

Resurrecting a toothy terror from Mitchell's distant past

Students in Mitchell are creating a metal replica of the plesiosaur, a 20-plus-foot predator of the ancient seas. The reason for the project? It will teach the students some history and science. And, in the words of one, it will be 'something neat.'

By Lauren Dake / *The Bulletin*

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MITCHELL —

Kristen Kelley, 15, covered her pink tank top and jeans with gray Dickies coveralls. She replaced her flip flops with black sneakers.

Then, the Mitchell School sophomore lowered a pair of red protective goggles, and used a 1,500-degree flame that melts steel to re-create an ancient creature's vertebrae.

This spring, Mitchell School students are going back in time 100 million years. Kristen and the other high school students are working with a California-based steel artist, Larry Williams, to weld a 12-foot-long replica of a sea-swimming plesiosaur. The end result will be placed in the Oregon Paleo Lands Institute's new Field Center in Fossil.

The idea is to help students connect with the landscape surrounding them. To help them conceptualize millions of years ago, when a large river collided with the sea, near where Mitchell exists today. Palm trees and giant ferns dotted the landscape. And a large, short-necked creature with paddle-like limbs — the plesiosaur — ruled the water.

In 2003, two paleontologists discovered a 2-foot-long jawbone between Prineville and Mitchell that belonged to a plesiosaur. The fossil's size indicated the animal reached 20-24 feet in length.

For some, it's difficult to picture Mitchell, a town of about



Photos by Melissa Jansson / The Bulletin

Sophomore Kristen Kelley, 15, works on the neck of the plesiosaur. The finished metal sculpture will be placed in the Oregon Paleo Lands Institute's new Field Center in Fossil. Kristen, who transferred to the school last year, said she had never welded before. Her teacher said she's one of the best welders in the class.



Melissa Jansson / The Bulletin

170 people, underwater.

"I can't believe it," said Cody Day, 17, a sophomore. "It's always so dry and hot here. And hard to find water."

On Thursday afternoon, Cody, who has attended Mitchell School for 10 years, was cutting out pieces that would later be welded to make the creature's backbone.

Day is no stranger to welding. While he's repaired pitch forks and worked on fencing tools, this is his first foray into artistic welding.

"It's pretty cool how it's coming together," Cody said of the project. "I thought it would take awhile, but it's coming along."

Day's classmate, Jacob Ferra, 16, also a sophomore, moved orange flames over flat pieces of metal to create the creature's teeth.

Jacob's swift strokes melted the steel, giving the teeth a textured look.

This project, Jacob thinks, will help put Mitchell on the map — the closest town to Mitchell is nearly 50 miles away.

"When I tell people I live in Mitchell, the first thing they say, is 'Where's that?'" Jacob said. "Not a lot of people come out here, except in the summer. Now, people can come out here in the winter and see something neat."

The school's younger students, in third- through fifth-grades, are studying the ancient sea floor.

The Oregon Paleo Lands Institute, a nonprofit, is funding the program through grants

"We believe in connecting a particular school to the landscape out their door," said Ellen Bishop, program director with the Oregon Paleo Lands Institute.

"We wanted to work with a rural school that was willing to try some innovative curriculum, and Mitchell was excited."

The school's welding teacher, Felipe Zamora, said using welding to express creativity has been a good

Mitchell School has 66 students from kindergarten through 12th grade. All the students are housed in one building, with eight classrooms. The large building in the back is the welding shop where the high school students are welding a plesiosaur sculpture for the Oregon Paleo Lands Institute's new Field Center in Fossil.



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opportunity for his students. Being a small school, the electives are limited and there aren't currently any art electives. But beyond welding — and the anatomy, geology, history and science his students will learn this spring — he hopes the experience teaches them something else as well.

"I want them to know they can do something with their creativity," he said.

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