

A Fossil Story For Children

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Editor's Note: This clever story, told as by a father to his child, can be read to elementary or junior high school pupils as motivation or as an introduction to a study of extinct animals. It offers excellent correlation for an English assignment; pupils may be encouraged to collect pictures of and prepare talks about the extinct animals mentioned in the story.

"Once a long time ago in 'Long Sangalus,' before there was any 'Long Sangalus,' before Daddy was a little boy even and there weren't any Indians yet—only just plains and swamps and wild beasts—there lived an Old Proud Peacock. He lived in the thickets around some water holes out on the plains south of the Santa Monica Mountains. Now peacocks are very proud and sometimes they think more about how they look than they ought to. They do have beautiful long tails, but they are a little bit *short* on every-day common sense.

"Well, one winter the rains didn't come as usual and the water holes began to get smaller and smaller until there wasn't enough water to run off in a stream, and the little pools that were left when the water didn't run off got all funny-looking and *smelled* very queer. The mud that was around them didn't look nor smell just as the mud used to when the little stream was bigger. There were some pools that seemed to get all black and sticky, with funny rainbow colors on top as bright as Old Proud Peacock's tail.

"Was that the 'asphalt,' Daddy?"

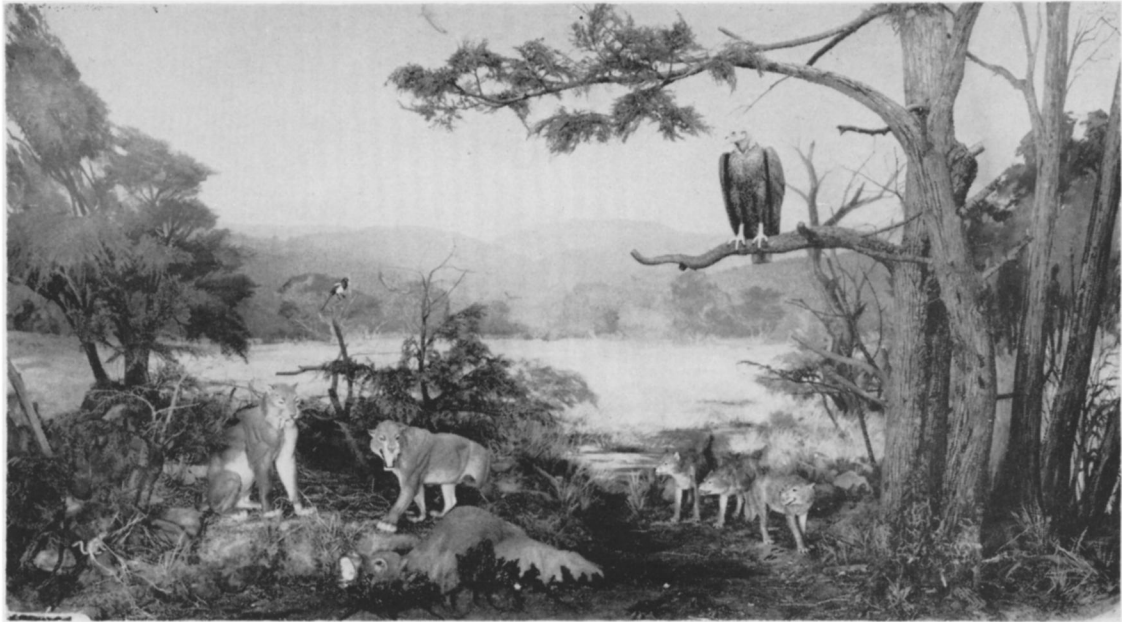
"Yes, that was the 'asphalt,' all gummy and sticky like tar. There wasn't any little stream to carry it off when it came up out of the cracks that ran away down deep into the ground, so it just stayed there and got more and more sticky in the sun and the wind until it was almost as bad as hundreds and hundreds of sticky flypapers all sjudged into one piece and bigger than our whole sleeping veranda. In the daytime the dust would blow in and cover the asphalt all over so it looked

like dry ground, but it *wasn't* dry ground! In the nighttime, when the water didn't dry up as fast as it trickled out of the bank, there would be some water on top of the asphalt all spread out so it looked like a nice water hole again in the morning.

"There was one Old Sore-Footed Wolf who lived in that same thicket. He was old and lame and couldn't run very fast, not fast enough to catch jackrabbits, so he used to eat lizards and quail eggs and gnaw the bones of the ground sloths that the saber-toothed tigers had killed. This Old Sore-Footed Wolf came limping and whimpering along through the dry weeds one morning and, what should he spy but the Old Proud Peacock, still thinking about his big fine tail as he walked out into a pool to take his morning drink! My, how he did wish he could catch that fine breakfast!

"Now, the Old Sore-Footed Wolf had tried any number of times to slip up on Old Proud Peacock, but he never could quite make it on three legs; still, he was never too lame or too discouraged to try. He just licked his chin to taste how hungry he was and started to slip along through the dry grass, holding up his sore foot. Of course Old Proud Peacock saw him before he really got through the bushes. But what do you 'spose? That funny-smelling mud had sjudged up between Old Proud Peacock's toes and around his shins. It had just stuck him so fast that he couldn't pick up his feet at all and, when he flapped his wings, they got all smeared up. And his big fine tail, that he was so proud of, what a sight it was! It didn't look a bit nice all covered with 'asphalt.'

"Well, the Old Sore-Footed Wolf got closer and closer. Old Proud Peacock acted so funny, he let out a great 'squa-a-awk!' just as if a snake had caught him. The Old Sore-Footed Wolf just couldn't stand it any longer. Skip-zim-blam! He landed right in the midst of the pool, grabbed Old Proud Peacock in his mouth, and started to wade ashore on his three good legs. Well, sir! But he just couldn't *wade* ashore. He was stuck in the awful 'asphalt'! It felt just as if a snake had gotten him by all three legs at one time and, when he put down the other leg, that got



—Courtesy: Carnegie Museum, Pittsburgh, Pa.

La Brea Tar Pits, Rancho La Brea, California

This photo of a reproduction of the famous La Brea Tar Pits, now set aside as Hancock Park in the City of Los Angeles, shows a bison (*Bison antiquus*) which has been chased by three dire wolves (*Canis dirus*) and has become mired in the tar. Two great saber-toothed cats (*Smilodon californicus*), attracted by the commotion, have driven the wolves away. In a nearby tree, a giant vulture (*Teratornis merriami*)—largest known extinct bird of flight—is waiting to share in the feast. The tree is the Macnab cypress (*Cupressus macnabiana*) which, although found fossilized in the tar, still exists in parts of California. A ground squirrel (*Citellus beecheyi*), and a yellow-billed magpie (*Pica nuttalli*), look on. Both of these animal species still live in California, but all of the other animals became extinct long ago. The bubbles are caused by gases escaping through the tar.

caught too, and there he was. He yapped and he howled and he made such a noise that a little Wolf Pup, who had started out to hunt his own breakfast, thought that his old three-legged uncle had caught something at last and would need him to help eat it. He scampered up, wagging his tail, and plumped into the pool to get a bite. What a row there was now! Old Sore-Footed Wolf felt mad enough to fight anything, and he turned on that Wolf Pup and really made him howl. They raised such a row that they waked up all the other wolves in the neighborhood. They all came blundering into the pool, thinking the fight was over something good to eat. Wow! What a racket they made!

“Then Big Old Saber-Toothed Tiger pricked up his ears when he heard all that noise, and he came down there to drive away the wolves that were carrying on as though they had killed a buffalo, or a camel, or a ground sloth, or something. The Old Saber-Toothed Tiger thought that, if they had, he was going to take

it away from them and eat the best part himself. So down he came with his big saber-teeth sticking half a foot out of his jaws. He gave a big ‘gur-rowl’ and plunked down among the wolves with a roar that would scare you and me almost to death if we heard it. But those wolves didn’t run a bit—’cause they *couldn’t!*

“Big Old Saber-Toothed Tiger was just as mad as he could be. He tried to pick up a paw to cuff the nearest wolf, but he could not pick it up. Then he tried to pick up another paw, but that one wouldn’t come up either. He was stuck in the awful ‘asphalt.’ Then he lifted up his voice, and *that* wasn’t stuck a bit. I suppose you could have heard the noise he made ‘way over in Hollywood even when there wasn’t any Hollywood there!

“Well, they began fighting each other because each one thought the other one had hold of him. They didn’t know any better than to fight about it, so they kept on fighting until there just wasn’t any more fight left in them.

"Well now, you know, all this time there was an Old Turkey Buzzard watching them from way, way up in the sky. He had a notion there was something going to happen, so he circled 'round and 'round up there looking about as big as a housefly. He got so interested that he came down until he looked as big as a bumble bee. When he did that, another Old Turkey Buzzard—so far away you couldn't see him at all—happened to see the first Old Turkey Buzzard circle down until he looked as big as a bumble bee, and thought he had better come down too and look into the matter. And another Old Turkey Buzzard saw the second Old Turkey Buzzard, and here he came. So, by the time the first Old Turkey Buzzard looked as big as a butterfly, there were almost a dozen Old Turkey Buzzards circling 'round and coming closer and closer.

"But, by the time the first Old Turkey Buzzard looked as big as a mocking bird, there was a Big California Condor sailing along and, you know, he was as big as three Turkey Buzzards. He came right in ahead of the Old Turkey Buzzards, and they scattered out of his way. The Big California Condor came so close that he looked almost as big as a barn door flying about, because Condors are the biggest birds in the world except the ostriches.

"Now, what do you suppose! Before the Old California Condor got one bite of that nice, delectable, dead Saber-Toothed Tiger that he wanted so much, what should appear in the sky but a great, great, great big *Tera-*

tornis! Wow! He was a big fellow—so big, he looked like the whole barn flying along. *Teratornis*, you know, was the big bird Daddy found in the 'asphalt' that's twice as big as a condor and bigger than any bird anybody ever saw flying about, and there aren't any birds living anywhere in the world nowadays that look anything like him. Daddy named him *Teratornis* because that means *terrible monstrous bird*. I suspect he must have looked almost like an airplane gliding in.

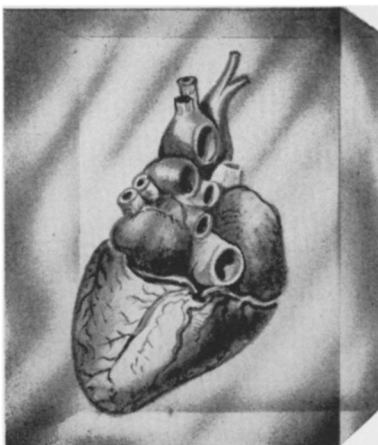
"Well, sir, that Old Terrible Monstrous *Teratornis* scattered the California Condor and the Old Turkey Buzzards out of the way like flies, and bang! he came down into the pool to get a bite of that delectable, dead Saber-Toothed Tiger for *his* breakfast. You *know* just what happened! He stepped right into the sticky 'asphalt'! It didn't do him any good to flap his big wings, because the very first flap got them so smeared up that he couldn't flap but once more, and then his tail got stuck also.

"Well, sir! Do you know, it wasn't long until the Old California Condor, and his mate too, had done the same thing? Now those Old Turkey Buzzards, sailing around and down until they looked as big as pigeons, saw everything all quiet. So farther down they came, circling and circling until they got so hungry and greedy looking at all the good things for Turkey Buzzards to eat, that"

(Here the teacher may suggest that pupils complete the unfinished story as a life science—English assignment.)

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