



Dinosaur 13 Discussion Guide

Director: Todd Douglas Miller

Year: 2014

Time: 95 min

You might know this director from:

Scaring the Fish (2008)

Gahanna Bill (2001)

FILM SUMMARY

When Sue Hendrickson, an experienced paleontologist, discovered a pile of bones amongst the dust and heat of a South Dakotan summer landscape in 1990, she made history. What was indecipherable to the untrained eye would become the most colossal step forward in the field of dinosaur discovery as the largest, most in-tact Tyrannosaurus rex ever revealed itself to Sue and the Black Hills team.

Named Sue in honor of the fossil hunter who found her, the T. rex captured the hearts and minds of the citizens of Hill City, South Dakota. With under 1,000 inhabitants, this tightly knit community houses Peter Larson and his team from the Black Hills Institute, a fossil collecting and preparation corporation. With the discovery of Sue, "We were riding on top of the world. We had everything going for us," stated Peter's brother Neal.

DINOSAUR 13 takes us through these thrilling moments, and as with any tale of colossal proportion, this one has a major twist. On a bright day, as Larson and team toiled over Sue, in burst the U.S. federal government, the FBI, the National Guard, and a battalion of police demanding they hand over Sue. Leaving no room for negotiation, Sue was hauled from the Institute and locked away from the reach of those scientists who loved her. To whom did the remains of this long-extinct beast belong: those who uncovered her, the landowner from whose land she was uncovered, or the government? The lengthy, complicated court case that ensued left much to be pondered.

Peter Larson served two years in jail. The landowner slipped off with \$8.3 million after Sue was auctioned at Sotheby's. The Chicago Field Museum became her resting place. A town mourned, a group of impassioned paleontologists were heartbroken, and Sue - the greatest echo to reach the human world from our long-distant past - boldly offered up her tale as DINOSAUR 13, the 13th - and greatest - T. rex to ever be recovered.

FILM THEMES

Sue was so much more than a pile of fossilized bones to one small community, and the handling of her case by the U.S. government was perilous at best, whichever side of paleontology you support.

STUDY OF THE PAST

Poring over dinosaur bones may seem futile. And yet paleontology, devoted to uncovering the past through the study of fossils, provides us with a mirror into our own evolution and that of the planet we inhabit. In the words of Louie Psihoyos, “That sense of deep time gives you a sense of who you are and how you fit into the scheme of things.” With a great passion for their work and a desire to share their findings with the world at large, the Black Hills Institute team made an impassioned case for the undeniable role the far-off past plays in our contemporary lives.

A COMMUNITY COMES TOGETHER

When Sue was taken from the Black Hills Institute, law agents flooding the small town of Hill City, South Dakota, the people mourned. A funereal tone played out in the air as children, grandparents, scientists, and locals alike grieved the loss of their beloved Sue. In the words of Peter Larson, who was so deeply enamored with this fossilized dinosaur that he devoted his heart’s love to her protection, “Sue belonged here. What happened was not right.” By barging in with such overwhelming force, the U.S. government was met with an outcry from the community, a group of loyal residents that refused to stand aside and watch their pride and joy being taken from them. One and all came together, petitioning for signatures, protesting in the streets, and letting their voices be heard. Sue was one of them, and what one South Dakotan suffered, they all did.

MAKING AN EXAMPLE

In 1990, legislation presiding over the rights of field paleontologists and the preservation of the fossils they uncovered was iffy at best. The contorted, complicated legal case that ensued served as proof of this. In the days before GPS, field paleontologists did their best to map their precise locations, and the Black Hills Institute team received permission from Maurice Williams to dig on his property. So why such massive, extensive actions: the FBI, the National Guard, the police, all sent to seize dead, fossilized dinosaur bones with no room for negotiation? Supporters of Larson and his team declare it was a publicity stunt, that Larson was being made an example, that in the unclear legal badlands of paleontology, somebody needed to be appointed the enemy.

ACADEMIC VS. COMMERCIAL CAMPS

There are two sides to any debate. In the field of paleontology, that debate involves the ivory tower of academia versus the hands-on work of commercial collectors. Which side plays a more legitimate role in the propagation of the field of fossil studies? Those who base their findings on extensive research and fact-finding, or those dirtying their hands in the field, finding the bones and selling them on for the world to experience? Just who is capable of protecting our global heritage best? The debate continues.

“Sue came out from an absolute legal netherworld.”

Patrick Duffy

“There was a dream that the town had. It was our dinosaur, our museum, our lives that had just been torn to pieces.”

Peter Larson

“65 million years later, this animal really had the power to give you goosebumps.”

Bill Harlan

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. What are your initial impressions of DINOSAUR 13? Do your sympathies rest with Peter Larson and team, or do you think that the U.S. government had a valid case by taking possession of Sue?
2. What, if any, were the film's shortcomings?
3. Have you ever been fascinated with dinosaurs? What is it about dinosaurs that capture the imagination of children and grown-ups alike?
4. Is study into the field of paleontology important? Should more funding be granted to paleontologists as they work to uncover clues from the earth's distant past? Or is the study of fossils a dead line of work?
5. There is a divisive split between academic and commercial paleontologists. Discuss your thoughts on the pros and cons of both arguments.
6. What can dinosaurs tell us about ourselves?
7. Why do you think the U.S. government took such intense, fierce action against Peter Larson and his colleagues at the Black Hill Institute? What fueled their arguably disproportionate actions?
8. Have you ever seen a full-scale dinosaur replication at a museum? What were your impressions of it?
9. Maurice Williams walked away with nearly \$8 million after taxes from the sale of Sue. Do you believe that Sue - and fossils in general - are "real estate," part of the land and thus the property of the landowner? Was Williams the rightful owner of Sue and thus the rightful benefactor of the price paid for her? Discuss.
10. From a filmic standpoint, did DINOSAUR 13 deliver? What do you think was director Miller's objective in making the film, and how did he succeed?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- DINOSAUR 13 premiered at the opening night of Sundance in 2014, where it was nominated for the Grand Jury Prize.
- DINOSAUR 13 is based on the book written by Peter Larson and his now ex-wife Kristin Donnan, "Rex Appeal: The Amazing Story of Sue, the Dinosaur That Changed Science, the Law, and My Life." Though the couple divorced following Larson's release from prison, they have cowritten a few books, including a children's story entitled "Bones rock! Everything you need to know to become a paleontologist."
- Peter Larson is played by his son Tim in the film's reenactment scenes. Tim, the photographer for the Black Hills Institute who provided the DINOSAUR 13 team with 300 hours of footage, also works as an actor.
- Very little legislation was in place in the U.S. regarding paleontology before the legal case of Sue. In addition to designating a large amount of land as protected wilderness, the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009, a direct result of the Sue case, included the Paleontological Resources Preservation Act, which established "stronger penalties than previously required for nonpermitted removal of scientifically significant fossils from federal lands."
- As of 2015, around 30 T. rex specimens had been recovered. Sue, who lived to be around 28 years of age, remains the largest ever found.
- At the Chicago Field Museum, where Sue is on display, a copy of her skull is used in the actual exhibit. Her real skull, which weighs 600 lbs (270kg), is too heavy for her structure to support. In order to prepare her for display, 12 technicians worked a total of 30,000 hours.
- Director Miller spent the summer of 2011 traveling around the U.S. interviewing dinosaur hunters, while he was reading Peter Larson and Kristin Donnan's book: "Rex Appeal." The last person he was set to meet with was Peter, and after a conversation with him and Kristin, they agreed to make a filmic version of the book. For the next two years, Miller, DP Tom Petersen, and music composer Matt Morton worked on the film.
- Tyrannosaurus Rex, the "king of dinosaurs," lived around 67 million years ago. Weighing in at around 7.5 tons, T. rex measured up to 42 feet in length and stood tall at around 13 feet. The first T. rex fossils ever uncovered were only teeth, found in Colorado in 1874.
- Paleontology, or the study of ancient life, aims to reconstruct the causes of past events.
- Sue sold for \$8.3 million through Sotheby's, an all-time record for dinosaur fossils. Other top-dollar items sold at auction include a Picasso painting for \$106.5 million, a Marilyn Monroe dress for \$1.267 million, Da Vinci's "Codex Hammer" manuscript for \$30.8 million, and a lock of Elvis's hair for \$115,000.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Learn more about paleontology and the many branches of this intriguing scientific field. "National Geographic Education" offers extensive - and easily accessible - information through their website.
2. "Rex Appeal: The Amazing Story of Sue, the Dinosaur That Changed Science, the Law, and My Life," written by Donnan and Larson, convinced director Miller to make DINOSAUR 13. Read the book.
3. The Paleontological Society, an international nonprofit, is devoted to advancing the field of paleontology. Learn more about their work and the funding they provide prospective paleontologists.
4. The Paleontology Portal offers a wealth of information covering all aspects of the field, from fossil findings to institutions offering paleontology studies. Become a part of the network!

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

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