



One time "Boy Paleontologist" is now senior volunteer

By Matthew Artz
Oakland Tribune

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It's an equation known to generations of Hayward students: Phil Gordon plus the great outdoors equals a nature lesson.

On Tuesday, the student was a reporter and the classroom was Fremont's Shinn Historic Park and Arboretum where Gordon, a retired Hayward teacher, avid birder and one-time Boy Paleontologist, couldn't walk past a black phoebe without going into teacher mode.

The round little bird with a white belly is one of only two flycatchers tough enough to stick around for a Bay Area winter, Gordon said before switching topics to a rare species of redwood tree, on the garden grounds, that loses its needles in the winter.

"A gardener nearly cut it down; he thought it was dead," Gordon said.

If the 76-year-old has a lot to share, it's because -- thanks in large part to his father -- Gordon started learning about the natural world at a tender age and with much fanfare.

Gordon comes from what he calls a family of rock hounds.

His father, Wesley, who lived in Fremont's Niles district before moving the family to Hayward, led his three boys on weekend expeditions along East Bay creeks, collecting rocks, minerals and arrowheads.

When they found fossils, Wesley Gordon would take them to a UC Berkeley paleontology professor, who in 1943 told him about a trove of fossils around a quarry in the hills above what is now Fremont's Irvington district.

Wesley Gordon, who later became a science teacher himself, contacted

the quarry owner and got permission to go digging with his sons and their friends.

"He'd squeeze as many as he could -- the record was 14 -- into his 1942 Chevy," Phil Gordon recalled. "The first thing we found was a camel skull with the teeth still in it -- just a gorgeous specimen."

In 1944, Life Magazine devoted a major spread to Gordon, then age 9, and his buddies, dubbing them "The Boy Paleontologists."

Over a decade, they dug up about 20,000 fossils from 58 different animal species, leading to the creation of a new faunal age, The Irvingtonian, dating from 750,000 to 2 million years ago.

The Gordons even had their own radio show on KPFA, during which Phil and the other Boy Paleontologists would ask questions of UC Berkeley professors.

That fanfare is long gone, but Gordon, even after 39 years teaching science at Tony Ochoa Junior High School and Tennyson High School in Hayward, is still devoted to preserving and sharing the East Bay's natural heritage, especially its varied bird population.

In 1965, Gordon helped start the Ohlone Audubon Society, and he continues to organize the Swallow Festival at Chabot College.

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He teaches an outdoor birding class through the Castro Valley Adult School and an outdoor, wheelchair accessible, nature class through Acalanes Adult School in Walnut Creek.

On Mondays he and his brother, William Charles, volunteer as curators at the Math Science Nucleus, a Fremont science learning center that is home to many of the Boy Paleontologists' fossils. On Tuesdays, he and his wife, Pat Gordon, herself a retired science teacher from Fremont's Mission San Jose High School, maintain a memorial butterfly and humming bird garden at Shinn Park.

And, when he finds the time, Gordon still visits dig sites where other Irvingtonian age fossils have been found.

"Digging out fossils," he said. "It's in my blood."

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