

Animal, Vegetable, Mineral?

St. Clair Trip Revisited

--by Don Kauffman, CPRMC

Sometimes there are blessings in disasters of small measure. As part of our basement recovery of box flats damaged by June 2006 flooding, we chose to do a lot of picking through our fossil and mineral holdings. We also located a cumbersome mass of non-descript coal shale in a forgotten corner of our cellar.

The mass was some 20 to 24 inches long by 12 to 14 inches deep by 5 to 7 inches high. Weighing perhaps 40 to 45 pounds this almost indistinct crumbling lump formed a crude trapezoid of irregular diamond shape. The only distinguishing detail was a knotty cluster of brownish nodules on top.

Extensions from what looked like arthritic knuckles on a twisted hand appeared to be flattened. Fingers, roots or plant tendrils; we were never really sure. Flashing back in memory I recalled how the mystery piece was dis-covered.

Over a decade ago, near mid-March of 1996, Linda and I were on a freelance fieldtrip to St. Clair, Pa. We were new to fossil and mineral collecting—just amateur collectors off on our own hoping to discover some St. Clair fossil ferns.

We chose a spot just east of the main road rising out of St. Clair. A large pull off with a view, we noted some dump piles of rock surrounded by weeds and debris. We went our separate ways but in a matter of minutes I heard Linda call, "Don I found something. I need your help." My curiosity tweaked, I went to her side.

Kneeling down, I noticed a knurled light rusty-brown formation on a gray mass. I tried to remember how to carefully make extraction without causing already weathered material to crumble. Matters were complicated by what appeared to top and bottom, a.k.a., mold and impression.

The question arose, animal, vegetable or mineral? If a true fossil, what could the form be? To the best of my limited knowledge dinosaurs did not exist during the coal-forming era. Elimination of a saurian animal left us with two choices, mineral or vegetable. A chilly March breeze urged us back to our car. We would take the fossilized mystery home and try to piece the puzzle together.

Once home we spent a little time examining top and bottom. Weathering had left a fragile matrix. Our move from the discovery location caused some delicate pieces to work loose. We managed to piece some small parts together by simply using Scotch tape and newspaper.

Then, as life goes on, our mystery was then absorbed into a corner of our basement for better than a decade.

Recent examination of the sum of the parts, I was no where any closer to getting an answer as to what we found. There is no question of mineralization. In openings of channels that look very much like hollowed root stems there are pyrite, chalcopyrite, perhaps even some limonite or siderite. Just mineralized nodules would be an easy answer.

There is strangeness in the object's protrusions. They actually remind one of tree roots or plant tubers. Besides the obvious mineral crystals some kind of core material can be seen. (Crinoids?) For such channels to form plant material must surely have rotted. The ends of protrusions are either flat or bulbous and appear to be growing out, like roots.

Now the shale mass from that day at St. Clair has been trimmed down to a more manageable size. The knurled fossil or nodule has been glued together and covered with several coats of

acrylic to help hold it together. Careful displaying of the find accompanied by numerous smaller pieces of interest should at least provide hours of discussion.

Animal, vegetable, or mineral; our St. Clair find stirs up memories of our first exploration of a fossil site. It is now a part of our collected curiosities. We may never really identify the object but just the discovery was half the fun and adventure of the trip.



Photo by Don Kauffman
Animal, vegetable or mineral specimen in St. Clair coal shale, March 1996.