

## **Michigan Every Day** **By Patrick Sullivan and Carole Eberly**

*Oct. 11, 1843*

*Legendary copper boulder arrives in Detroit*

Early settlers learned from French fur traders of a great mass of copper located in the wilds of the western Upper Peninsula. Later, geologist Henry Rowe Schoolcraft attempted to devise a way to remove it, only to give up in the face of what seemed like a futile endeavor. For decades, no one thought the massive rock could be moved from its perch along the Ontonagon River.

Still, the Americans wanted it. When the federal government negotiated a treaty with the Indians to secure lands in the area, Americans demanded mineral rights that would include the copper boulder. The United States won, despite the fact that the Ontonagon boulder was considered sacred to the Indians. Somehow, the boulder became an obsession for a Detroit hardware store owner. Julius Eldred had read Schoolcraft's report on copper in Michigan, and caught copper fever. He was determined to own it. When Eldred arrived in Ontonagon in 1841, he bought the boulder for \$150 from Chief Okondokon, whose tribe resided at the mouth of the river. Eldred thought the Indians still owned the boulder and Okondokon apparently was happy to indulge his delusion. Eldred returned to Detroit before traveling again to the Upper Peninsula in 1843, ready to set his plan in motion. Upon his return, Eldred discovered that his party was one of several that had arrived in Copper Country that

summer to stake its claim. When he arrived at the boulder with approximately 20 men and moving equipment, Eldred found the boulder guarded by a larger group of men who had secured a permit from the U.S. War Department. The group claimed ownership of the boulder. However, Eldred was determined.

He negotiated to buy the 3,700-pound copper rock again. This time he paid \$1,365.

Eldred's men, with a specially constructed cart, rope, and pulleys, inched the rock through the wilderness. Railroad track was laid and the rock pushed forward. The track was then pulled up and hauled in front of the boulder to be laid again. But by the time the boulder was out of the wilderness, Eldred received some bad news – ownership of the rock now was claimed by the federal government. He met a military official who had orders to confiscate the rock. Eldred was furious and dumbfounded. He put great effort and expense into the project and had nothing to show for it.

Eventually, the military officials agreed that the \$700 the War Department had agreed to pay for the rock's removal from the wilderness was not fair compensation and Eldred should be allowed to take the rock to Detroit. Eldred arrived in Detroit with the natural curiosity on Oct. 11, 1843. A tent was set up on Jefferson Avenue where Eldred charged gawkers 25 cents for a peak at his massive chunk of copper. Still, many people believed the boulder belonged in Washington D.C. as a national exhibit. Orders finally came from the U.S. District Attorney. The boulder was confiscated by soldiers and

taken to Washington. Eldred followed the boulder to Washington and continued his fight.

After three years of negotiations, Congress authorized a settlement. The government paid Eldred and his sons \$5, 664.98 for their trouble.

The boulder remains at the Smithsonian Institution, although it is not currently on display. In the 1990's, the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community petitioned the federal government to have the boulder returned to the Upper Peninsula on the grounds that it is a sacred object to the tribe. The request was denied.