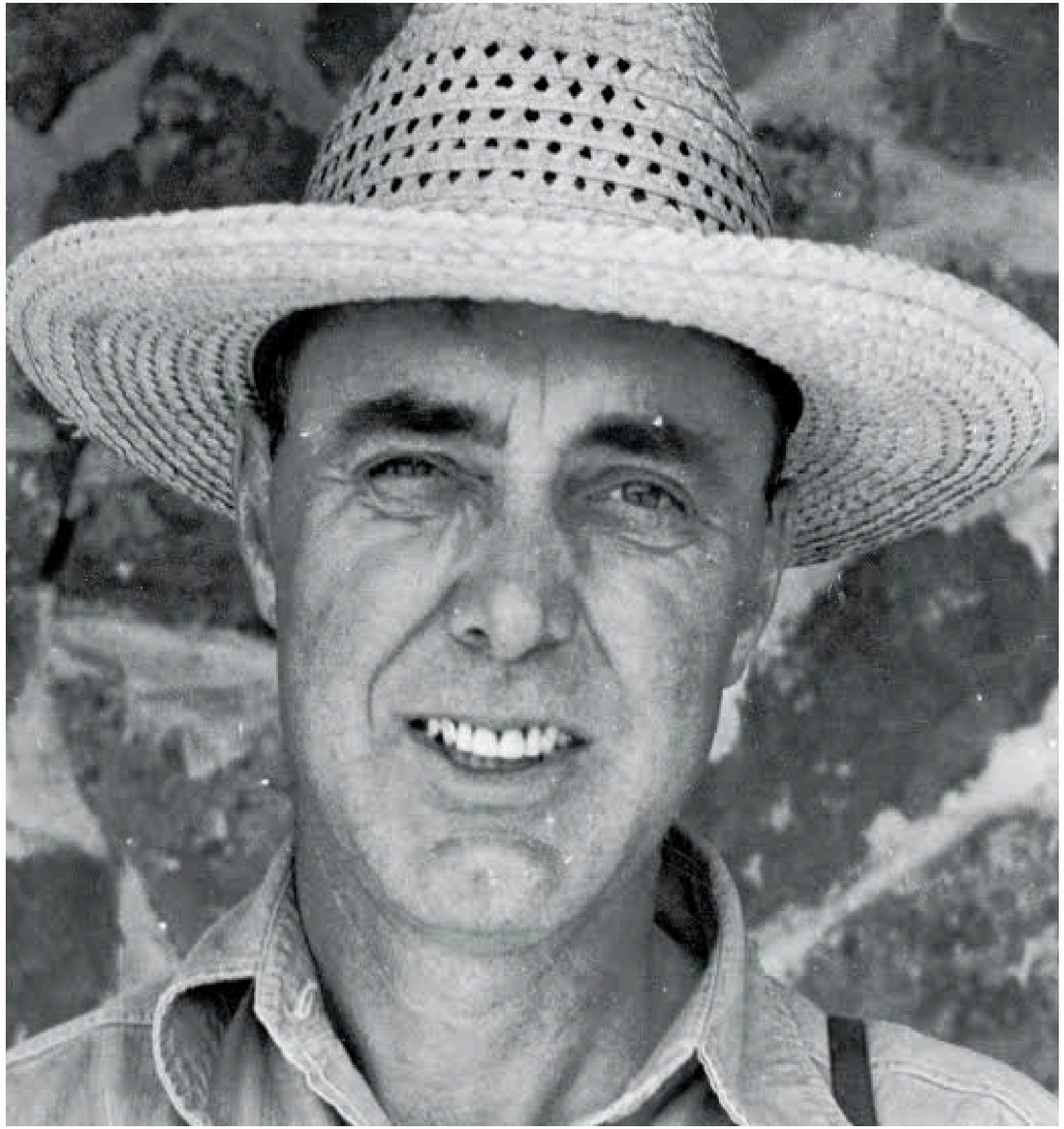
PALAEONTOLOGIST

EDWIN H. COLBERT

1905-2001







EARLY LIFE

Born on 28 September 1905 in Clarinda, Iowa, Colbert grew up in Maryville, Missouri and was interested in fossils from an early age.

EDUCATION

Colbert first studied at the Northwest Missouri State University before transferring to the University of Nebraska. He went on his first paleontological expedition with the University of Nebraska State Museum in 1928.

He graduated the same year, moved to New York and studied for his MA and PhD at Columbia University, finishing in 1935.



EARLY CAREER

In 1933, Colbert was appointed as an assistant curator at the American Museum of Natural History.

In 1938, he began teaching at Columbia and travelled to the Agate Fossil Beds in Nebraska with a team from the Academy of Natural Sciences.

In 1945, he published his first book, The Dinosaur Book: The Ruling Reptiles and Their Relatives.





COELOPHYSIS

In the 1940s, Colbert excavated Arizona and New Mexico for Triassic fossils. With his assistant, George Whitaker, he discovered one of the largest dinosaur deposits recorded after excavating over a dozen complete Coelophysis skeletons. Colbert studied the Coelophysis throughout his career and published a monograph in 1989.



LATER CAREER

From 1949 to 1952, Colbert was the editor of Evolution, and was later the editor for Curator.

Throughout the 1940s and 1960s, he described several major fossil discoveries in New Jersey, including the Hypsognathus fenneri, the Hadrosaurus minori, and the Icarosaurus siefkeri.

In 1957, Colbert was elected to the National Academy of Science, and as the president of the Society for the Study of Evolution. In 1958 he became chairman of the Vertebrate Paleontology department at the AMNH, and took part in numerous international expeditions.

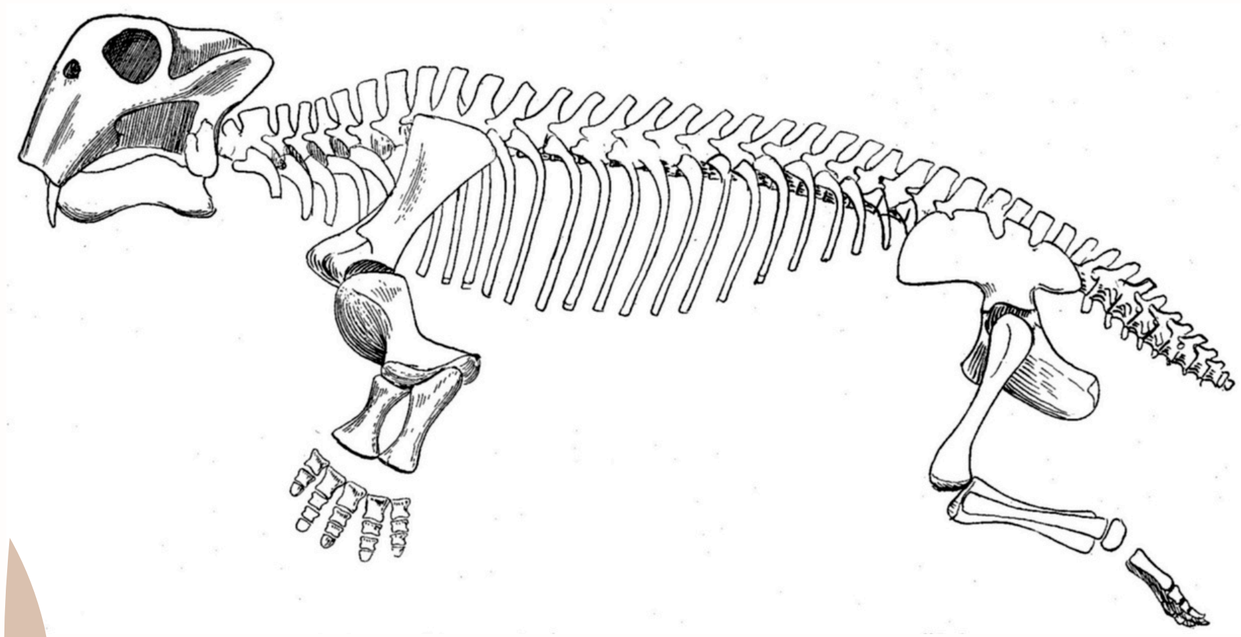
ANTARCTICA

In 1968, Colbert assisted in identifying an amphibian bone discovered by Ralph Baillie, an Ohio State University student, in the Transantarctic Mountains. This was the first record of tetrapod life found in Antarctica.

Subsequently, Colbert himself travelled to Antarctica with an expedition led by geologist David Elliot. In the Coalsack Bluffs, the team discovered fossils which Colbert identified as Lystrosaurus (an early mammal) bones.

The discovery helped to prove the theories of plate tectonics and continental drift.

Laurence M. Gould in the New York Times described it as "one of the truly great fossil finds of all time".



PERSONAL LIFE

Colbert married Margaret Matthew, a graduate of the California School of Arts and Crafts and the daughter of paleontologist Willam Diller Matthew, in 1933. She was a noted artist and illustrator in her own right, illustrating much of her husband's work, and accompanied him on his international fossil hunting trips. The pair had five sons.

Colbert retired in 1970 and moved to Arizona. He became the honorary curator of vertebrate paleontology at the Museum of Northern Arizona, and continued to research and write papers.

He died on 15 November 2001.