

# THE CARAVAN

NEWSLETTER OF THE FRIENDS OF LOREN EISELEY

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Winter 1993

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**Loren Corey Eiseley**  
September 3, 1907 - July 9, 1977

*"We have joined the caravan, you might say, at a certain point; we will travel as far as we can, but we cannot in one lifetime see all that we would like to see or learn all that we hunger to know."*

*-- The Immense Journey*

## PRESIDENT'S LETTER

Eiseley once said that mankind rarely gets to look at the universe head on, but rather comes at it post facto.

My universe came to me tooth to tooth when, returning from a vacation in California I found a shiny new computer on my desk. I had made a vow that I was going to make retirement before learning to sign on to any computer.

I had always had a much softer feeling toward the humanities. But, to my astonishment and joy, my "tutor" said he had chosen a password that would make me happy and promptly punched in that password -- nothing less than Eiseley! (My tutor is a young man and knows of my interest in Eiseley.)

So every time I sign on, I punch in Eiseley and smile!

Sincerely,

Jane Stillwell Smith, President

# HUNTING FOSSILS IN THE WILDCAT HILLS LOREN EISELEY'S NIGHT COUNTRY

Our program at the recent Annual Meeting of the Friends featured a slide presentation given by Mike Voorhies of the Nebraska State Museum after our dinner in Elephant Hall. Mike's photos gave us wonderful views of the fossil country. Since his talk was somewhat dependent on his pictures, it is not possible to reproduce in writing his presentation exactly as he gave it to us. So we have adapted the following text from his notes so that we can try to share our experience with you. Mike is a paleontologist and he is perhaps best known because many years ago he found a rhino skull protruding from a hillside in his home country near Orchard, which in turn led to the discovery of the great deposit treasure which has now become Ashfall State Park. Here many years ago a great cloud of volcanic dust settled to trap and preserve the rhinos and other animals which were basking in the area of a small lake. The story of this discovery and of the development of the site is told in the recent TV production, "Mysteries in the Dust," which was produced by Nebraska Public Television in 1991. Mike is the Curator of Vertebrate Paleontology at the University of Nebraska State Museum. He is also a member of the Friends' Board of Directors.

So what follows is Mike's presentation which he called:

## **"Hunting Fossils in the Wildcat Hills - Loren Eiseley's Night Country."**

Eiseley never pretended to be a paleontologist, but as a scientist interested in human origins he was deeply affected by paleontological themes. He was intrigued by fossils both for their implications (evolution), and for their beauty, rarity and tangibility.

He was more than a scientist, of course, and unlike most scientists he regarded style to be at least as important as substance. For him, how something was said was as important as what was said.

Eiseley discovered in western Nebraska the joy of poking his nose into endless ravines and gullies while he was a student member of the Museum's Old South Party in 1931, '32 and '33. They went to collect fossils for the newly built Morrill Hall.

The bedrock reality of the Nebraska panhandle is

little changed in the sixty years since young Eiseley ventured out there. Chimney Rock is a few inches shorter. There is some urban sprawl in the western part of the Wildcat Hills, but fewer people now live on most of the ridge. I am convinced that Eiseley would still feel at home there in a way he no longer did in Lincoln or Aurora. His spirit would feel at ease in Bird Cage Gap or at Roundhouse Rock.

Chimney Rock was that landmark which provided most travelers their first glimpse of the Wildcat Hills.

To a geologist it records five million years of time, layer upon layer of air-fall volcanic dust and the debris washed eastward from the Rockies. Fossils trapped in those layers let paleontologists read the history of life.

To a poet it was the vision of medieval battlements and the castles of the high plains gods.

Eiseley comprehended both view points simultaneously in an unusual, probably unique way. He had that rare capacity to see both views through the same set of eyes. While the note books of his fellows were being filled with scientific data, Eiseley's also contained notes and observations that later were worked into his poems and essays.

Eiseley was fortunate to be attending the University of Nebraska during the exciting years that Erwin Barbour was there. He was Eiseley's geology instructor and he told Eiseley and the other students wonderful stories about fossil hunting in Nebraska. He gave many students the chance for summer work in the western fossil country and he hired Loren as a field hand.

Barbour was an inspired teacher and a gifted artist. This museum was his vision and he planned and built Morrill Hall. Barbour wanted this Elephant Hall, where we are tonight, to be a Nebraska Hall and the present restoration effort you see going on around you is aiming to make this main room of the museum satisfy his vision, to celebrate and display the wonderful and special prehistory of our state.

To promote his dream for this museum, he had the inspiration to mount the museum's largest elephant specimen, Archie, so that people could walk between its legs in the old museum which was later the geography building.

While Barbour's active field work ended about the time of World War I, the next generation, affectionately called "his boys," kept up his tradition.

Let us try to put ourselves in Eiseley's boots. Imagine that you are an undergraduate. School is out and you are about to see the fabled fossil beds of the west for the first time. You head west up the Platte Valley and you don't stop until you get to the middle portion of the lower side of Nebraska's great panhandle where you come to the Wildcat Hills. By coincidence, this also describes me back in 1959 at the end of my freshman year when I was hired as an assistant to a graduate student, Arne Aadland, who was mapping in the Wildcats. While Arne worked out the geology, I hunted for fossils.

To someone growing up in eastern Nebraska, as Eiseley and I both did, the first impression of the Wildcats is their vastness. You feel like an ant exploring the Great Pyramid. But soon the horizontal grandeur of the broad landscape becomes secondary to the even more profound sense of the vertical dimension. Each rock face climbed bears the direct evidence of eons of deposition. Each step down a ravine takes you further back into time.

In the opening essay of The Immense Journey Eiseley tells of a narrow place which he calls the slit: "The crack was only about body-width and, as I worked my way downward, the light turned dark and green from the overhanging grass. Above me the sky became a narrow slit of blue, and the sandstone was cool to my hands on either side. . . . that cut was a perfect cross section through perhaps ten million years of time. I hoped to find at least a bone, but I was not prepared for the sight I finally came upon. Staring straight out at me, as I slid farther and deeper into the green twilight, was a skull embedded in the solid sandstone."

Like Eiseley, I found my first skull in a slit just such as this, but I did not read the Immense Journey until I was a graduate student when I picked up a copy of it at the library in Laramie. I had no idea that anyone else had felt that same visceral reaction to collecting a fossil deep in a crevasse with the blue sky above. Eiseley's essay, "The Slit," provides the most perfect evocation of geological time known to me.

I found my first skull just west of Redington Gap, right at the bottom of a slit-like "drainspout" cut in the sandstone. But where exactly is Eiseley's "slit?" No one will ever know. Perhaps it was in the badlands, but probably it was in the Wildcat Hills because he visited there first.

Those expeditions in which Eiseley participated brought back great quantities of important material

to the museum. There are several things from those fossil hunts which you can now see on display and which also found their way into some of the most familiar of Eiseley's writing.

The skull celebrated in the poem, "The Innocent Assassins," is now placed in a new display case of "Nebraska Fossil Treasures" which you will find just west of the entrance to the museum shop. This remarkable specimen consists of the skull of an extinct cat-like animal with its elongate canine tooth piercing the leg bone of another cat. This was found in the Black Hank Canyon just south of Chimney Rock and Eiseley was with the party that found it.

In the same case is the molar of a giant four tusked elephant from Banner County. This comes from the bone bed discovery described in "The Relic Men" in chapter 8 of The Night Country. Eiseley tells us, "I saw protruding from an eroding gully, the jaw of a shovel-tusked amebelodont that has been gone for twice a million years into the night of geologic time. I tell you I saw it with my own eyes and I knew, even as I looked at it, that I would never see anything like it again." The likes of the many specimens from this site are not found in any other museum.

And just across the hall from this case stands a Large-Horned Bison killed by paleo Indians and which was found in the Scottsbluff Bison Quarry in 1932. Tools used by these early hunters were found mixed in with the bones of their kill and so this site yielded one of the earliest documented associations of man-made stone tools with skeletons of big-boned bison in Nebraska. This is the "heavy headed beast of the gone time" evoked in the poem "Flight 857" which you will find in Notes of an Alchemist.

We can also see the Paired Horned Rhino skeleton of the Miocene era found near Bridgeport in Morrill County. Eiseley describes in The Unexpected Universe collecting "carpals and metacarpals" of "some lost Tertiary species of American Rhinoceros" until "we cursed like an army platoon that headquarters had forgotten."

Soon there will be an new exhibit here in Elephant Hall which will have another Eiseley association. The "Milford Mastodon" skull is to be displayed on a sand bar that is to be built to extend into the room in front of the new Ice Age mammoth mural. This skull was found lodged in the ice by two hunters in Seward County in 1931 and they notified the museum. Loren Eiseley and Bert Schultz were

among those who retrieved the skull and brought it to the museum.

I visited the Wildcat Hills in 1981 with a grad student Carl Swisher III who did his master's thesis on the rocks and fossils of the Wildcat Ridge. He was tracing out layers of volcanic ash in order to refine the exact age relationships of fossils in the Wildcat Ridge. Over that summer he found at least 58 new fossil sites in that region. Carl has since gone on to break new ground in geochronology - the science of determining the exact ages of rocks. One of his latest achievements was to determine the age of the crater in Mexico that may have been the result of the collision that killed the dinosaurs. My most vivid memory from that trip recalls the crest of the ridge where we found piles of teeth from small prehistoric animals which had been gathered by harvester ants. These ants seek shiny pebbles for their mound and like good paleontologists they had been attracted to these small teeth and brought them home.

In 1982 another friend and I made a return pilgrimage to the Wildcat Hills. Our ostensible excuse was to relocate the site of the Museum's Giant Rhino Quarry using the notebooks of the Old South Party as a guide, but both of us really wanted, in a small way, to retrace the footsteps of one of our favorite authors. Greg Brown and I found the valley at the edge of the Cheyenne Tableland.

The sites are still there. The holes have drifted shut with sand, but eerily we found still resting on the rocks lichen covered piles of the bone fragments which were left behind by the field parties from 40 to 50 years before.

You can see what kind of country it is, for a recreation of that place has been used as the background for the bobcat display in our Hall of Nebraska Wildlife which you will find on the lower level of the museum.

We prospected for new fossils and Greg found a jaw bone of an ancient peccary. This was the clue which then pointed us to the discovery of another great bone bed. We named this new site the "Immense Journey Quarry" in memory of Loren Eiseley. This site has now produced specimens of nearly one hundred species of 14 million year old animals. Some of the most interesting animals were chalicotheres (giant horse-like clawed vegetarians), beardogs, tapirs, horned rodents, hedgehogs and curl-tailed lizards.

We discovered a cave which we soon realized housed an ancient, but still occupied, pack rat nest. Eiseley was fond of pack rats. We now use these sites to study the materials pack rats hauled back to their nests for these places provide a continuing record of climate, animal and floral change. Packrat nests in the Grand Canyon have been radiocarbon dated to 15,000 years or more, but the Nebraska nests remain undated.

It was a joy to be working out there in the silence miles from anyone else and from a scientific standpoint this was certainly a success. We added several thousand good fossils to the museum's collection, but it also put us in touch with why we do this work in the first place -- to increase our sense of wonder at the workings of nature.

For the entire time we worked the Immense Journey Quarry site, a pair of nesting hawks were constantly overhead, patrolling the valley until finally our departure returned it to them.

## EDITORIAL COMMENT:

This is a good time to emulate the god Janus and look both behind and ahead. In September of 1992 the Friends offered a panel discussion at the second Nebraska Literature Festival in Kearney on "Loren Eiseley; His Message for our Time", with Board Member Kira Gale as moderator. We also had a booth there where President Jane Stillwell Smith and Board Member Morrie Tuttle sold Eiseley books and memorabilia.

In September, October, November and December, Board Member Darrel Berg of the University of Nebraska at Omaha Religious Center and Bing Chen of the UNL Engineering Department at Omaha led a series of six book discussions of Eiseley works, Immense Journey, All the Strange Hours and The Unexpected Universe. These talks were taped for broadcasting in the public schools in Omaha in January as part of the Nebraska Authors Series. The programs culminated in a reception in the Performing Art Education Building at UNO sponsored by the Nebraska Center for the Book, co-sponsored by the Friends of Loren Eiseley and hosted by the UNO Library Friends.

On Loren Eiseley Day in Lincoln on October 25, Board Members Kira Gale and Darrel Berg planned and conducted a tour for 30 members to visit the sites of Eiseley's youth. The weather cooperated,

the discussion was good, and the "pilgrims" were highly enthusiastic with requests that this become a regular part of our programs. The Annual Dinner that evening was held in Elephant Hall of the University of Nebraska State Museum on the UNL campus where fossils collected by digs in which Eiseley participated are now displayed. Board Member, Michael Voorhies, Curator of Vertebrate Paleontology at the Museum, spoke on "Hunting Fossils in the Wildcat Hills; Loren Eiseley's Night Country." His speech is reproduced here for those who did not make the meeting. Board Member Bob Runyon, Director of the UNO libraries, wrote of this day in "The Shaping of a Scientist Poet" which has just appeared in the January Nebraska Center of the Book Quarterly.

With many thanks due Dr. Susan Krotzinger, we have received a very fine article from The Kansas Anthropologist, Journal of the Kansas Anthropological Association which is entitled, "Loren C. Eiseley KU Years: 1937-1944." In this extensive study Marlin F. Hawley of the Kansas State Historical Society tells of Eiseley's faculty years at the University of Kansas and a great deal about the field work of that period.

As we move into 1993, Board Member Morrie Tuttle is working on searching out "Eiseley in Periodicals" and is coming up with an amazing and (hopefully) complete listing; Nebraska Educational Television is collecting Eiseley material in preparation for a program on his life and work; the Educational Coordinator of the Omaha World Herald is collecting Eiseleyana for use in a supplement for teachers of famous people from Nebraska. From this a packet will be prepared for use in the classroom.

At the November Board Meeting, President Jane Stillwell Smith, presented a Board Reorganization Plan that was accepted. Implementation is beginning and we are looking for members interested in taking an active role in working on such programs. If you would like to participate in the work and the fun, either write to our box number (send the message with your dues check), or call Naomi Brill, 4625 South Street, Lincoln, NE 68506, (402) 488-7020, or Kyra Gale, 3314 North 49th, Omaha, NE 68104, (402) 451-2878, indicating your area of interest.

Here's to a great 1993!

--- Naomi Brill

## **THE HERITAGE ROOM CENTER FOR EISELEY ARCHIVES**

At the last meeting of the Nebraska Literary Heritage Association Board, Vickie Clarke told how she and Laura Lacy have been working to develop an inventory of the materials which the Heritage Room of the Lincoln Public Libraries holds from Nebraskan, Weldon Kees. And she went on to say that when this project is done they would like to begin to do the same for Loren Eiseley. The work on Kees is truly impressive and we are very excited about the potential of their Eiseley project.

This would seem to be a good time to remember that the Heritage Room is the place where the Archives of the Friends of Loren Eiseley are housed and contributions of Eiseley materials would be especially welcome. Copies of correspondence, copies of newspaper clippings, or anything else of interest would be more than welcome. (We would be glad to get a copy when you wish to retain originals.)

If you have anecdotes or recollections of him which you would be willing to write and tell us about, we would really appreciate your letters.

If you send things to our box, we will get your materials properly placed into the archives.

We are very grateful to the Heritage Room staff and the Lincoln Library people who do so much for us.

## **NEW PLAQUE AND PEDESTAL NEEDED FOR EISELEY BUST**

Work is being done in the Nebraska State Capitol to improve the pedestals on which the busts of members of the State Hall of Fame sit. Each will now bear a bronze plaque telling about the person. In addition, the pedestals will be made uniform.

The Friends of Loren Eiseley, as the group who sponsored him for the Hall of Fame, are responsible for the costs of this operation which are significant for our small organization. The plaque is estimated to cost \$300.00, the pedestal around \$1,000.00. We will, of course, meet these costs--we have no choice.

Contributions to this fund will be greatly appreciated. Send checks designated for this purpose to Friends of Loren Eiseley, P.O. Box 80934, Lincoln, NE 68501-0934.

## ON WRITING "SINGERS OF LIFE"

*By Marilyn Coffey*

As anyone who habitually courts the muse knows, Calliope and her gang often arrive in strange guises. So I suppose it's not surprising that I didn't recognize the muse when she leaned forward, in the beguiling form of Morrie Tuttle, at the Nebraska Literature Festival in Kearney last summer.

"Hi, kid!" s/he said. "What's cooking?"

"Not much," said I, delighted, as always, to see Morrie but eager to get past the Friends of Eiseley's booth where Morrie stood so I could display my own wares.

"Here," Morrie said, "take a look at this. It's our latest." And he pressed a cream-colored booklet into my hand as I rushed by.

Later, at my lake-home, I began reading the booklet, Loren Eiseley's Religious Pilgrimage by Harvey Potthoff. On pages six and seven, Potthoff had reproduced the "judgment of the birds" from Eiseley's The Star Thrower. I kept stopping, as I read, to admire Eiseley's terse language, so clean and clear.

"It's almost poetry," I thought, drifting into a memory of teaching. A week or two earlier, one of my creative writing students at Fort Hays State University in Hayes, Kansas, had asked me to explain the difference between poetry and prose. I had, but I was not satisfied with my explanation.

Then I began to day-dream. In my mind, I stood again before my creative writing class with copies of this excerpt in hand.

"Is this poetry?" I asked them. "Or is this prose? Such a fine line separates them."

I returned from my day-dream to read "judgment of the birds" again, more slowly this time, intending to answer the question I'd

posed in my reverie.

"It's prose," I decided. "But it sure wouldn't take much to turn it into poetry, it's so close. I wonder, could I do it? Could I re-write this piece as poetry without using any words but Eiseley's?"

The answer to that question, as it turned out, was "No." Or, more exactly, "Not quite." But that's how "Singers of Life" came to be written.

Even though my students and Morrie played significant roles in my writing this poem, the real inspiration was, obviously, Eiseley's text. However, explaining why that is so is much more difficult than explaining how the poem came into being.

Why did Eiseley inspire me, and not another writer? Why did his "judgment of the birds" move me, and not another segment, later in the booklet?

Was it because Eiseley's "judgment" is a narrative, and I love to write narrative poetry? Or did Eiseley's vivid visual descriptions, so much like my own gift of "seeing with words," stir me? Or was it the ending -- unanticipated, ironic -- that gripped me? Certainly I, in my lifetime, have felt as powerless as those tiny birds and yet, like them, have chosen to "take heart." Did I write because I saw myself?

Perhaps. All I certainly know is that, for whatever reason, Eiseley's words rose in my being like dust motes dancing in shafts of light. When I feel words rising like that, rising and then beginning to coalesce, I recognize my muses stirring and know that poetry is on the way.

Why this occurs remains a mystery.

A more precise answer no doubt lies buried in my unconscious, alongside my fetal poems, near where Calliope hangs out. She no doubt could explain why. If I recognize her, when she next appears, I'll ask her.

## SINGERS OF LIFE

He woke to a commotion  
an outcry in the clearing.

Light sliced the glade  
hewing a vast pine cathedral.  
Wood pollen dust motes  
danced in long bright shafts.

An enormous raven perched  
on a thrusting branch.  
In his beak a nestling:  
bright red, squirming.

'Round and 'round  
flew the parents  
in helpless circles  
of shrieking rage.

Sleek, black  
the raven sat  
indifferent  
to squirming morsel  
to whirling parents.

Then he gulped  
whetted his beak  
against the branch  
sat still again.

What new.

Nothing  
until softly  
through the woodland  
cries of complaint  
rose, rose up.

Nothing  
until a swarm  
of little birds  
a half-dozen colors, shapes  
fluttered into the glade  
drawn by anguish.

None  
neither bereaved  
nor unbereaved  
dared attack the raven  
but all took up the cry

filling the glade with soft  
rustling, with mourning  
filing 'round the raven  
pointing wing tips:  
murderer! murderer!  
black bird of death!

The raven sat on  
glistening  
formidable  
unmoving  
unperturbed  
untouchable.

Eventually  
the sighing died.

Then a song sparrow  
lifted a tentative note.  
Some painful fluttering.  
Then another took the song.  
And another.

Hesitant, doubtful  
as evil dimmed  
as one by one  
the birds  
relinquished  
mourning.

Until suddenly  
all took heart  
sang great joy:  
How sweet life!  
How beautiful sunlight!  
Ignoring the raven's  
still brooding shadow.

They who'd seen it all  
life's sweetness  
death's agony  
passed judgment  
warbled life.

"Singers of Life" is based on a  
passage from Loren Eiseley's  
The Star Thrower.

Marilyn Coffey

## LETTER FROM RAY BRADBURY

Among the letters from members responding to announcement of our December meeting came one from distinguished author, Ray Bradbury. With his permission we are printing it and the one from Eiseley that he enclosed for your edification. We appreciate his sharing this with us.



RAY BRADBURY

10265 Cheviot Drive • Los Angeles, CA 90064 • Tel: (310) 287-1209 • FAX: (310) 839-8478

October 16, 1992

Dear Darrel Berg and Naomi Brill:

I wish I could be with you on October 25th to celebrate Loren Eiseley, my friend of many years. I'm proud to enclose his response to a letter I wrote to him many, many years ago suggesting that one day he write a book. So I was one of the first, having read *THE FIRE APES*, to imagine the future of Loren Eiseley. Thank God he followed up and gave us all his wondrous works.

Best wishes to you all,

Ray Bradbury



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THE COLLEGE

Anthropology

October 9, 1949

Mr. Ray Bradbury  
33 South Venice Blvd.  
Venice, California

Dear Mr. Bradbury:

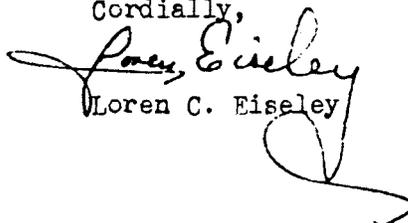
I am most appreciative, and indeed deeply touched that you should not only have written me but Harper's, as well, about the "Fire Apes" article. I find it very heartening that one of your professional standing in the field of imaginative writing should have liked my piece, and I thank you for the real encouragement you have given me.

I have been contemplating doing a book, but between the press of administrative details, teaching, and popping in and out of holes in various parts of the country (I was away in the field when your letter arrived) finding time to write is not easy. I am discovering by degrees, however, that purely technical writing no longer satisfies me, and I am deriving a good deal of enjoyment from some of these recent endeavors. A reaction such as yours tempts me to steal a little more time for some arm chair wondering about the universe.

Your name is well known to me, and I am glad of this opportunity to tell you how much pleasure a number of your stories have given me. One that I remember particularly is "The Jar" -- a most expert and intriguing tale.

Whenever you are in Philadelphia I hope that you will drop in on me. I should very much enjoy talking with you.

Cordially,

  
Loren C. Eiseley

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**PLEASE NOTE:**

**This is your newsletter. Comments, criticisms, suggestions, article submissions are always welcomed.  
Let us hear from you.**

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