

# Terrence Coffin-Grey

## *One of the giants of taxidermy*

**I** contacted Terrence Coffin-Grey and asked him to tell the readers of ASG about his life and work, and to give first-hand advice from his years of experience. This is his fascinating story, and the information in it must be invaluable to hunters and would-be taxidermists. Being an ex-Bulawayo boy myself, his remarks about the Doddieburn elephant in the Lowveld Hall of the Bulawayo Museum, bring back nostalgic memories of that absolutely magnificent display. Visitors stand in awe when they are confronted by the group of animals so realistic that unsophisticated people have been known to recoil in shock at the sight of the enormous elephant with the other lowveld creatures. Even the massive man-made wild fig tree has them fooled... each leaf so real, a work of art. But let Terrence begin:

The history of the Coffin-Grey origins may not be of interest but I have included it because 'this is where we came from' and has some bearing on my love of the bushveld and all its wildlife.

I have shot everything from elephant downwards but I was never a hunter in the correct term - I 'collected specimens for display and scientific purposes' except when we hunted bush-buck with a pack of foxhounds in my late teens. That was hunting! You ran hard to keep ahead of the hunt and carried your trophy up and down the steep kloofs and hills of the Eastern Cape - no 4x4 vehicles to fetch and carry! My transport was a 1934 Ford V8 two door sedan!

I was born, Terence William Coffin-Grey together with my twin brother Brian Noble, 19.07.1926.

My parents married in Selukwe (now Churugwe) Rhodesia, settled in Port Elizabeth and set up a racing stable in Newton Park where the only buildings were two dairies and an old house. We were brought up there in racing stables which were housed in one of the converted dairies. We had our own ponies and bred a small pack of foxhounds to hunt bush-buck and duiker in the fynbos and the Eastern Cape valley bush beyond Uitenhage and Sundays River.

All school holidays were spent in Bathurst with an elderly aunt on the farm Bunkershill, where we hunted birds and trapped small animals, skinned them and tried to preserve them. My father had

collected birds with the original Bob Ivy whose father was a taxidermist. Father told us stories of how the birds were 'stuffed'. This is where the interest was born - I think!

Hunting and trapping made us very observant of the wildlife and insect life around us and implanted a love of the deep valleys, tall yellow woods, palms and maidenhair ferns of the trickling streams in the Eastern Cape. We were never blood-thirsty skullums, but collected strange and wonderful birds for our 'museum' at home.

When we were 13, Father bought us a book on taxidermy, *Practical Taxidermy* by Montagu Browne, for five shillings at a second-hand bookshop. Browne was the curator of the Town Museum, Leicester. I think it was published in 1898 but there is no publisher's date. I still have the book whose author was considered a crank - he was so far ahead of his 'stuffing' contemporaries. What a gold-mine of information for small boys! Later a more modern book was added to the collection.

We skinned and mounted everything we collected - birds, snakes, lizards and small mammals, moving onto game heads in our late teens. Our home museum was quite something!

We did not mount specimens for clients. Both of us vowed never to let anything out of our hands until it was perfect - and we still had a long way to go.

Ambitions? All I ever wanted to do was to join a museum and travel Africa like the famous taxidermist/explorer Karl Akeley of the American Museum of Natural History, collecting, mounting and creating huge natural habitat groups in which to display the beautiful game animals of Africa in a new museum.

I had heard so much of Rhodesia and the wild life from my parents that that was where I wanted to live and hunt.

I finally got to Rhodesia with my newly-wedded wife in 1950, and within 4 years joined the National Museum of Bulawayo as a taxidermist in 1954. I worked under Reay Smithers, the Director, for 23 years. He taught me all he knew of field-work. There was no better field naturalist than the late Dr Reay Noble Smithers. He encouraged me, created posts for me and later gave me the huge responsibility of creating the many large habitat groups in the

brand new museum, which was built in 1961.

I accompanied Reay on many field expeditions to Botswana and the whole of Rhodesia when he was doing his bird and small mammal surveys. We spent six weeks, twice a year, in the field and I was in my element, hunting and fishing. And this was work!

I trained a team of African technicians to skin birds and make them up into study-skins and worked alongside them after collecting specimens all day. Reay was a hard taskmaster and he demanded high standards from us all - we had to utilise every minute of the day and sometimes at night, to trap, hunt and collect everything from birds, small mammals, beetles, butterflies and small reptiles. Really splendid specimens were kept for mounting later at the museum for the planned displays, others went into the study collections which were the finest in Africa. These collections were used by our own research officers and taxonomists from around the world.

Camping out under the stars on a piece of canvas alongside our Landrovers, sitting around the fire at night with the skinning team, listening to lions roar and hyaenas call, was magic to me and worth all the sweat and toil of trekking through the southern Botswana wilderness of sand, tall grass and camel thorns.

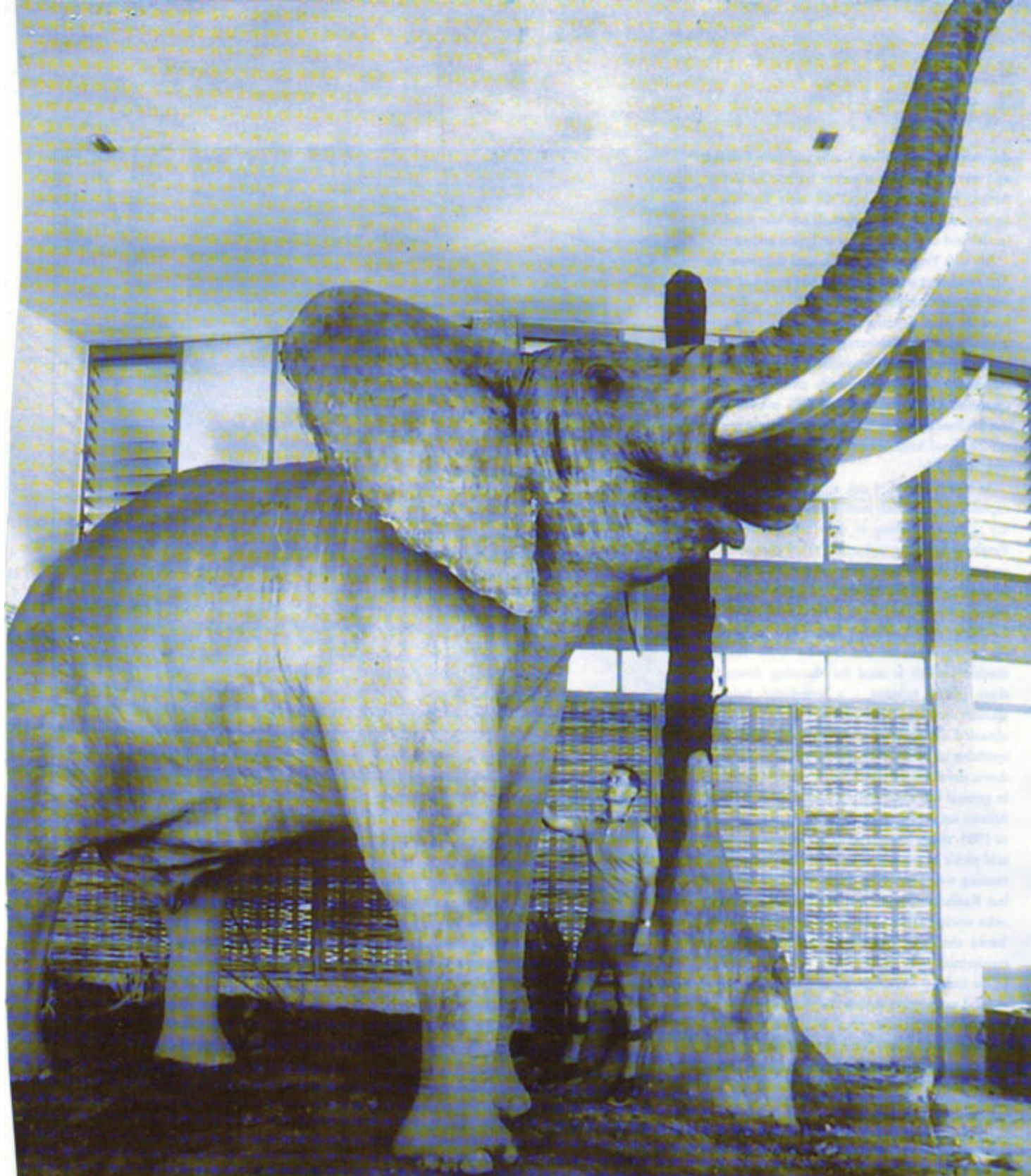
One of the highlights of my career was being invited by the Botswana government to accompany Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands on a safari to the Okavango. I had to take care of his few big game trophies and the smaller mammals he planned to collect for a museum in Holland.

When the Lowveld Hall, a giant walk-in habitat group at the National Museum, which displayed a full mount elephant, giraffe, eland, zebra, warthog, buffalo, water-buck and a pride of lions on a zebra kill, huge rocky outcrops, krantzies and trees was finally completed in 1978, I resigned. I went into full-time commercial taxidermy, creating Taxidermy Enterprises, Bulawayo, Rhodesia, which I had been building up over the years.

Looking ahead after Rhodesia/Zimbabwe independence and the rapid erosion of law and order, I sold the studio and moved to Jeffreys Bay and started up all over again!

It took me 8 years to build up a clientele and get a nucleus of moulds together. Joined by my





(1) A Doddieburn elephant (presented to the city of Bulawayo and the National Museum by the Henderson brothers of Doddieburn Ranch, Gwama district, Rhodesia/Zimbabwe. How the huge mount was started – a metal armature on which 5 tons of potter's clay was hammered on and sculpted – a herculean effort by a team who worked under my guidance.

(2) The Clay sculpture completed.

(3) Final step – skin glued onto the fibreglass form. Tusks 88 and 99lbs. The Giant Lowveld Hall was built around this elephant.



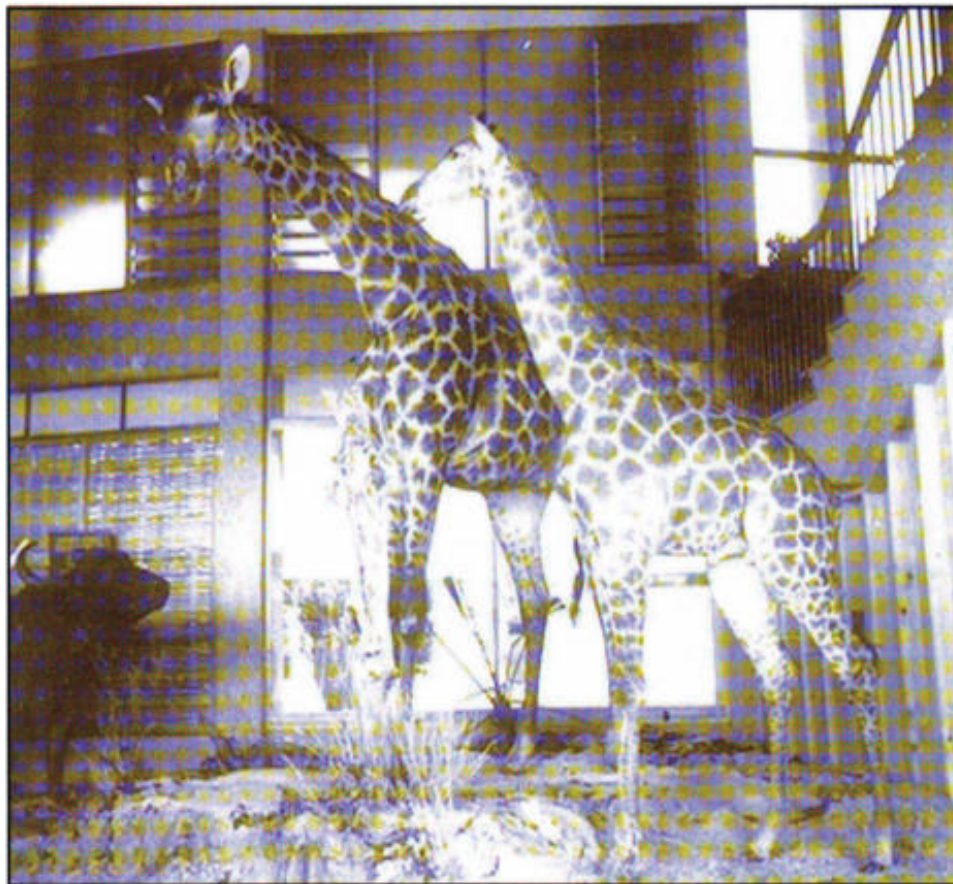
daughter and son-in-law, Cathy and John Peacock and son Roland, we together started Taxidermy Africa, Humansdorp in 1989 after building a factory of 400 square metres. It has now doubled in size and employs 20 plus technical assistants.

My wife Yvonne who had helped me create our first taxidermy studio and who was my chief critic and staunch supporter, died in 1991. I did not have the heart to carry on, and retired. I am now a consultant to Taxidermy Africa and museums across South Africa, specialising in displays and recreations of early hominids and other fossil creatures. Mrs Terry Donnelly who worked with me for many years in Bulawayo as Chief Artist in the National Museum, is my partner in business and in my life.

As stated before, I am self-taught by painful experience and much reading, but brushed up on my skills by working at the Carnegie Museum, Pittsburg for six months in 1965. I concentrated on large mammal sculpting and the fascinating art of creating artificial flowers and leaves from wax, paper and plastic. I had further training in Germany with Karlheinz Fuchs who introduced me to the skill of the circular knife shaving machine which is used for thinning down fur skins before tanning - a wonderful help to taxidermists. The knowledge of fur-skin tanning I obtained in America and Germany, with both synthetic tannins and chrome tanning, has filtered down the chain of taxidermists worldwide and is in general use today. Many American and South African taxidermists with smaller studios used, up to 1965, either a crude form of salt and sulphuric acid pickle or salt and alum mix. The chemistry of tanning was a closely-guarded secret in the USA but Karlheinz Fuchs, a tanning chemist of note, who worked at the Carnegie Museum for a while, 'broke the dam' and introduced me and other taxidermists to the huge field of tanning chemicals in use today.

I did not receive any special training in the art of recreating the early homonids and prehistoric creatures but I drew from the knowledge that I had accumulated over the years as a taxidermist, for example, sculpting skills, moulding and casting and the use of silicone and plastics.

After finishing the reproductions of *Australopithecus africanus*, *Homo erectus* (Brokenhill man) and the archaic *Homo Sapiens* who lived in Saldanaha Bay, and placing them in suitable habitat groups at the McGregor Museum, Kimberley, we were asked by Dr Billy de Klerk, Curator, Earth Sciences, Albany Museum Grahamstown to sculpt a full size recreation of *Aulacephalodon* (253 million years) which would be displayed on the Asantasana Game Ranch, the Albany Museum and other museums. The footprints of this fossil and others have been discovered on the Asantasana ranch and are quite fascinating. We were able to measure the stride and size and shape of a large male's feet from



*Two giraffe mounted in the Louwveld Hall*

which Billy de Klerk was able to judge accurately how it walked.

Copies of this sculpture are now being made at Rhodes University by John Hepple

During my earlier years in Jeffreys Bay I built a museum display for Fred Burchell at Mpongo Park, near East London. Displayed were the birds and animals named by his great-uncle W J Burchell, the great botanist/explorer - Burchell's Zebra, Burchell's Coucal, Wild dog, Blesbok and so on. I mounted all these animals for the displays.



*Self with sable in Rhodesia, collected for display, National Museum Bulawayo.*

The background painting for this interesting display was a scene of the Nahoon Valley, painted by Terry Donnelly in great detail. Unfortunately this game park has been closed for financial reasons - a great pity.

Taxidermy as a trade? It is no longer regarded as a 'trade' but as an art-form. Taxidermists today are not the 'stuffers' of yesteryear. To be proficient in the art of taxidermy you must have artistic talent, be able to sculpt, have a knowledge of sketching, painting and composition. You need to be au fait with carpentry, welding, mechanics, photography, moulding and casting, and have a working knowledge of the various plastics used in the manufacture of artificial trees, logs, rocks, leaves and so on. The taxidermist must know how to make moulds in rubber latex, silicone rubbers, plaster of Paris, and be able to cast copies from these materials.

He must have a love of the wildlife he is processing and creating. He is often a hunter himself but most often hunts only to obtain material to study and to further his art. He must be observant and study the character of all the animals he sees in the field. There are many women taxidermists today. Most are highly skilled. I admire their pluck and courage because taxidermists are often faced with physically demanding sculptures and mounts. It can be very hard work indeed.

Where do you learn or study taxidermy? There





*Hazards of Central Africa – Landrover trying to climb over a huge tree trunk! It did!*

have no reputation at stake and have been reported to be fleecing foreign hunters and exporting poorly mounted trophies.

Taxidermy at one stage in South Africa was appallingly bad and small operators were giving the country a bad name. The late Nico Van Rooyen and a few of us firmly-established taxidermists started The Taxidermy Association of Southern Africa many years ago in order to hold seminars and training demonstrations in an endeavour to encourage and impart skills to the struggling younger taxidermists. This has proved to be a great success and many have shown exceptional skills, equal to any taxidermists overseas. We are proud of them and trust that they, in turn, will see that only the best work ever leaves our shores.

The most challenging work I have ever done is to mount the Doddieburn elephant which was mounted at the National Museum, Bulawayo with the help of my museum technicians. We did not know where to even begin! I wrote to the two now retired taxidermists who had mounted the

are a couple of individuals in RSA who offer training but I cannot comment on their abilities.

A few South African taxidermists have spent time either working for taxidermists in the USA or attended training 'colleges' there.

The finest training, however, is to work for a local taxidermist after you have had some sort of

formal art training. The problem is that local taxidermists are not keen to train 'the opposition.'

There is a glut of taxidermists in the country at present and the 'game cake' is getting smaller and smaller and competition more fierce.

Competition is fine, it keeps us on our toes, but backyard taxidermists who are after the dollars

*Group photograph of the Fenykovi expedition to Angola, with Giant Sable (varients Sable) collected for Rowland Ward, London, who subsequently mounted it for the British Museum where it is on display. – Self with hat on head!*







*Pride of lions over a zebra kill, mounted, also for the Lowveld Hall, National Museum Bulawayo*

Fenykovi elephant at the Smithsonian Museum, Washington. I received a one-page letter explaining very, very briefly how they had followed the Akeley method. They did not tan the skin - they did not know how to. This was farmed out to a tannery.

Four technicians and myself skinned the huge jumbo three days after it was shot! A smelly, lousy job. We used tractors to turn it over! A cold wind was blowing over the mopani scrub in the Gwanda area of Rhodesia but that did not prevent the stomach skin exploding and sending torrents of water and chewed foliage 40 metres into the veld. We shaved the skin down in the veld under a huge wild fig tree... but this is a long story. Eight years later we tanned the skin and mounted the elephant.

The jumbo, which is the second-largest mounted elephant in the world, is now exhibited in the Lowveld Hall in what is now known as the Natural History Museum, Bulawayo. The Doddieburn Elephant was presented to the city by the Hendersons of Doddieburn ranch, Gwanda, on whose ranch they shot this huge bull with tusks of 88 and 89 lbs a side. This magnificent ranch with masses of game, dams and cattle exists no longer. It now forms part of a huge tribal settlement.

I did, however hunt in Angola in 1952 with Joseph Fenykovi who later shot the massive elephant which now forms an entrance display at the Smithsonian Institute, Washington DC.

I was asked by the British Museum of Natural History to accompany Fenykovi to Angola where he had a hunting ranch at Sadabandiera. The late Rowland Ward of the famous Rowland Wards Taxidermy Studios in London had bequeathed funds to create a habitat group in the museum in order to display Variants Sable (Giant sable), a

White-tailed Bearded Gnu from the Cameia area of Angola, and a Black-faced Impala from the Cunene basin. They had not been able to obtain a well-prepared skin of these species because there was no one in the area who knew how to prepare the skins for taxidermy purposes.

I was flown from Bulawayo to Fenykovi's ranch and enjoyed two months of hunting and touring in the country from north to south. We collected the required specimens and they are now mounted in displays at the British museum.

Game was plentiful in widely-spaced pockets, but the country was quite heavily settled by the various tribes.

I was not impressed by the treatment the Portuguese officials meted out to the black tribes people: a direct result was that when we stopped to ask for directions they simply fled into the thick bush or the women stood and urinated in fear. Many of the men carried powerful bows and metre-long arrows and appeared ready to use them...

Another long journey was to Eastern Nigeria by Land Rover with Dr Elliot Pinhey, the entomologist at the Museum. I collected birds for the museum whilst Elliot concentrated on various forms of insect life, specializing in dragonflies and damselflies. No problems with borders in those days of late 1950s. The trusty Land Rover (Series II) gave no trouble except a split battery and loose radiator clamp caused by horrific roads in what was French Equatorial Africa.

(I am amused to see that today this type of expedition has several back-up vehicles, mechanics, GPS and all the bells and whistles that the modern 4x4 cannot seemingly go without!)

We simply had a spade, some grain bags and a rope and two normal Land Rover jacks, spare radiator hoses and fan belts and some simple spanners and a small roll of wire. These were all the spares you needed for a Land Rover in 1950-1960.

You ask about my present hobby of reconstruction of prehistoric man and fossil creatures and how it is done.

We start when the professional officer, who is an expert in his field supplies us with all the relevant information, plus sketches or drawings by artists of what he and his peers think the homonid or fossil animal might look like. Sometimes we have casts of fossil bones to work with, but mostly we have a replica of a skull and measurements to guide us.

We weld up an armature, clad it with polyurethane foam, roughly in the shape of the homonid or animal and then re-shape the foam to a little thinner than what it should be. This completed armature is covered in a layer of plasticine and the features, muscles and skin impressions are sculpted in. If the professional officer is happy with the final sculpture we make a silicone mould of it and reproduce it in either a

flexible compound or resin/fibreglass. Early homonids are done in flexible compounds so that we can insert hair into the flexible surface without having to use glue.

What do I enjoy most in the field of taxidermy?

Sculpting full mounts, bird-mounting, and designing and executing natural-habitat groups, but at present my partner and I are fully occupied in the recreation of fossil creatures from the Karoo Basin.

What do I do for relaxation?

Ceramics, underglazing, firing - very therapeutic, or, load up my Bakkiemate pick-up camper on the trusty Nissan V6 4x4 and take off into the vastness of South Africa, Botswana, Zambia and Zimbabwe - fishing and photographing the marvellous and varied wildlife we are so privileged to have at our doorsteps in Africa.

Advice to other taxidermists out there - take it easy! Life begins at 76.

**T W COFFIN-GREY**

(Honorary Life member TASA)

Specialist Taxidermist, Sculptor.

Taxidermy and Museum Display Consultants

Part Two of this article will be in the next issue of ASG, where Terrence continues his story and gives unstinting advice to anyone interested in the art of 'stuffing'.



*Commission by the Macgregor Museum, Kimberly to create the early homonid, Australopithecus africanus.*