



Making of a Monument

A grassroots effort

Looking to the north you can see the Florissant valley. Beneath your feet is one of the richest fossil deposits in the world. Now try to imagine this valley filled with a housing subdivision. No open space, no interpretive signs, no scientific research and no opportunities for you to explore and learn. There are times when our society must face difficult questions about our relationship to the land. In 1969 the fate of this valley hung in the balance.

With the prospect of development looming, a group of citizens and scientists banded together with attorney Richard Hansen to form the Defenders of Florissant, a grassroots organization dedicated to achieving federal protection for the Florissant fossils.



Estella Leopold, prominent scientist and daughter of conservationist Aldo Leopold; Betty Willard, scientist; Vim Wright, activist

Florissant maple leaf

Quotes from the Courtroom

Victor J. Yannacone, Jr., lead counsel in the effort to preserve Florissant, along with other lawyers including former Colorado Governor Dick Lamm and his brother Tom, led efforts in the courtroom. Their ingenious legal strategy led to an injunction to stop development of the valley. Their defense set precedents for environmental law.

The Florissant fossils are to geology, paleontology, paleobotany, palynology, and evolution what the Rosetta Stone was to Egyptology. To sacrifice this 34 million year old record, a record you might say written by the mighty hand of God, for 30 year mortgages and the basements of the A-frame gehttos of the seventies is like wrapping fish with the Dead Seas Scrolls.

...if someone had found the original Constitution of the United States buried on his land and then wanted to use it to mop a stain on the floor, is there any doubt...they could be restrained?

A Monumental Decision

The efforts of the citizens, scientists, and lawyers to temporarily delay development allowed time for Congress to pass the bill that protected Florissant Fossil Beds as a National Monument. The bill was signed into law by President Nixon on August 20, 1969.



Political cartoon by Tom Oliphant from the Denver Post