Local artist adds another mural to SW Ks. museums

Whether it’s his vision of a mastodon and a woolly mammoth preparing for a possible showdown, or Paleo-Indians hunting buffalo with crude spears, these are more than just brush strokes on canvas for Chuck Bonner. He’s recreating history.

“It’s important to get it right,” says the artist and fossil expert. “Anytime I’m not sure about something, I’ll visit with someone who does know.”

The local artist’s latest work is a mural hanging in a new, permanent exhibit room at the Stanton County Museum. Earlier murals are displayed at museums in Scott City and Leoti.

Nearly 200 square feet of canvas represent a time-line from the Cretaceous Period, when the region of the United States was an inland sea, to the mid-1800s as the Plains Indians were giving way to early settlers. It’s a project that has been nearly five years in the making.

Museum Director Katie Herrick knew she wanted a mural after visiting the Keystone Gallery in southern Logan County, operated by Bonner and Barbara Shelton. Filling the north wall of the gallery is a seascape mural by Bonner.

Herrick’s trip to the gallery occurred shortly after the University of Kansas had conducted an archeological field school in

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Artist and fossil hunter Chuck Bonner in his workshop with the final panel of the mural that he painted for the Stanton County Museum. He painted four panels which are now part of a permanent exhibit at the museum. (Record Photo)
Murals (continued from page one)

Stanton County where they excavated a buffalo kill site used by pre-Plains Indians.

“We have some pieces of bison bones from that dig,” says Herrick. “(KU) authenticated the site as 9,000 years old, which would have been late Paleo-Indian. This is something unique to our county.”

Such an exhibit needed to be represented in a unique way, which is where Bonner entered the scene.

Even though the KU dig took place in 2002, it wasn’t until about two years ago that Herrick seriously pursued local funding for the project. Once he completed work on a mural for the Museum of the Great Plains in Leoti, Bonner turned his attention to the Stanton County mural last fall.

He broke the project into four time frames. The first was a “Cretaceous storm warning” which depicts this region as an inland sea; the second shows a mastodon-mammoth face-off; the third, entitled “First Blood” shows the kill site; and the final segment, which is also the largest, recreates a Kiowa camp site.

It’s not as though Bonner’s background hasn’t prepared him well. As a fossil hunter, he’s very familiar with prehistoric creatures that swam the vast sea that once covered this area, as well as the land mammals that roamed once the waters receded.

**Buffalo Kill Site**

As for recreating the 6x8 foot mural of the kill site, which is perhaps at the heart of the exhibit, Bonner visited with an archeologist from the Kansas Geological Survey to determine what the area’s landscape would have been 9,000 years ago.

Of course, there’s also a certain amount of imagination involved.

“The kill site is a playa lake, so it makes sense that Paleo-Indians would have found this an ideal place,” Bonner says. “I figured the buffalo would have been moving slow because of the mud. And a 10 to 12 foot rise around the area would give the Indians a good vantage point for a surprise attack.”

This was before the time of bows and arrows, so the Paleo-Indians were limited to using spears.

The final mural segment, which was also the largest (6x11 ft.), didn't arrive at the museum until April 28 - just five days ahead of the open house. It brings the display into the mid 1800s, with a small Kiowa encampment in the foreground and three covered wagons in the background.

With settlers on the horizon, Bonner jokingly titled the final mural “There goes the neighborhood.”

Herrick showed a lot of confidence in Bonner, never asking to see sketches of his murals in advance.

“When you hire Chuck you’re not just getting an artist. He’s a paleontologist at heart,” Herrick says. “We knew he wasn’t going to come up with a fictional representation. Everything would be authentic.

“I was surprised with each panel when they arrived,” she says. “It was breathtaking to see them as they were put up.”

With Bonner’s assistance, Herrick says the museum exhibit helps tell a part of history that many in this region aren’t familiar with.

“A lot of museums tell the story of the Plains Indians, but Paleo-Indians is another matter,” she points out. “This is a history that’s important to us because we weren’t part of the Santa Fe Trail. We’re very fortunate that
One of the Bonner murals depicts Paleo-Indians at a buffalo kill site in Stanton County.

our dig site provides a very good idea of what life was like here 9,000 years ago.”

The Bonner murals are complemented by a five-foot section of a mammoth tusk and tooth and a mastodon tooth that were uncovered at the archeological dig. An exhibit of some 200 photos from the KU dig are also on display.

As for his role in the exhibit, Bonner emphasizes he wanted to do more than create colorful backdrops.

“My goal is to create paintings that can stand on their own,” Bonner says.

Just as important to Bonner is the ability to bring fossils to life and share his knowledge of what the Western Kansas landscape was like 9,000 or 90 million years ago.

He’s able to do that, whether it’s with a rock hammer or a paint brush.

“I enjoy murals,” he adds. “I’m hoping this will open up the chance to do some for other museums.”

And continue to give people a better understanding of the earliest Kansas history.