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IWU Magazine Explores Ancient Illinois

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IWU Magazine Explores Ancient Illinois

*Fearsome predatory fish, long-necked reptiles,
and ground sloths the size of oxen
were among the creatures
who once populated Illinois*

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.--What was Illinois like 400 million years ago--a time so distant that most of North America was south of the equator?

The answer to that question--and many others about Ancient Illinois--is found in an article appearing in the Fall, 1999, edition of *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine*, a quarterly with about 25,000 circulation.

Thomas Griffiths, IWU's Beling professor of natural sciences, takes readers on a travelogue through the Prairie State's natural history in a story headlined, "Here Before Us." The story is illustrated by Rebecca Kirk, a 1999 IWU biology major and music minor. *A copy of the article is attached to this story.*

Griffiths' tale, for example, introduces readers to ancient heavily armored fish that lived 400 million years ago with massive plates of bone protecting the head and thorax. He also travels back 300 million years, when the only part of Illinois not covered by the ocean was the northeastern corner of Illinois--including the Chicago-Joliet area.

"It's likely," Griffiths wrote, "that a modern resident of either city would not have enjoyed living in the region at the time, as the area was a large freshwater swamp, created by the outflow of a river flowing from the foothills of the newly formed Appalachian Mountains to the east."

Griffiths' article also illustrates a unique teaching technique he uses to explain to students just how long ago 300 years is, a concept known as "deep time."

"I came up with an exercise," Griffiths said, "that uses distance as an analogy for time."

For example, the distance from the IWU campus to Macomb, Ill.,

(more)

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would represent 450 million years, when the first species first appears. Another 635 miles west, all the way to Colorado, represents the dawn of single-celled life some 3.8 billion years ago.

As Griffiths explores Illinois' natural history--to a time as recent as 15,000 years ago--he introduces readers to the mysterious Tully Monster (a creature attracting scientific debate), perhaps a foot long, and the woolly mammoth (adult males stood 12-feet-high at the shoulder and weighed as much as eight tons).

"Illinois has been the home of a number of unusual and interesting animal species," Griffiths explained, "many of whom thrived for millions of years before conditions changed and they moved elsewhere or became extinct.

"Our prairie state of today," Griffiths concluded, "is only the latest version of a vast number of different versions of Illinois, stretching back into a distant past."

Griffiths has taught biology at IWU since 1981. He teaches classes in evolution and vertebrate anatomy, and is a recognized authority on the anatomy and evolution of bats and other mammals. A past winner of IWU's Award for Teaching Excellence, Griffiths also was picked by *Rolling Stone* magazine as one of the nation's top professors.

IWU, founded in 1850, enrolls more than 2,000 students in a College of Liberal Arts, and individual schools of Music, Theatre Arts, Art, and Nursing. Since 1994, these facilities have been added to the IWU campus: a \$15 million athletics and recreation center, a \$25 million science center, a \$6.8 million residence hall, a \$5.1 million Center for Liberal Arts, and a \$1.65 million baseball stadium.

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Editor's Note: Permission is given to reprint excerpts or the entire article, "Here Before Us," by Thomas Griffiths, the Beling Professor of Natural Sciences at Illinois Wesleyan University. Please send copies to: Bob Aaron, Director of University Communications, Illinois Wesleyan University, P.O. Box 2900, Bloomington, Ill. 61702-2900.