibly on the soles of her shoes. And how does she know when she stumbles on a 150-million-year-old dino dropping?

"It's not always easy," she said. "A feces fossil looks and feels like a rock. But there are clues, including the presence of calcium phosphate, not usually found in sandstone, shale or other rock where dinosaur bones are typically discovered."

And, she might have added, they don't smell like rocks.