

## A letter of Willian Diller Matth  w Explaining His Experiences Collecting Fossils in 1906, South Dakota

Porcupine Cr'k,  
July 8, 1906

Well I don't think I've told you much about our camp life. We have a 10 x 12 tent, and a sheet-iron camp stove, and at present a pretty good supply of firewood, though it isn't always easy to get any as the Indians clean out pretty much all the dry wood they can lay hands on. We have a heavy wagon for our camp outfit and a light one which we use every day to go to and from our work. Also we carry home our specimens and firewood in them. Each morning Tim, the cook, gets up at dawn and gets breakfast ready by the time we are washed and dressed. Then we have a breakfast — a pretty solid one, too, no cup of coffee and shredder for us out here. Then we light our pipes, catalogue and finish pasting our specimens if we have any to do up, feed and water and harness up the horses and get off some time between seven and eight. Get down to our work and unharness and picket out the horses and start hunting specimens, or prospecting those we have already found. You find a specimen, the back of a skull or a few fragments of bones sticking out of the rock, and chisel and pick and scratch around it to see what it is, then cut away the rock from above so that you can see whether there is anything left in the rock. Having found out the lay and limits of your specimen you channel around it and soak it with a thin solution of shellac in wood-alcohol, to harden it, then cover it with burlap strips dipped in flour paste to keep it from breaking apart. Then you cut underneath until you can break off and lift the block and turn it over to paste the under side. It takes some time to dry the paste and while it is drying you go and hunt more specimens. Of course in most cases the fragments sticking out of the rock are only fragments or there isn't enough left to be worth bringing in, and you have all your work for nothing. About six o'clock we come back to the wagon, harness up and start for camp. If we are near enough we come back at noon also, for lunch. We always take a couple of canteens of water and package of lunch with us. These, with our shellac bottle, chisels, awls, wrapping paper and cotton twine; brushes for removing dust and fragments from the surface of the bone, and can of flour paste and strips of burlap we carry in our "war-bag" on our backs, roped over the shoulders. We get back to camp between seven and eight o'clock at night, and get supper, smoke a pipe (and write a letter if there is any light left) and then turn in. How's that for a good day's work? You see one has to be thoroughly interested in the work to keep it up on such long hours, and if no specimens turn up for a long time it gets pretty tiresome. But when you do find a specimen — some new species or missing link, or the skull or skeleton of some animal of which only fragments have been found before — it makes up for all the hunting and you feel that you've made a solid addition, permanent even if small, to scientific knowledge, and it's worth while after all.

Thus far we've done pretty well. About fifty numbered specimens up to date, and I should regard 150 specimens as a successful season's haul. If we go on at present rate we ought to make that number or more by the first of October. . . .

Thomson killed a rattler the other day — a small one — and I have the skin for you. Haven't had time to hunt rabbits, and it's hardly the season for them yet, but if we get any I'll keep the skins for you.