

## American Story of T-Rex Named Sue in 'Dinosaur 13'

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on August 20, 2014 - 8:28pm

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Only in America can an animal die millions of years ago, have its fossilized bones discovered in the 20th Century, and end up in a court of law, determining who she belongs to as if in a child custody case. The story of the most complete Tyrannosaurus Rex ever found is chronicled in the new documentary “Dinosaur 13.”

The T-Rex in question is nicknamed Sue, named after her discover Susan Hendrickson, and now resides in the Field Museum of Chicago. Hendrickson was part of a fossil-hunting-for-profit team who uncovered Sue in 1990, only to have a location dispute put her ownership rights into litigation. This story is fascinating, from the viewpoint of what land ownership means, and who owns what is found on said lands. It also is a cautionary tale about messing with the U.S. government, because as this film rightly points out, they mostly use their law enforcement and legal muscle to protect the landowner.

The fossil discovery team from the Black Hills Institute were working on a property in 1990, leased by the government to rancher Maurice Williams. As most of the team were in town to get some car repairs, Susan Hendrickson stayed behind and took a walk. On the jaunt, she found some fossilized bones that she knew had some significance. It turned out those fragments were from a Tyrannosaurus Rex dinosaur, buried in a hillside.



Peter Larson Works on Sue Around the Time of Discovery in 'Dinosaur 13'

*Photo credit: Lionsgate*

The team unearthed the treasure bit by bit, and determined that they had found a T-Rex – the 13th such dinosaur discovered in history – with 80% of her bones intact. The previous discoveries topped out at 40%. They paid rancher Williams \$5000 and took their dinosaur back to their facility to restore her. In the midst of that work, the federal government raided the Black Hills Institute, and seized the T-Rex due to ownership issues. Williams claimed that he never took any money, and the dinosaur belonged to him.

Who is going to win? If you guessed the government-backed land owner you are on the nose, and Sue eventually went to auction. This is a story of America, in which anything of perceived value, claimed by multiple parties, is bound to make lawyers richer before cooler heads prevail – in this case the good people at the Field Museum. Who owns what is the thesis of the film, and who gets harassed because of it is based on who has the most muscle, legally and metaphorically.

The talking heads in the documentary are all on one side, that of former and current proprietors of the Black Hills Institute and their friends. This leaves some lingering questions, but there is no doubt that the government seemed to overstep its bounds in the case, sending a National Guard contingent to seize the dinosaur. It's all about the value of the find, and when a find is valuable somebody thinks they deserve to be paid. In this case it wasn't the discoverers, but at least Sue ended up being treated academically and in a public display.

The main Kafka-esque figure on trial is Peter Larson, one of the co-founders of the Black Hills Institute, and a doggedly determined seeker of fossils. He does have a passion for them, and blaming him for thinking of a way to profit from the bones doesn't necessary make him bad, but even in the context of the film doesn't exactly make him a martyr either. He was send to prison for charges that were retroactive, but the film doesn't really make a case against them, only how harsh the sentence was. Larson is rightly painted as a victim of his circumstances, but there is underlying questions as to what really motivates him.



The T-Rex Named Sue is 'Dinosaur 13'

Photo credit: Lionsgate

The director Todd Douglas Miller is making his major film debut, and does a nice job keeping the story organized, fascinating and moving forward. Using a mix of archival footage, interviews and re-created scenes, Miller hits all the right notes of what is shocking about the dispute. The interviewees are good storytellers as well – the film is partially based on Larson's memoir, "Rex Appeal" – and are able to relive those days in sometimes emotional ways. The film might make you angry, sad or just plain cynical, but in eliciting such emotions it's doing its job.

The T-Rex named Sue is one of the most popular exhibits at the Field Museum, in a prime spot inside, right passed the entrance to the building. The journey of the bones ends there, but the steps toward that stage proves there's always a piper to be paid on the road to immortality.

*"Dinosaur 13" released in theaters – including Chicago – and through Video-On-Demand on August 15th. See local listings for theaters and show times, plus television providers for VOD channels. Featured interviews include Peter Larson, Susan Hendrickson and Kristin Donnan Standard. Directed by Todd Douglas Miller. Rated "PG"*



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