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Go Fossil Me! – Wheeler Elem Students Raise Funds for New Historic Marker at Browning Fossil Park

The 42 fourth graders in Mrs. Amy Tice’s science classes at Wheeler Attendance Center are producing a limited-edition sample of petrified wood from Twenty-mile Creek in Frankstown, MS to fund a small part of the cost of a new historic marker for their W. M. Browning Cretaceous Fossil Park.

Each student will assemble a card with a piece of petrified wood and identifying information. The bagged specimens will be available for a small donation. The 45 numbered specimens will be numbered and initialed by each student.

The petrified wood comes from 65 million year-old, Late Cretaceous deposits. Trees and other pieces of ancient wood floated downstream from the rivers on the continent of Appalachia. They sank and were buried in the sea called the Mississippi Embayment. At that time, nearly all of Mississippi was covered by this shallow sea.

Late in 2019, the original granite marker was broken by a driver backing into it. The original monolith was contributed by Mr. Browning’s children on the dedication of the Fossil Park in 1995.

In October and November 2019, students from Wheeler High School were installing the tables at the new outdoor education and picnic area under the supervision of Mr. Denny Shaw, their teacher. After its completion, former Principal Todd Swinney made arrangements for the elementary Wheeler students to have a field trip to the Park, led by Doug Fleury, Fossil Park Project Chair.

The Browning Family, contributors to the Park Project and the Committee discussed the need for new signage. Mrs. Anne Browning Walker would work on an appropriate granite marker for Park entrance. Fleury would look into a historic marker for the side of the county road.

During his research, Fleury found out the cost of the new sign would be \$2,040. When he shared the news, everyone thought the \$40 was funny. Fleury told Principal Swinney, “that must be the kids’ share!” They discussed the possibility of a student-sized project to raise the amount. Fleury received four contributions for the \$2,000. The COVID postponed the Park’s 25th Anniversary celebrations and the rest of the effort until this year.

Current Wheeler Principal Denny Shaw sees the mini-fundraiser as a chance for his younger students to contribute to the Fossil Park improvements. Shaw says: “The Park is a wonderful resource for not only our school work but for our nearby communities to enjoy. It’s an opportunity for our young students to participate in a community effort.”

Fleury reports that there are two other geology-related, historic signs in Mississippi, both in Jackson. These signs were the effort of Dr. David T. Dockery, MDEQ. He also wrote the text that appeared on the first granite marker and on the new historic marker.

The Fossil Park Project Committee is a program of the Caterpillar Catalyst, Inc., a Mississippi-chartered non-profit organization. The Caterpillar Catalyst promotes young people’s interest in the sciences using inexpensive, local resources.