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**\$10 Million Dollar Museum of Natural History Reaches Its Grand
Opening After High Anticipation**

*Gray Fossil Site is the Only Site In the Eastern U.S. with fossils from the Miocene
Epoch Age*

JOHNSON CITY, Tenn.— In May 2000, highway contractors were working on a routine job site near State Route 75 when a large area was discovered that provided information dating back seven million years. The site, located near the small town of Gray, Tennessee, provides a rare and unique opportunity for researchers, scholars, and most importantly, the community to learn about the rich ancient history of the Southern Appalachian Mountains.

To showcase this discovery, the East Tennessee State University (ETSU) Museum of Natural History and Visitors Center, was awarded an \$8 million grant from the federal government. This grant allowed the museum to establish a storage space for fossils, a preparation laboratory to work on fossil species, a museum and education center, as well as a workshop for display construction and assembly of the fossils. Organizers for the visitor center also made sure the center did not intrude on the digging site where regularly new fossils are being discovered.

“A visit to the Museum and Fossil Site will provide adults and children with unforgettable experiences, experiences that are unparalleled anywhere else. Take a walk through the five million year old forest and come face to face with ancient tapir, rhinos and a saber-toothed cat,” said Jeanne Zavada, director of the Gray Fossil Site. “Surrounded by sounds and sights of the natural world of the Miocene, visitors ‘discover’ the hidden treasures of the Gray Fossil Site.”

When Tennessee Department of Transportation crews discovered the dark clay-rich deposit, bones were discovered, dating back to the late Miocene to early Pliocene periods, more than 4.5 to seven million years ago, the only known site in the Appalachian Corridor covering this span of time.

Not only is the age of the Gray Fossil Site unique, but the size stands out as well, covering four to five acres and approximately 140 feet thick. The Gray Fossil Site has included animal fossils of salamanders, alligators, shovel-tusked elephants, short-faced bear, red panda, saber-toothed cat, camel, weasel, shrew and peccary, as well as birds, snakes, turtles, fish and frogs. Approximately one percent of the site has currently been excavated, with paleontologists estimating that the site will take 100 years to be fully excavated.

The museum will feature several exhibits showcasing the site’s finds. As visitor’s walk through the entrance of the museum they will be lead into a theatre where a seven-minute video will be shown outlining the discovery and construction of the site. After the video presentation, guests are lead into the main exhibit room, which features life size murals depicting the setting and actions of those prehistoric animals found on the site. As guests walk through this area, sound recordings of these animals are played for all to hear-roaring, growling and other noises give visitors a sense that they have been taken back in time to the prehistoric age.

All animals displayed in the mural and real life exhibits all represent fossils found on the Gray Fossil Site. The permanent exhibit space features fossils that might be the entire skeleton or just pieces of those found on site. With the sounds and sites, the display truly appeals to all ages and all senses. To appeal even more to adults and children, there are interactive games and displays set up throughout the museum.

For example, a dig box is featured in the main room, where a synthetic substance was used to represent the fossil site outside of the museum. Kids and adults can use the tools given to dig around the box and take on the role of a paleontologist during their visit to the museum. There is also a laboratory opened for the public that contains touch screens along the lab tables where guests can engage in an interactive fossil cleaning game, with features such as a computerized brush to clean your fake fossil and preservation tools.

While the main feature for the public is the museum aspect, the most unique element is the fossil site, where paleontologists are actively digging for more fossils. There is also an observation lab where guests can watch as scientists examine their recently discovered remains. The lab is used as a preparation site where new fossils can be cleaned, glued together preserved right next to the digging site rather than being hauled to the university labs.

An essential part of the museum is they will be changing the exhibits frequently so visitors will always know what is being found on the digging site.

“Literally generations of visitors will be able to watch the excavation as it progresses from the glasses-in overview on the second floor of the museum or along the nature pathway that we plan for the perimeter of the site,” said Zavada

The center, a combination of museum and laboratory, stretches over 33,000 square feet. The museum will display the hard work done at the dig site, and will also include huge quantities of species, including fish, frogs, salamanders, alligator, snakes, birds, and even a three-toed horse, rhinoceros, saber toothed cat, a red panda and a Eurasian badger.

“The discovery of this site and the money granted to the university to build the museum and center is not only a gift to Johnson City, it’s a gift to the region and the nation. Visitors and locals will be able to look into our prehistoric past and learn from these fossils and artifacts,” said Brenda Whitson, executive director of the Johnson City Convention and Visitors Bureau.

The Gray Fossil Site is the single site in the Eastern part of the country to contain fossils from the Miocene Epoch age, with fossils estimated to be four and a half to seven million years old. The site may have been formed because of a cave collapsing, which then formed a sinkhole. At this point, animals and plants fell into the sinkhole and eventually fossilized into one of the richest deposits of fossils in the area. The four to five acre and forty meter region where fossil

digs are conducted is now the focus for exhibits at the visitor center. The fossil exhibits donated to the growing collections of the museum will be a vital part of learning opportunities for both students and professionals.

“Since the site was discovered in 2000, many have traveled to Johnson City to either volunteer or just observe the history taking place,” said Whitson.

When the grant was given in 2002, ETSU’s President, Dr. Paul Stanton, was noted as saying, “ETSU is entrusted with a rare opportunity and an important responsibility to teach generations of students and visitors lessons about the earth and its inhabitants firsthand. The potential for regional tourism and worldwide recognition for the work going on at Gray is tremendous.”

The museum will feature classes as well as onsite digs that volunteers can be a part of. There is a screening process, but anyone can apply and assist in what the museum calls “active digging,” a rare chance at uncovering ancient history.

“The museum and the site will become a source for field trips, tour groups, and even possible overnight stays to take part in excavation of the digging site,” said Whitson.

The Museum of Natural History at the Gray Fossil Site is dedicated to understanding, preserving and interpreting regional biodiversity through time, and to providing inspirational educational programming for visitors of all ages. Guided tours of the fossil site are \$5 for adults, \$3 for children and \$4 for seniors. There is no cost to view the exhibits. For more information, please visit <http://www.etsu.edu/grayfossilsite/> or call (423) 439-1000.

Johnson City is located in Northeast Tennessee and is the fourth largest metropolitan city in the state. Set in a region known as America's First Frontier, Johnson City is “Where the Pioneer Spirit Began”—a historically significant and culturally rich community surrounded by an abundance of unspoiled natural beauty. Johnson City has a history, which dates back more than 200 years, and its culture embraces individual creativity and encourages innovation through expression. The area is world-renowned for its modern and traditional Appalachian and bluegrass music, art and cuisine, and outdoor recreation for the whole family throughout all four seasons. For more information on Johnson City, please visit www.visitjohnsoncitytn.com or call (423) 461-8000 or (800) 852-3392.

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