

Dozing with the Dinosaurs

Story by Irene McMahon
Original illustrations prepared specially for *Home & Away* by Franklin McMahon

The twilight grandeur of Stanley Field Hall has often provided an unusual venue for business and professional gatherings, elegantly catered cocktail receptions and fancy dinners. It has become a place where formally attired corporate executives, august professors, and flower-bedecked womenfolk can frolic in the shadow of dinosaurs and charging elephants.

We have sometimes attended these elegant parties. But now we were mixed up with a very different crowd as we trudged into the West Entrance of the Field Museum of Natural History loaded down with sleeping bags, pillows, toothbrushes and flashlights.

Meryl, 10, Jonathan, 9, Drew, 8, my long-suffering husband whose age is best not mentioned, and I arrived at 6:30 p.m. and stashed our gear in a designated "sleeping hall." We had choices of sleeping next to teepees, beneath totem poles, beside a dug-out canoe, but picked a secluded and carpeted niche between exhibit cases in the "Indians Before Columbus" section of the great museum; a place where silver and blue foxes and North American cats could watch over us. The pre-Columbian Indians are a reminder that the Field Museum is a permanent legacy of the 1893 World's Columbian Exhibition, a World's Fair commemorating the 400th anniversary of Columbus's Discovery of America.

There were about 150 of us indoor outdoorsmen game enough to be engulfed by the eerie hollowness of one

million square feet of exhibition, research and storage space, covering nine acres on three floors.

We Meet Museum Experts

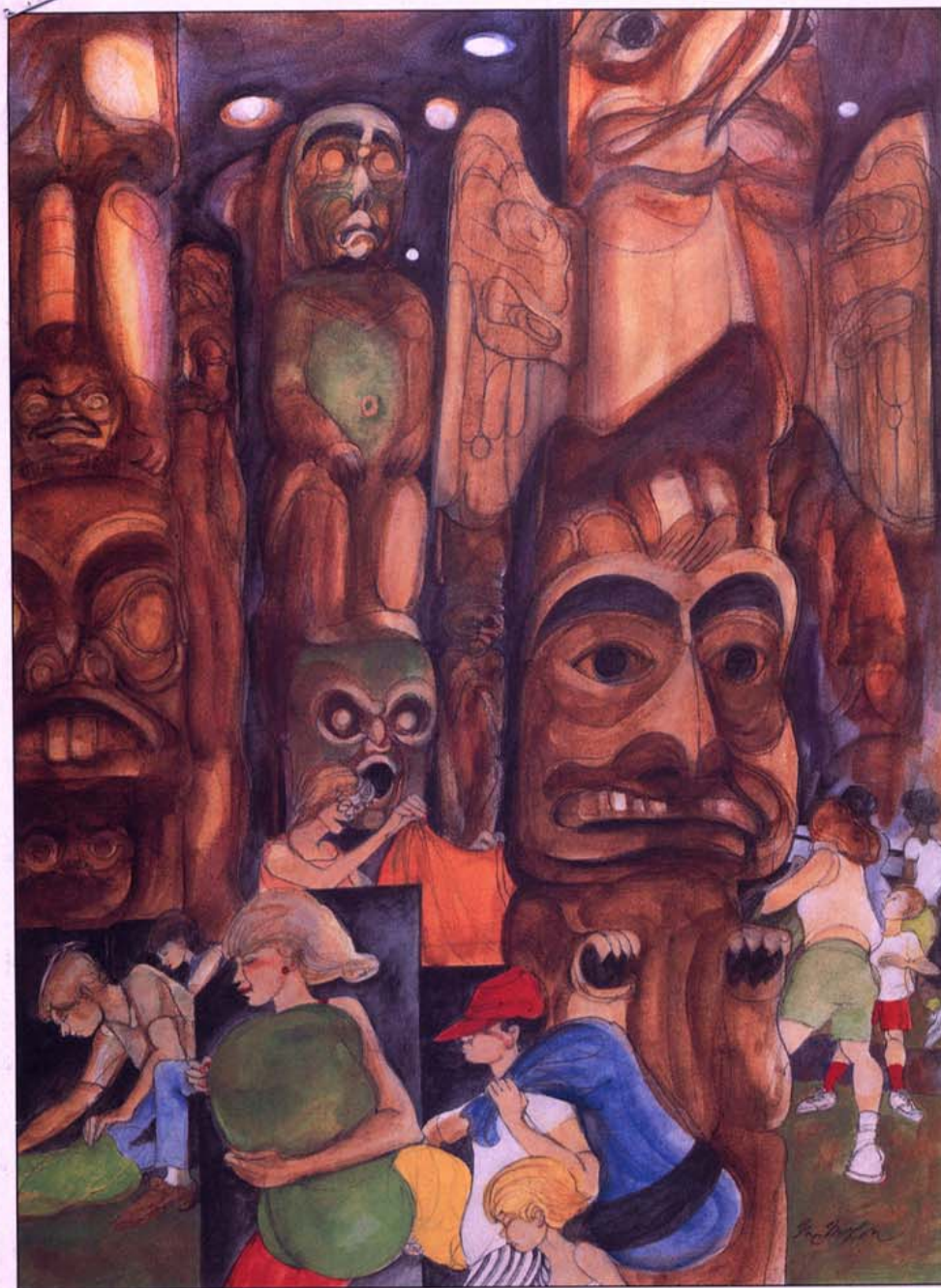
A short, Boy Scout-like powwow introduced us to the museum experts we would meet later at exhibits and hands-on activities. They were to tell us about dinosaurs, show us how to make and use primitive Indian toys and weavings, introduce us to the eating habits of bears, all in a spirit of summer camp, fun in one of the four greatest natural history museums in the world. Only the British Museum of Natural History, the National Museum of Natural History (Smithsonian), and New York's American Museum of Natural History are judged to be its peers.

"Do the animals make noises at night?" asked one small boy.

The darkness enshrouded the murmurs of young voices. A girl cringed as two boys turned their flashlights on the torso of an unwrapped mummy. In the dark-out we had descended a 35-foot burial shaft, prowled through a tomb robber's tunnel into the mastaba burial chamber of an Egyptian Noble; and there were to be 22 other such mummies including dogs and children within this "Inside Ancient Egypt" exhibition.

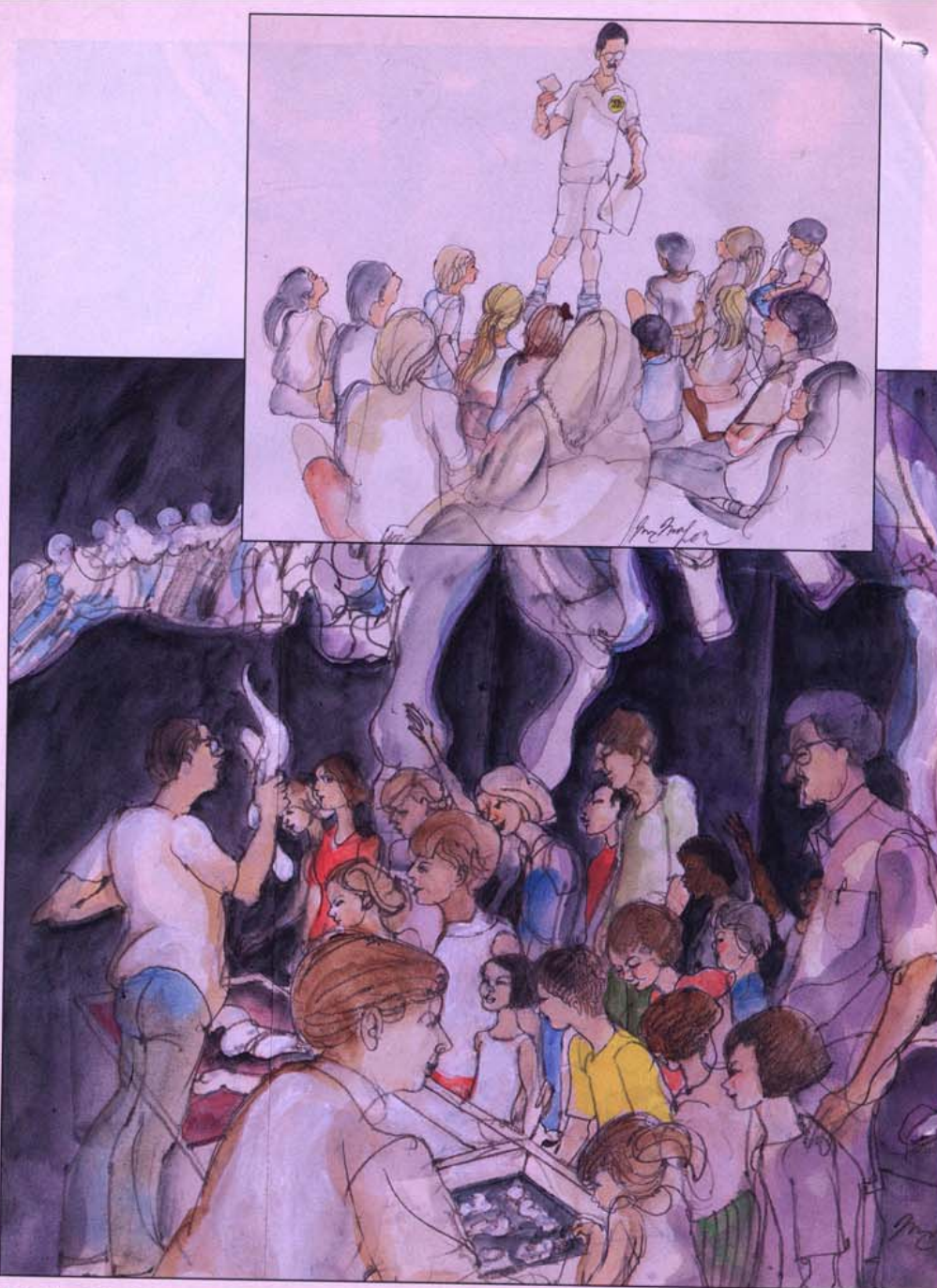
We saw a 3,876-year-old box that had once belonged to Pharaoh Sen-wosret III among the 1,400 rare artifacts in this ancient Egyptian collection spanning from 5000 B.C. to 300 A.D. Not so old compared to the Pre-Cambrian stromatolites (fossilized algae) from the Gunflint Formation in Ontario, Canada.

Searching for a quiet place to sleep at the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago.



"We walked along a stretch of the Nile River . . . and Jonathan was awarded a Dinosaur Hunting License."

Irene and Franklin McMahon of Lake Forest, Ill., are a unique team of travel reporters. Her stories are illustrated with his art and appear in major publications such as Ford Times.



which are said to be two billion years old; all adding to our own worries about ossification within the sleeping bags of our Pre-Columbian resting chamber.

We roamed through "Traveling the Pacific," walked along a stretch of the Nile River and lifted water with an

(Left) Young people and their parents are divided into small groups. On the list for most groups is the Dinosaur lecture. (Bottom) A Museum staff member gives directions for the games.

Egyptian irrigating shaduf, then found ourselves beneath a 72-foot-long apatosaurus enmeshed in an amazingly detailed academic discussion. Our Jonathan was able to answer one of the most difficult questions and was awarded a Dinosaur Hunting License for Vernal, Utah.

Detouring around the museum's astounded cleaning women, we explored regions never before seen. With 19 million artifacts and specimens before us we had trouble concentrating on one thing. Drew wandered off; we lost him a half-dozen times. Meryl was more contemplative, interested in Ojos de Vevados (deer's eye) weavings. She did well on the Bear Hunt for Food.

During snack time, Drew The Provider kept us supplied with plates of cookies and glasses of apple juice. Late-night movies included *The Little Mermaid*, *Never Cry Wolf*, *The Land Before Time*, and it was lights out at 1 a.m. Finally exhausted we climbed into our sleeping bags; at least, some of us did.

Now the museum became cavernous and the shadows took over; clearly the most wonderful place in the world to range with a flashlight, to undertake a solitary exploration of the nooks and crannies of history, of bears, eagles and skulls, Guatemalan masks and Alaskan Totem Poles, daggers, 3.5 million beetles, and kinsmen in sleeping bags.

There was a big thunderstorm, but it was all outside, allowing a few sporadically fortuitous winks before lights on and an early breakfast.

Even the young people in the washroom next morning were complaining of stiff shoulders; I had blamed it on the skeletons around me. Our young researchers when asked their opinions about this particular museum experience replied, "Excellent, excellent, excellent."

Scheduled dates in 1991 for Field Museum's Family overnights are Oct. 26 and Dec. 7 with each session offering different activities. More overnights are scheduled for 1992.

The program is designed for families with children in grades one to five accompanied by an adult. It is in keeping with plans of museum president Dr. Willard Boyd and Vice President Michael Spock to make the place a living museum; provide a new kind of environment where the general public can learn on its own. Overnights are \$30 per adult and \$25 per child. Call (312) 322-8854 for information and registration.

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