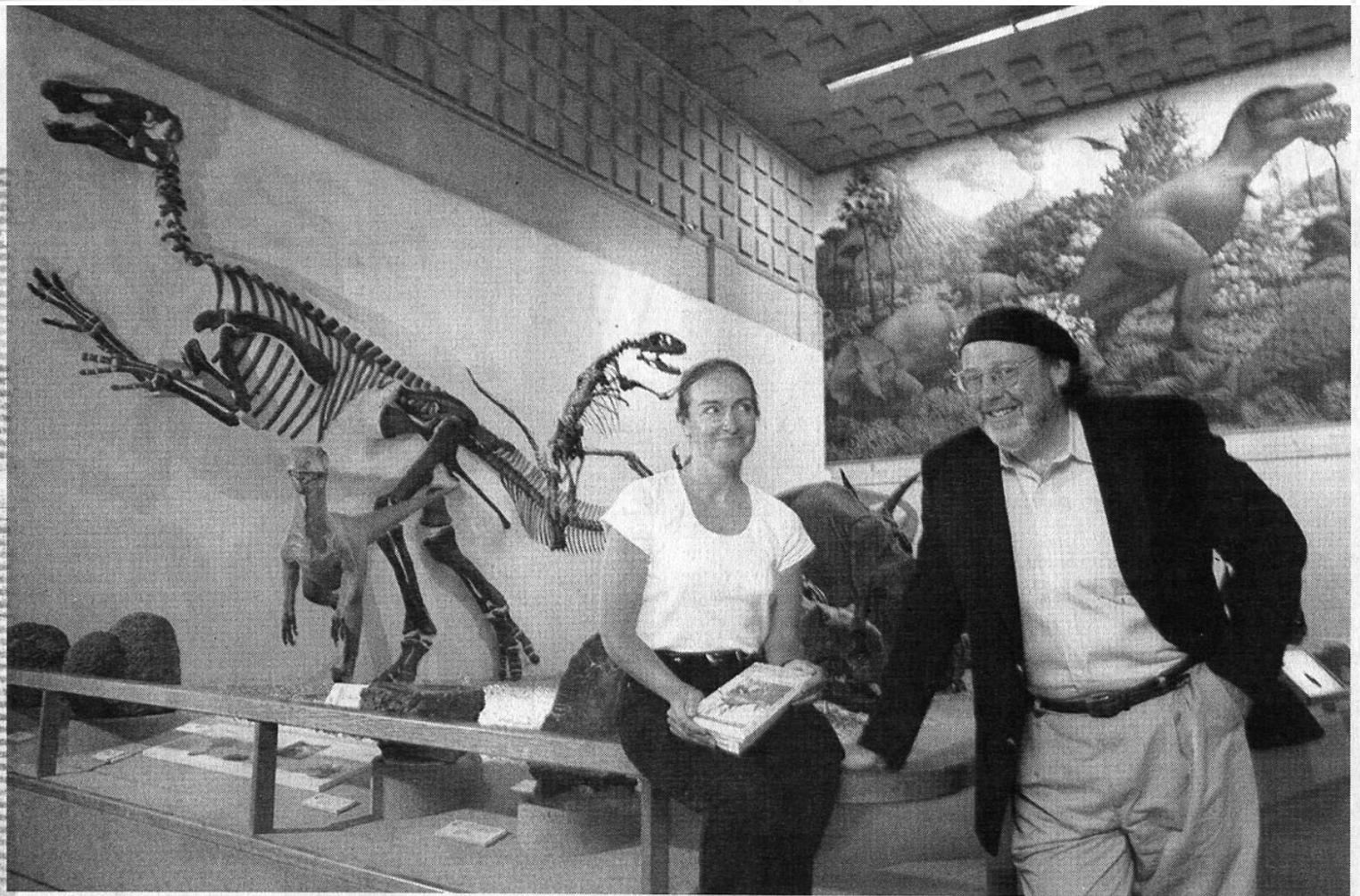


Connecticut

Section 14



Judith Psenica for The New York Times

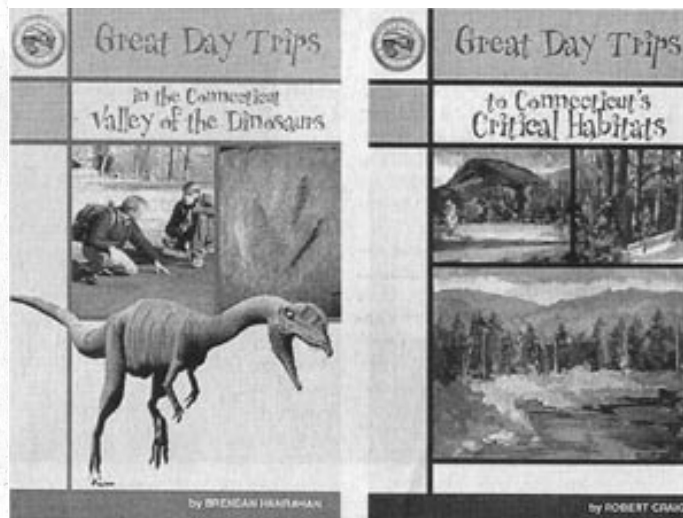
Got a Day? Go Back 250 Million Years With a Page Turner for the Field Trip

By ALAN BISBORT

TWO hundred and fifty million years ago, when dinosaurs were just getting their feet wet in the swamps of the Connecticut Valley, the seed for Perry Heights Press was being planted. At least that is how it seems to Brendan and Nancy Hanrahan, co-founders of the publishing company in Wilton.

Mr. Hanrahan, a dinosaur nut, had spent years searching for a way to translate his own paleontological knowledge into something that would connect with families and kids. He began with the seemingly clear-cut idea of writing a day trip guide to Connecticut's abundant dinosaur sites. Then, he and his wife discovered the state's Geological and Natural History Survey.

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Brendan and Nancy Hanrahan, above at the Peabody Museum of Natural History, are co-founders of the Perry Heights Press, which has published four books about the natural history of Connecticut. Each is de-

Mr. Hanrahan tracked down Mr. Craig. Swayed by his enthusiasm, Mr. Craig agreed to retrace his steps 30 years later to write the day trip book.

"Brendan found me somehow," said Mr. Craig, who runs a nonprofit foundation in Putnam called Bird Conservation Research, that offers scientific data to towns to help with land conservation and open-space planning. "My wife and I connected quickly with he and Nancy personally. We share the same vision of the world. And I thought what they were doing with this publishing series was wonderful."

Not only did Mr. Craig agree to write the book, his wife, the artist Barbara Lussier, supplied the cover images and all of the text illustrations.

Established in 1903, this state-run survey sporadically produced a now neglected series of books about all aspects of Connecticut's natural past, including but not limited to dinosaurs.

"The survey was run by scientists from Yale, Wesleyan, Trinity and Connecticut Agricultural College, then was folded into the D.E.P. in the 70's and is now on life support," said Mr. Hanrahan, a longtime contributor to The Chicago Tribune and author of several children's books. "It's quite a shelf full of books. The authors were the leading experts on the natural history of the state. But the books were written by scholars for scholars. That was the real purpose of the survey, as a scientific undertaking. It was not for the mainstream."

So far so good, he thought. The survey would supply ready made, reliable material for his dinosaur book.

"I familiarized myself with the survey's publications on prehistory, and I talked to the authors who were still alive," Mr. Hanrahan said. "But I began to see that the survey was full of so much wonderful information that begged to be shared with a general audience. Until then, I thought I was just going to write a book about dinosaurs, but three other titles emerged in my head."

He then had the less clear-cut idea that he would somehow write all four books.

"I'd been working on the idea for years but it is so expansive it took me this long to get my arms around it," he said. "I tried to do it all in a year, but all I could see were the calendar pages flipping by as I kept discovering how deep the material went."

Though the Hanrahans' Perry Heights Press venture officially began in 1990 with a single children's book, it was recharged about three years ago by the material available in the state survey. They found leading experts on three other areas and established their own "survey," of sorts, called the "Road to Discovery

Brendan and Nancy Hanrahan, above at the Peabody Museum of Natural History, are co-founders of the Perry Heights Press, which has published four books about the natural history of Connecticut. Each is designed to be a field guide to explore the state.



Series."

In addition to Mr. Hanrahan's "Great Day Trips in the Connecticut Valley of the Dinosaurs," they have just published "Great Day Trips to Connecticut's Critical Habitats" by Robert Craig, who assisted with the state's first ecological survey in 1975; "Great Day Trips to Discover the Geology of Connecticut" by Greg McHone, a geologist at Trinity College, and "Best Fishing Trips in Connecticut" by Bob Sampson, longtime fishing columnist for The Norwich Bulletin.

"We pursued the idea of bringing natural history to families, and were amazed to learn how abundant, easy and accessible it is in this state," said Ms. Hanrahan, who helps run the company out of the couple's home and a building on their property.

One of the Hanrahans' most excit-

ing discoveries was Mr. Craig. While they were at the D.E.P. bookstore in Hartford, where the remnants of the survey can still be found, they came across a publication called "Rare and Endangered Species of Connecticut and their Habitats" by Robert Craig and Joseph Dowhan.

"President Nixon had just signed the Endangered Species Act and these two young biologists fresh out of UConn were like the Lewis and Clark of Connecticut," Mr. Hanrahan said. "They scoured the state for rare and endangered species. They came up with the idea, which was radical at the time, that instead of protecting species, per se, you should protect places. In 1975, when they started, the concept of protecting endangered species was so new. How do we save the bald eagle? You save the estuaries!"

"Joe and I did our original survey in 1975," Mr. Craig said of Mr. Dowhan, who wrote the earlier book with him. "Joe was hired by the D.E.P. as a liaison at UConn. When he put together this project, he needed a field zoologist and he heard about me and I jumped at it. Yes, it was almost like the state's own Lewis and Clark expedition.

"We were, literally, breaking new ground," he continued. "The ideas I developed that summer have guided me since."

He was especially glad to get a chance to build on the book that he and Mr. Dowhan produced years ago for the survey.

"The survey produced some nice books, but no one ever sees them," Mr. Craig said. "Brendan mined them for salient material and presented it in a more effective way. I was very impressed by his vision. It's like reinventing the whole idea of a field guide."

Mr. Craig's approach is not just scientific, but philosophical too. In "Great Day Trips to Connecticut's Critical Habitats," he writes, "I think of the Connecticut landscape more as I do the thoughtful paintings of the mature artist; not about stunning grandeur, but about looking inward at the simple elegance of its details; not Bierstadt's West, but the elderly Monet's garden."

"The book he created is like 'Sand County Almanac' by Aldo Leopold, a personal, idiosyncratic but scientific survey of the state's endangered species and places," Mr. Hanrahan said. "We couldn't be happier with it."

"We get universally very positive reaction to the books," Ms. Hanrahan said. "We want to establish a relationship with the Connecticut Science Teachers Association, as well as with some environmental groups in the state. We didn't originally develop the books with curricular standards in mind, but we're planning to incorporate teacher lesson plans with future editions."

The books are available at various museum and state park shops and online at www.cttrips.com.

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