



# The Senior



VICTORIA

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## Tom still digs his line of work!

by SIMON GARNER

IN 1974, palaeontologists Dr Thomas Rich and his wife Patricia Vickers-Rich were visiting Australia from the USA on a fellowship, which Patricia had received the previous year.

According to Tom, he came along for the ride.

He bought a newspaper with the intention of learning something about life in this country.

He found a job advertisement for a curator of paleontology at Melbourne Museum, applied for the position, got the job – and still has it some 37 years later.

Tom decided to become a palaeontologist in 1953 at age

12 when he was given a copy of the book *All About Dinosaurs*.

The last chapter contains an illustration showing two small mammals eating dinosaur eggs.

Tom concluded they must be really interesting animals, our ancestors who lived with the dinosaurs.

It's an interest that still drives him today, and one that has shaped his decades of research and writing.

Since the mid-1970s, he has been a significant figure in the scientific study of Australian fossils and ancient life on this continent, in particular mammalian life.

In the late '70s and '80s, he

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Tom Rich has been at the forefront of Victorian-based research into ancient life on this continent.

Photo: Museum Victoria/Heath Warwick.

# Never lost his love of dinosaurs

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mentored and assisted a young student called Tim Flannery (palaeontologist and 2007 Australian of the Year) in his research into fossil vertebrates in the Early Cretaceous rocks exposed on the Victorian coastline east of Phillip Island.

"Patricia was able to get Tim Flannery enrolled at Monash University to do his Masters in Geology," Tom said. "Tim's first degree was in English."

In 1982, following the Dinosaurs From China exhibition at Melbourne Museum, the Friends of the Museum convinced Tom that a dig should take place searching for Victorian dinosaurs.

It led to the establishment of a dig at Dinosaur Cove on the flanks of the Otway Ranges.

Over the next 22 years many dinosaur bones were uncovered, although the main 'prize' – mammal fossils – was never found in the time it was open.

However, two years after the closure a mammal bone was found, which appears to be that of a monotreme, but it is neither an echidna nor platypus.

In 1992 a dinosaur site 10 million years older than that at Dinosaur Cove was discovered at

Flat Rocks near Inverloch.

A number of dinosaur remains were found, and in 1997 a mammal bone, with tiny teeth next to it, was uncovered.

While not yet formally identified, Tom believes it is from either a placental mammal or something very close – a closer relative to shrews, horses, and us than to kangaroos, koalas, possums and echidnas.

Tom said that day (March 8, 1997), when he first realised there was evidence of ancient placental mammalian life at the Flat Rocks dig, was the most memorable one of his working life.

Tom and Patricia, now aged 70 and 67 respectively, are as passionately active as they have ever been in their field. And their work still takes them to many parts of the world.

During their 45-year marriage, they have often spent time apart.

At the time of writing, Patricia was about to head off to Siberia and then Namibia, and Tom was to take some Victorian mammalian fossil material to the synchrotron near Kyoto in Japan.

Tom said events like Science Week were important to get children and their parents and grandparents interested and aware in many facets of science.

Dinosaurs in particular spark the interest of youngsters.

"Younger kids are drawn to dinosaurs," he said. "But by the time they get to 10 or 12 that interest drops off.

"I guess I've never grown up – I stayed interested in them and became a palaeontologist."

Tom and Patricia have two children.

Tom recounts that when his daughter was young she demanded to know why he couldn't arrange to get her a dinosaur.

"When she was 12, I did – well, I named a dinosaur, *Leaellynasaura*, after her," he said. "She was past dinosaurs then, and she cringed.

"It wasn't until she was in her 20s that she started thinking that it was quite cool to have a dinosaur named after her."

Tom also named a dinosaur *Timimus* after his son Tim and Tim Flannery.

He said he and Patricia would continue their work with as much energy and passion as ever.

"People ask me when will I retire," he said. "I tell them I retired when I got this job 37 years ago – I just keep spending my days doing what I love.

"If I didn't do what I'm doing, I'd die of boredom."