

They had an elephant in their back yard

BY ANGELA TYLER
The New Tanner

Some families may have 'skeletons' in their closets, but the Peller family from Rockwood had some pretty big bones in their backyard. Actually, some elephant bones.

When they bought the house in 1990, they were told there was an elephant buried in the back yard. "We looked at each other and thought, is this guy serious?" Jim Peller recalled.

In 1969, a young abandoned African bush elephant, thought to be born in 1966 in Mozambique, Africa, was

captured. Temporarily acquired by an animal dealer in Germany, the elephant found a home at the new Metro Toronto Zoo, which opened in 1974. The Zoo named him Tantor and began to use him in a breeding program. Tantor, the largest animal in North America and once nicknamed the 6 ton bachelorette, had a tendency of being "pretty nasty" and difficult to handle. In the breeding program he fathered four calves, including a daughter named Thika, the first elephant born in captivity in Canada, and another called Toronto in honour of the city's 150th anniversary in 1984.

New twist on compost

In August 1989, Tantor, the longest resident at the Zoo, had surgery for an infected tusk. A group of specialists from the Zoo, the University of Guelph and two elephant dental specialists from Florida performed the chancy surgery. Unfortunately, Tantor died as a result of surgical complications. The 21-22 year old elephant's premature death was first speculated a result of the infection spreading beyond his tusk, the anesthetic or even the stress of the surgery might have had a part in it. Elephants can live as old as 65 years.

When animals at the Zoo die, they are usually incinerated, however they often have requests for animal specimens from institutions and schools. This includes the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. The ROM has basically requested a male and female specimen of every species the Zoo has. For Tantor, the ROM was to become his final resting place, but before that could happen he needed to visit Guelph and Rockwood.

When Tantor's remains

were offered to the ROM, Susan Woodward who is the assistant curator at the ROM's centre for Biodiversity and Conservation Biology, quickly readied a team of people and Tantor. He was loaded by a crane onto a flat bed truck and taken to Guelph's Veterinary College pathology lab. The lab is used to dealing with larger animals such as horses and cows. Tantor, at 14300 pounds, was still too big. For size comparison, Tantor's daughter Toronto weighed 4000 pounds. The elephant carcass was moved by front end loader, then sectioned and eviscerated to make him fit and easier to work with. The lab is equipped with tools of the trade to work with larger animals such as, a ceiling winch and tracks, which make moving the elephant feasible. From there, 10 to 16 people worked three days to remove the animal of its flesh using butcher knives and scalpels.

In the case of 'normal' sized animals, carcasses are placed in a special bug room at the ROM that is filled with dermestid beetles. The bee-

ties, after hatching larvae in the flesh, eventually eat the remaining flesh. However, once again for North America's largest animal, procedure needed to be changed. "Most animals can be handled here at the ROM. We've done large animals like a Rhino and a Hippo, but this was a whole different kettle of fish," said Kevin Seymour, the ROM's assistant curator in the palaeobiology department.

This is how a farm near Rockwood became a temporary home for Tantor's remains. The farm was owned by Mr. Peterson who was a curator at the ROM. He allowed Tantor's remains to be buried in three crates of manure and put into the ground. Apparently this was not the first time Peterson used this procedure to turn a carcass into a skeleton. It is believed he did this with a whale or shark prior to Tantor. Seymour said the crates were buried, "on a little section of land, but not part of an active field." From here the manure would help the remaining flesh and bone marrow decompose and the manure would compost and turn into dirt. The crates were

made of plywood, with the largest of the containers being 8' x 8' x 4'.

Originally the ROM planned to leave him buried for three years but more complications occurred. Mr. Peterson passed away and the farm was sold to the Peller family with a verbal agreement that allowed the ROM to retrieve the bones. However, after the initial shock, they purchased the farm and Tantor, once the largest animal in North America, became "no big deal".

The complications continued as the ROM had no storage available at the time for the bones. According to Seymour, who is an assistant curator at the ROM's palaeobiology department, the extra time in the manure turned out to be a good thing. The extra time allowed for some of the marrow in the cavity, which eventually turns into a grease-like object, to also decompose. If the bones were exhumed on schedule, the bones could still have had the grease on the bones, which is very difficult to clean. "The land owners were very good. They were not in a rush and I don't

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Exotic pet bylaw

Cont. from Pg. 1

than two pages long," Bonnette said at last week's council meeting as he questioned the delay and offered to provide staff with the research he's done.

Noting that Toronto has a restrictive exotic pet bylaw Bonnette suggested that Peel and Halton could end up being "a nice haven" for people with exotic pets because of the lack of legislation controlling them.

Resident Elizabeth Cole, who admits to "an absolute and very real terror of snakes," echoed Bonnette's concerns in a recent letter to council.

In it she argued that the family dog must be registered and licenced in Halton Hills, so exotic pets "these creatures," should be as well.

Cole's letter will be sent to Town staff who promised to get to work on a possible bylaw.

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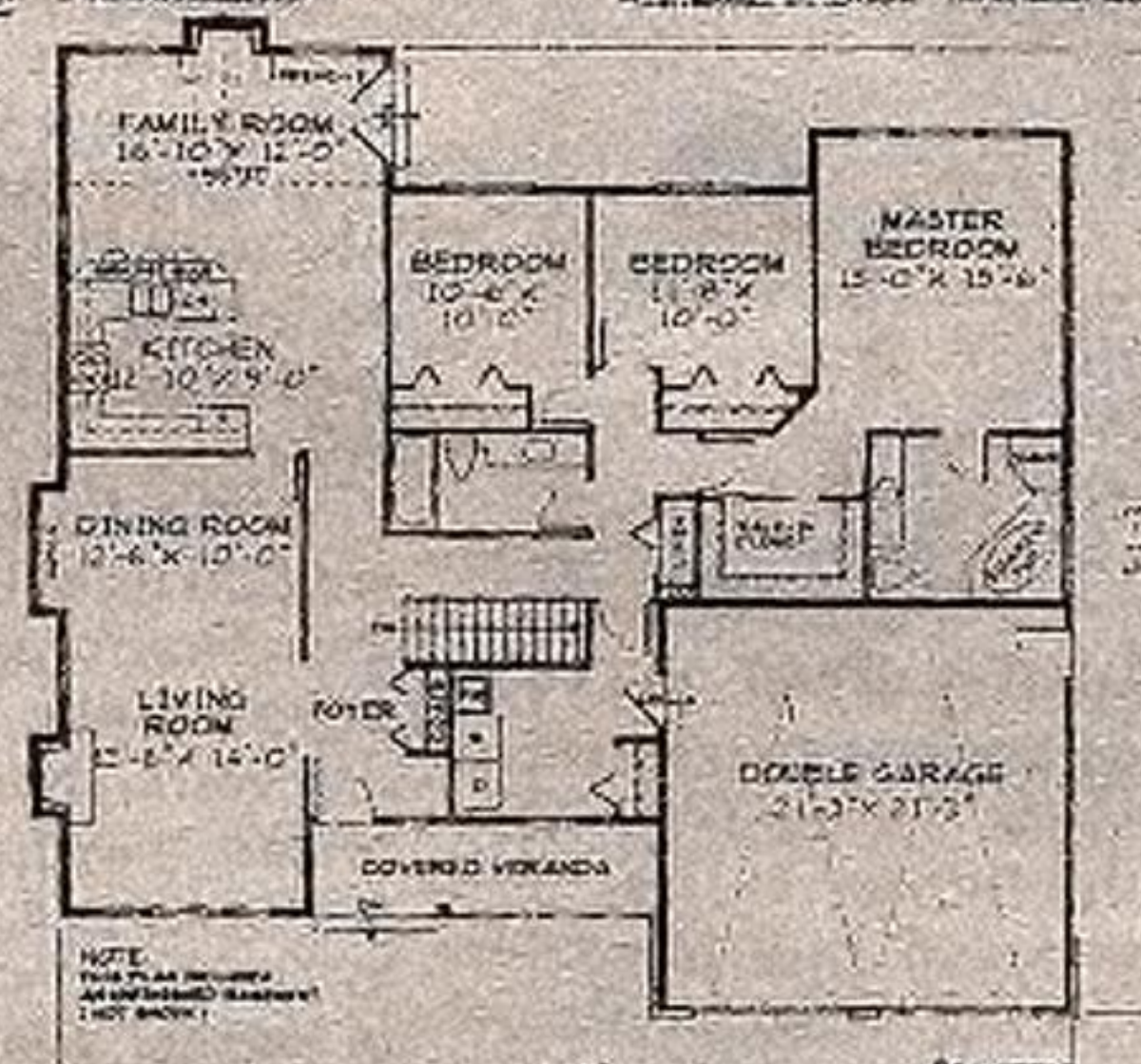
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