If the Petoskey stone could talk, it would tell the story of a shallow, sunny sea that once covered what now is Michigan and teemed with thousands, perhaps millions, of coral colonies.

"It was like the Great Barrier Reef," said Steve Wilson, a state geologist, comparing the little-known extinct reef to Australia's famous one.

"I don't know how long it stretched, but these critters — fossil corals — are everywhere. They're in Michigan, Ontario, Ohio, Iowa, Arizona, Alaska."

One of the sea's most successful residents was Hexagonaria, a genus, or group, of corals that lived about 350 million years ago. It is the remains of these creatures that are imprinted on the Petoskey stone, which might better have been named the state invertebrate fossil because that's what it is. (The new state fossil, the mastodon, was a vertebrate, or animal with a backbone.)

In the early part of its life, "Hexagonaria looked like a little jellyfish," said Wilson.

"These little buggers were floating anywhere they could and attaching to anything hard that they could to continue the growth of the coral."

Once they had gripped something hard, such as a rock, they grew upwards, building little tubes as they ascended. "They were always migrating up the tube and living in a calyx, or little cup, at the top," said Wilson.

At intervals, the corals budded, or divided, creating new animals that grew in the same way. Occasionally, the colony entered a sexual phase, producing new floaters that set off to start new colonies.

"Their strength was in being able to link themselves together," said Wilson. "They started as one and divided, like branches on a tree."

The Yak had always wanted to find a Petoskey stone — what Michigander doesn't? But he had never had any luck because he didn't know exactly what to look for. So in mid-April, he met Wilson in Charlevoix, on Lake Michigan, which is prime marine fossil territory.

Wilson took him to a nearby quarry, where he found more Petoskey stones — rocks, really — than he could carry, and later to Fishermans Island State Park, where he found a half-dozen small specimens on the beach.

"This is kind of like the rearing ground for Petoskey stones," Wilson said of the Cemex quarry, where limestone — and any imbedded Petoskey stones — is mined, crushed and made into cement. "This is where they lived, sort of — and they can be incredibly large."

Quarry manager Mike Mayse has three at home the size of bushel baskets, "but that's an incredible size," he said.

"Their strength was in being able to link themselves together," said Wilson. "They started as one and divided, like branches on a tree."

The Yak scours the Lake Michigan beach for Petoskey stones — and found a half-dozen in a half-hour!