

The Thing: a Kansas mystery

By DONALD GRANT

Gordon Gyrmov has this thing from Kansas stored in a Weston warehouse.

And he doesn't know what it is.

But he's modestly hoping it could be "something big" scientifically.

Although better known as the Wheat State, Dorothy's home in the Wizard of Oz, and home of the Kansas City Royals, who lost the 1980 World Series, Kansas was once a seabed for marine reptiles.

At one time, in the period known as Cretaceous, Kansas was covered by seas and judging from the creatures uncovered in recent years, those seas teemed with unusual sea monsters.

The fauna from Kansas, dating back 70 million years or more, has been established and is on display in state, national and international museums, but the Royal Ontario Museum paleontology technician hopes his find may be something new.

"We don't know yet what it is," he said. "We can't identify it. It's very frustrating."

Because the museum is physically changing its shape during the next 18 months and departments are moving about, Mr. Gyrmov isn't sure just when he and his fellow paleontology work-mates will work on "the thing." It may not be for a year or so.

For now, it is carefully stored in the warehouse.

"We know that it's about 70 million years old from other finds there," he said. "Perhaps it could be part of a mososaur (a swimming reptile). There are other bones we can't identify. But it's something we haven't got."

The 46-year-old ROM technician, once a hospital operating room technician, went to Kansas in 1976 to build up the museum's collection from that area and returned in 1979.



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Gordon Gyrmov and turtle.

"In 1979, we left behind this big specimen because we didn't have time to dig it out completely. We covered it with a tarp and took down a hill to cover it so other people wouldn't disturb it."

The team discovered the thing while prospecting.

"We just walk along the bluffs and use our good eyes. We saw the brown-colored thing sticking out of the wall of the bluff. We dug it out with hammers and chisels."

During the past summer Mr. Gyrmov, another technician, Peter May, and some student workers went back to uncover the thing, which measures about 10 by 15 feet.

The ROM crew covered the fragile

fossilized bones with plastic before wrapping them in burlap and plaster and brought it all back in seven 100-pound blocks.

"It's well preserved but fragile," he pointed out, adding that his find is in soil, very soft like chalk.

Working in an area known as Cedar Bluffs was "very, very hot . . . record temperatures of 109 Fahrenheit (42.7 C). We'd crawl under the truck to eat our lunch in the shade.

"It was so hot even the rattlesnakes didn't come out. The year before, it was much cooler and the rattlesnakes were plentiful. We carry a kit just in case something happens."

The object could be as important as a sea turtle, as yet unidentified scientifically, among the ROM possessions. About three feet across, the turtle's fossilized bones were also found in the soft chalk soil and is dated 70 million years ago.

He's also proud of vertebrae and about 200 teeth from an ancient shark found in the same area.

"It's a good specimen we've never had before."

The ROM crew spent the rest of the summer with Dr. Loris Russell in Alberta, where he's attempting to locate the last level of dinosaurs.

Meanwhile, Mr. Gyrmov and the others in the paleontology department will be preparing for the move into the new ROM building, taking care not to disturb bones of fish, some 400 million years old, and other ancient creatures.

They'll also be making more life-size fibreglass models of the ROM's famous parasorolophus, one of three such dinosaur specimens in the world, and the most complete. These models, which take three months to make, are now throughout the world.

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