

Documentary on T-rex discovery leads to pardon request

April 30 2015, byKevin Burbach



In this June 26, 2013 photo provided by Black Hills Institute of Geological Research, Peter Larson excavates a Triceratops femur in a quarry near Newcastle, Wyoming. Larson has discovered thousands of fossils around the world and led the team that unearthed the largest and most complete Tyrannosaurus rex ever found. But there's one black mark on his record—a federal conviction that landed him in prison 20 years ago. His name could soon be cleared because a documentary released last year at the Sundance Film Festival has brought his legal blemish back into the public eye and spurred South Dakotans—and Larson himself—to push for President Barack Obama to clear his name with a pardon. (Timothy Larson/Black Hills Institute via AP)

Pete Larson has discovered thousands of fossils around the world, co-authored three books and led the team that unearthed the largest and most complete *Tyrannosaurus rex* ever found. But there's one black mark on his record: a federal conviction that landed him in prison almost 20 years ago.

His name could soon be cleared because of a documentary released last year at the Sundance Film Festival, which has brought his legal blemish back into the public eye and spurred South Dakota residents—and Larson himself—to push for President Barack Obama to give him a pardon.

"Dinosaur 13" details the discovery of "Sue," a *Tyrannosaurus rex* that was more than 90 percent complete when it was discovered in 1990 in South Dakota. Federal agents seized the fossil in 1992, alleging that Larson's Black Hills Institute of Geological Research and its employees took it from federal trust land.

While those charges never stuck, the federal government investigated the institute and brought more than 150 unrelated charges against its employees. Only Larson and two others were found guilty, and the paleontologist was sentenced to two years in federal prison for lying on customs documents about thousands of dollars used for fossil deals in Peru and Japan and illegally taking fossils from a national forest in Montana.

Larson's backers have argued for more than two decades that he was overzealously prosecuted. The movie's release has reignited that conversation, leading his supporters to push for the president to correct what they see as the government's mistake.

The South Dakota Legislature overwhelmingly passed a resolution this session that's been sent to Obama requesting a pardon for Larson. And

Larson is working with an attorney on a formal pardon request—a move he hopes could clear his name and also allow him to travel to Canada, where he said more fossil work is to be done.



In this 1994 photo provided by the Black Hills Institute of Geological Research, Inc., Peter Larson excavates a bone from a *Tyrannosaurus rex* at site in Harding County, South Dakota. Larson has discovered thousands of fossils around the world and led the team that unearthed the largest and most complete *Tyrannosaurus rex* ever found. But there's one black mark on his record—a federal conviction that landed him in prison 20 years ago. His name could soon be cleared because a documentary released last year at the Sundance Film

Festival has brought his legal blemish back into the public eye and spurred South Dakotans—and Larson himself—to push for President Barack Obama to clear his name with a pardon. (Timothy Larson/Black Hills Institute via AP)

"It's something very special for me personally to have this piece of paper that says I'm pardoned for these offenses," Larson said. "It's an important mile marker to reach. Like climbing Mt. Everest, or finding your first T-rex—or finding your 10th T-rex."

But not everyone thinks Larson's name should be cleared or that the documentary, which portrays the paleontologists in the mid-1990s trial in a fairly sympathetic light, should prompt a pardon.

The lone two lawmakers—out of 105—who opposed the resolution said they personally know people who were involved in the investigation, believe Larson's crime was serious and that the conviction was justified.

"It's possible that he was overzealously prosecuted but yet guilty of the crimes on which he was found guilty of," said Rep. Mark Mickelson, R-Sioux Falls.

Neither he nor fellow Republican Rep. Lee Schoenbeck, of Watertown, has seen the film.



In this May 5, 2013 photo provided by the Black Hills Institute of Geological Research, Inc., Peter Larson surveys a dig site before beginning an excavation near Newcastle, Wyoming. Larson has discovered thousands of fossils around the world and led the team that unearthed the largest and most complete *Tyrannosaurus rex* ever found. But there's one black mark on his record—a federal conviction that landed him in prison 20 years ago. His name could soon be cleared because a documentary released last year at the Sundance Film Festival has brought his legal blemish back into the public eye and spurred South Dakotans—and Larson himself—to push for President Barack Obama to clear his name with a pardon. (Timothy Larson/Black Hills Institute via AP)

"Unless it had a detailed review of the criminal investigation file, I probably wouldn't spend my time watching it," Schoenbeck said. "There is no chance that any legislators knew the details of that criminal case that would warrant them for voting for that resolution."

Rep. Mike Verichio, a Republican from Larson's home of Hill City, said he introduced the resolution after an outpouring of requests from constituents who had watched the documentary and thought Larson was unjustly imprisoned.

The film aired worldwide and played in tiny theatres across South Dakota last summer, from Mitchell to Hill City, where the geological institute is headquartered.

"There were people who really weren't aware of the background of the situation and how it happened and that seemed to be the catalyst right there," said Verichio, who has watched the film several times. "It built up a tremendous amount of support here."

It's unclear how Larson's pardon request and the support from the state of South Dakota will be received by the president. A White House spokesman said they don't usually comment on individual cases.

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