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That's no bottle



—Photos by Sam Vestal

Jim Stanton rubs shoulders with his discovery.

Aptos student stumbles upon skull of mastodon

By MATT SPEISER

A 16-year-old Renaissance High School student with a penchant for collecting discarded bottles discovered the skull of a giant mastodon while foraging in the Aptos hills last week.

According to a paleontologist at the University of California at Santa Cruz, the find is "extremely rare" for the Santa Cruz area.

Jim Stanton said he came upon the skull as he was searching for old bottles in the dirt of the Aptos hills when he saw what looked like a white rock sticking out of the ground.

"I was just sitting there, and saw this thing," Stanton said. "And then I noticed there was a hole near it, like where someone had poked a pole in the ground, but it was actually the space from where the tusks had been."

Stanton and three friends dug for six hours before bringing half of the mastodon skull back to his house where a paleontologist from the Santa Cruz Museum told them what it was.

"I was pretty surprised," admitted Stanton.

The mastodon, a large elephant-like creature, roamed the earth between 2 million and 10,000 years ago, when it became extinct. Paleontologist Roberta Smith-Evernden of UC-Santa Cruz said the preservation of this specimen was apparently "a rare stroke of luck." Usually, she said,



skeletons decay unless they are quickly covered at the time of death.

Stanton and his friends were unable to remove the entire skull in their expedition. "The brain cavity is full of sand and it will take some time to dig out," Stanton said. "We'll go back later."

Stanton, who refuses to even hint about the location of his find, said that the skull is well hidden from view. "There's no way anyone will find it," he vowed.

The County Parks Department is not so sure. From Stanton's indications so far, the skull might have been uncovered in part of Aptos Creek Park. According to Director of the County Department of Parks, Open Space and Cultural Services Larry Norris, it is illegal to remove any property from county parks.

"We'll look into it," commented Norris, adding that a parks crew will

be sent out to comb the park for signs of Stanton's handiwork. "He had to have carefully covered it up for us not to find it."

Wayne Thompson, a paleontologist with the Santa Cruz City Museum, was first contacted about the find a few days after the boys brought the mound of dirt and bone to Stanton's house.

He confirmed that the artifact was indeed a mastodon and contacted the San Francisco Academy of Sciences for advice.

Stanton said a representative from the academy would be traveling down to Aptos to help with the further excavation of the skull.

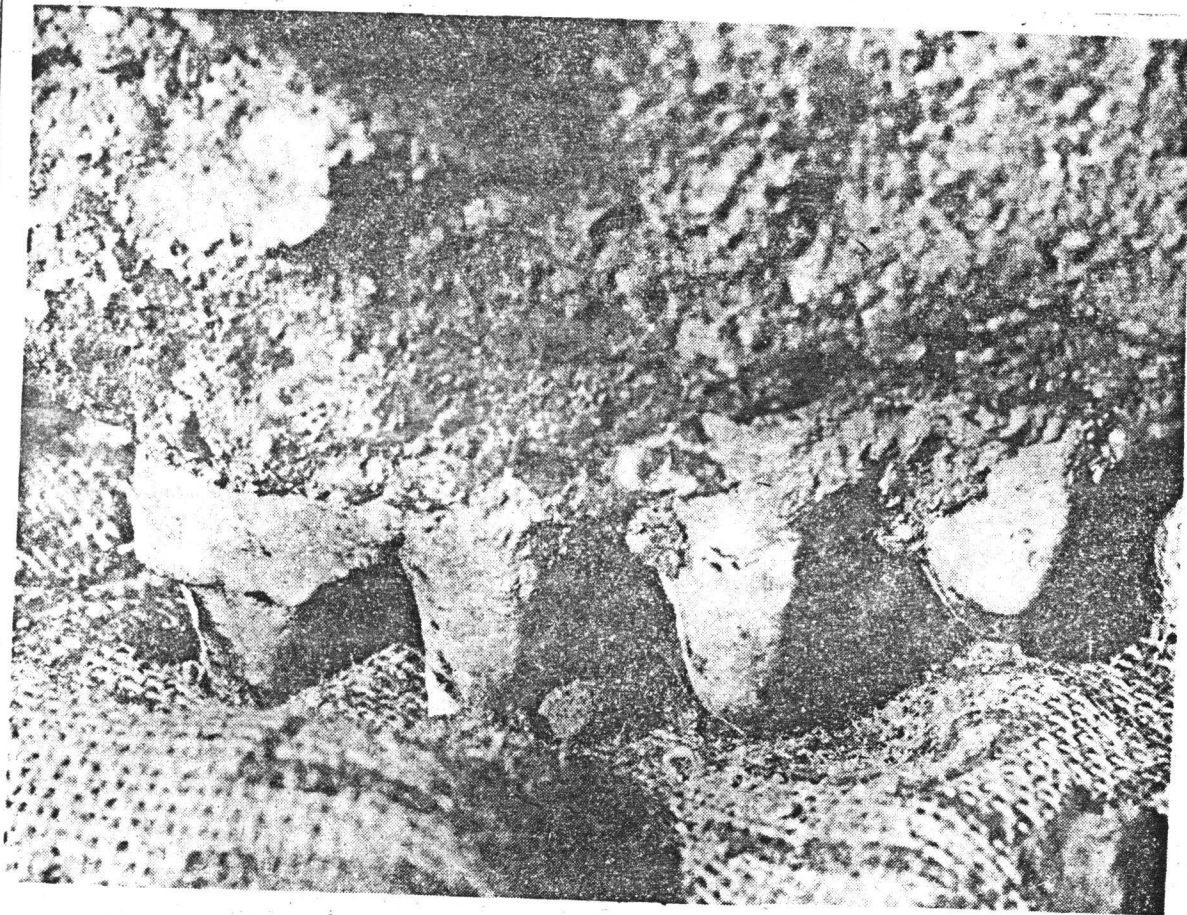
Meanwhile, the attention Stanton is receiving has caught him a bit off-guard. "I don't really know what's going on," he confided, as he prepared for interviews with local media and an 11:30 stint on ABC news.

Stanton's mother, Marsha Stanton, is left no less dumfounded. "I didn't believe it at first. It was one of those days when Jim missed the school bus home and he just started bottle hunting.

"He's just that kind of kid," she said. "He's either eating or digging up bottles."

Stanton is proud of his habit. "You really ought to try it sometime," he advised as he showed the collection. "I started when I was really little. It's actually really good money."

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The skull still had a good set of choppers.