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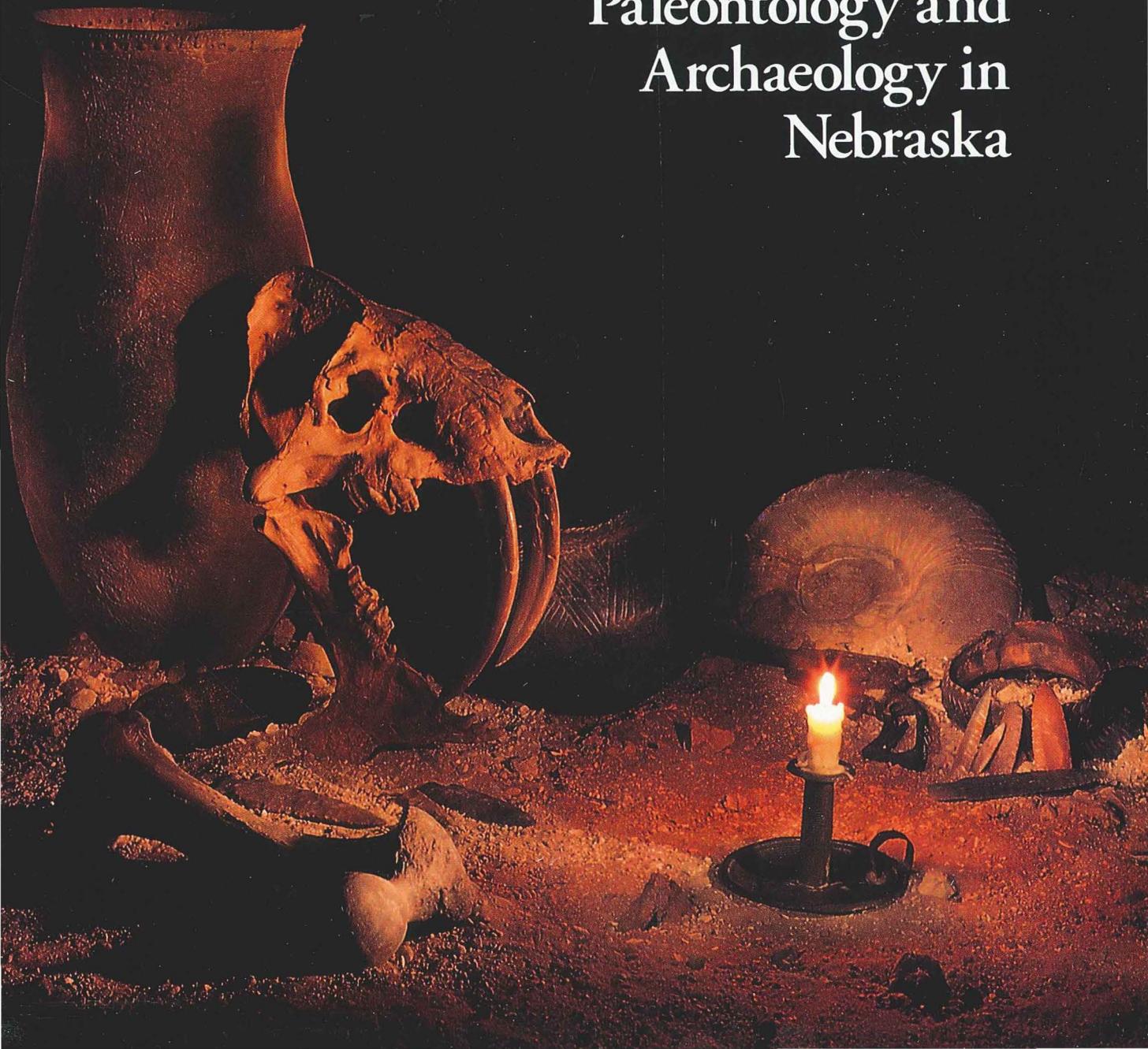
Photographs / Images: fossils and artifacts ranging from a 300-million-year-old nautiloid to a 19th century pistol; a 700-year-old pipe bowl representing a court-game player; Pawnee maul; fossil remains of two sabertooth predators locked together 25 million years after their fight to the death

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THE CELLARS OF TIME

Paleontology and
Archaeology in
Nebraska







INTRODUCTION

*Once in the sun-fierce badlands of the west
in that strange country of volcanic ash and cones,
... we found a saber tooth, most ancient cat,
far down in all those cellars of dead time.*

from "The Innocent Assassins" by Loren Eiseley

THE 25-MILLION-YEAR-OLD CAT enthralled a young student on the University of Nebraska paleontology crew. Trapped by the evidence of its own violence, the cat was found with one of its sabers thrust through the upper arm bone of another of its own species, and both animals obviously died locked together as a result of their combat. The student, who later found fame as a naturalist, anthropologist and writer, was Loren Eiseley, and the discovery of the ancient cat in Nebraska's Wildcat Ridge was the inspiration for one of his well-known works, "The Innocent Assassins."

For the title of this issue, we adapted Eiseley's image of the earth as time's underground storehouses — the cellars where its treasures are kept. "The Cellars of Time" seems an appropriate name for a publication that documents the rich historic and prehistoric record of the people, animals and plants that lived here before us.

Our keys to these secret storehouses are the sciences of archaeology and paleontology. These are not two long words for the same thing, as many people seem to think. Although both involve dirt and digging, their goals are different. Archaeology is about people — people who lived more than 10,000 years ago as well as those who lived only a few decades ago. Archaeology differs from history and the social sciences in that it examines material culture. Archaeology is the collection and study of the items, or "artifacts," used or made by humans, whether arrowheads and old pots, the ruins of structures or modern garbage in landfills. Archaeological studies in Nebraska have shed light on how people have adapted to survive on the Plains during the past hundred or more centuries.

Paleontologists, on the other hand, are concerned with the history of all other living things. Few areas the size of Nebraska have produced so much of the world's knowledge about how life developed, especially life on the Plains. Our state has a virtually uninterrupted fossil record of the past 35 million years, roughly half the time since dinosaurs became extinct. And we have older fossils — skeletons of great reptiles that swam the inland sea while dinosaurs were living on land and even more ancient remains of corals and sharks that flourished in tropical seas where Omaha now stands. But Nebraska is noted most for its latest fossil deposits dating from the Age of Mammals.

The exploration of these underground riches by archaeologists and paleontologists has helped us to understand the "Immense Journey" as Eiseley called the progression of life. Discovering how animals and people lived hundreds, thousands and even millions of years ago is important in placing our existence in perspective. Paleontology tells us how the natural world functions and how its creatures cope with change, while archaeology can give us a sense of our identity, our origins and the fragile nature of humans and their cultures.





The fossil remains of two sabertooth predators, still locked together 25 million years after their fight to the death, moved Loren Eiseley to write the poem, "The Innocent Assassins." The skull, with its sabers stuck in the arm bone of another sabertooth, was found in the Wildcat Ridge near Bayard in 1932, while Eiseley was a student member of a University of Nebraska paleontology crew. The fossil is on display at the University of Nebraska State Museum in Morrill Hall.