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Giant boulder to be retrieved from lake bottom

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By John Flesher/Associated Press

Bob Barron was exploring Lake Superior bottomlands off the Keweenaw Peninsula a decade ago when he came across an enormous block of pure copper.

"As soon as I saw the edge of it, I knew what it was," said Barron, facilities manager for Michigan Technological University's geology department. "I shot up to the surface faster than I should have, I was so excited."

On Thursday, a team of divers will attempt to retrieve the boulder for display by the university's Seaman Mineral Museum. It would be one of the world's largest copper exhibitions and the biggest copper slab ever pulled from the lake, spokesman Dean Woodbeck said.

"There is no other place on Earth with so much pure copper in the ground as the Keweenaw Peninsula," said Stan Dyl, museum director.

The boulder is more than 18 feet long, 8 feet wide and 15 inches thick. Its weight is conservatively estimated at 20,000 pounds, Dyl said. It lies under about 30 feet of water.

Even bigger copper masses were found underground during the peninsula's mining era, which ran from the mid-1800s to the late 1960s. But it's rare to come across unburied slabs of this size -- even underwater, Dyl said Wednesday.

It's hard to put a price tag on the boulder, Barron said. Copper usually sells for about \$1 a pound, but a collector might be willing to pay considerably more, he said.

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Barron, who also works in the museum and gathers minerals, said he long suspected there might be large copper deposits on the Superior floor.

He and partner Don Kauppi were exploring around the Eagle River Shoal nearly a mile off the peninsula's north shore when they found the boulder in July 1991. Kauppi was piloting the motorboat as Barron, clinging to a rope attached to the slow-moving vessel, scanned the rocky bottom.

They originally hoped to put the boulder on display in Copper Harbor, a village at the tip of the peninsula. But the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, which owns the bottomlands, denied their permit application, saying the slab should remain for divers to view.

It is within an underwater diving preserve that includes numerous shipwrecks.

Later, Barron proposed displaying the boulder at Seaman, which is the official state mineral museum. This time, the DNR went along.

University officials are planning to relocate Seaman, now on the Michigan Tech campus in Houghton, to the grounds of the Quincy Mine Hoist north of Hancock. The boulder would be the centerpiece of the new museum.

In the meantime, it will be stored in the hoist building, which is open for public tours and affiliated with the Keweenaw National Historical Park.

Barron and his team used a 20-ton jack last weekend to lift the boulder and slipped heavy-duty nylon straps underneath. A U.S. Army Corps of Engineers crew will try Thursday to lift the boulder with a crane onto a barge, which would carry it to shore and place it aboard a flatbed truck.

"This will be a truly unique exhibit," Dyl said. "It's one of the natural wonders that you just can't find anywhere else but the state of Michigan."

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