

Student archaeologist returns

By MARK STEVENS

Although digging up human remains may not be everyone's idea of a fun summer vacation, it was the experience of a lifetime for one UNB student.

Sue McNeil, a fourth year honours student, recently returned from a field trip to East Africa. Based near Lake Turkana in Kenya, Sue had the opportunity to work under Dr. Richard Leakey - a world authority on early human archaeology.

"He's just incredible," said Sue. "Unfortunately, we didn't get to spend much time with him because he was working at a site on the other side of the lake."

Sue explained that the focus of Leakey's work was to promote research on hominid remains. "Basically, a hominid is our evolutionary ancestor," she explained.

Organized by Harvard University, the field trip was designed to give students an idea of what working in the bush is like. Despite Sue's attempts to get funding for the trip, most of



Sue McNeil meets Dr. Richard Leakey prior to flying to E. Africa.

the money came out of her own pocket.

Starting at six every morning, groups of trainees would leave the Koobi Fora base-camp to search for fossils and prehistoric remains. At midday, they would return to record their notes - and to avoid the heat. After attending talks dealing with the basics of archaeology, excavation techniques and artifact preservation, the sixteen lucky students would make sure they got an early night's sleep.

"Although we didn't do much excavation, the days were pretty gruelling," said Sue, "and no, we

didn't have a social life!" she added with a smile.

The area around Koobi Fora is one of the most fossil-rich zones in the world. Considerable erosion by the wind and rain has exposed fossils, extinct animal remains, and hominid bone fragments. "It's quite possible to walk along and pick up fossils four million years old!" said Sue. "We can't really go back more than about four million years, and identifying the artifacts was often a problem, but at least we had the satisfaction of finding some tooth fragments which Dr. Leakey identified as hominid,"

she added.

After flying into Nairobi on July 26, Sue embarked on a gruelling four day drive to the base camp. "It was horrible," she remembers with a grimace. "We were sitting on benches in the back of trucks, bouncing over volcanic boulders. The roads were terrible - often non-

existent, and we even had to abandon one of our Landrovers. By the end of the journey, tempers were a little frayed, but at least we didn't have to sleep in tents," she said with relief.

"But," she added, "Koobi Fora was over nine hundred kilometres from civilization."

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