

Master dino builder

Peter May's skill at building dinosaur replicas is featured in museums around the globe

BY IAN CRUICKSHANK
For The Financial Post

The whispers started this spring, just a few days after the moving vans turned left onto Union Road and then through the S-bend and into the parking lot of the old warehouse. "We've had lots of cars drive by, but there's nothing much to see. We don't even have a business sign up yet," says Peter May, president and founder of Research Casting.

May's name doesn't mean much to his new neighbors in Beamsville, Ont., but for museum curators, he's recognized as one of the world's top dinosaur builders. Ian Morrison, chief technician of the Royal Ontario Museum's palaeobiology department, says of May, "He has an innate talent for seeing how bones fit together. To do this job well, you need to be able to form a 3D picture in your head to figure out how to articulate the bones and Peter has a really good eye for it."

Over the past 20 years, the 42-year-old May has had a hand in building more than 200 dinosaurs that are now displayed in museums around the globe, including the British Museum in London and the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Business is so brisk May has moved to Beamsville to take advantage of the space in a 18,000 square foot warehouse. Inside, he and his 14 employees are busy constructing dinosaurs that will soon be shipped out to museums in New Zealand, Oklahoma and Dallas. He's also just finished an Ice Age exhibit that is currently running in Oakville, Ont., but will later travel to Virginia, Texas and New Jersey.

Depending upon the project, May's crew either uses the actual fossils or makes moulds of the bones and then slips them into a module system of steel rods which May developed. The cost runs from US\$5,000 to US\$150,000 per skeleton and May is busier than ever. "Each new generation seems to be fascinated by dinosaurs," says May. "These were real monsters that ruled the earth and we will never see anything like them again."

Ironically, May missed the chapter on dinosaurs when growing up. Born in Oldham, a small town outside of Manchester, England, he was eight when his family moved to Canada and he has no recollection of a youthful infatuation with "the great lizards." "I missed out on the whole dinosaur thing," he admits with a laugh. "They must have taught it after I left England and before I got to Canada."

Raised in Hamilton, the future dinosaur man attended the University of Guelph where he

specialized in sculpting and earned a BA in Fine Arts. After he graduated in 1977, one of his professors arranged an interview at the Royal Ontario Museum, which had an opening for a junior technician in its vertebrate palaeontology department. The job involved a little bit of everything including making moulds and casts, repairing small engines and driving a four-wheel-drive truck. "They also asked if I liked to go camping which I did," he recalls, "and I thought, 'this is a dream come true.'"

May was offered the job but had one big reservation. "I didn't know anything at all about dinosaurs and that worried me. But Gordon Gyrmov, who was to be my boss, said, 'Don't worry, you'll pick it up as you go along.'" He was immediately enrolled in the museum's unofficial apprenticeship program and within a couple of weeks was out in the Alberta badlands, with chisels and saws, excavating dinosaur fossil sites. Back at the ROM, he learned a lot about welding and working with steel from Rudy Zimmerman, a former Second World War Luftwaffe test pilot who flew Messerschmitt jets.

May turned out to be a natural at blending all of the talents needed to be a dino builder and after seven years in Ontario he was offered the chance to help establish the Royal Tyrell

Museum of Palaeontology in Drumheller, Alta. As senior technician, he was in charge of moulding and casting bones for almost all of the original displays at the Tyrell. The museum opened in 1985 and now boasts over 40 dinosaur displays, making it one of the largest facilities of its kind in the world.

In 1986, May returned to the ROM but was approached with so much outside work that by 1987 he established Research Casting. Over the past decade his high-profile pieces have included the construction of a fully grown Barosaurus for the American Museum of Natural History in New York. It was the tallest free-standing dinosaur ever built, a one-tonne replica that stretched 15 metres tall and over 24 metres long. To make things even more interesting, the Barosaurus

was posed on its hind legs.

May and his crew drove down to New York to collect the original bones and remembers trying to pick up the hip bone. "It weighed 400 pounds and took four of us to move." The fossils were far too heavy for a freestanding mount so he took latex moulds from the original and used polyurethane foam to pour the casts. When the five-storey-high Barosaurus was reassembled underneath the new rotunda, it became the museum's most popular attraction.

However, May's most visible work came

Andrew Hurst and Steve Mula (below) attach a tail to a Milawisaur replica. Shannon Kelly (right) puts the finishing touches on a Hysilophodon. Shane Portelance (far right) with a Moososaur head replica.

