Geology professor Meg Harris of Onondaga Community College likes to take her students to Jonesville Quarry, above, and to the creekbeds of Skaneateles, Pompey and Pratt's Falls.

**Pratt's Falls Reveals Prehistoric Secrets**

An OCC professor discovers a 245-million-year-old insect trapped in a fossil.

By SUE WEIBEAHL
The Post-Standard

OCC Professor Meg Harris spent hours chipping away at the limestone rock ledge. Wearing sturdy leather gloves and safety glasses, she and three of her geology students were ankle-deep in mud, shivering in the cold spring air. They used crowbars and hammers to loosen the 2- by 3-foot boulder that would make her famous.

Harris' discovery of a 245-million-year-old trilobite at Pratt's Falls has not only put that Onondaga County park on the map, but also Harris in the dictionary. The new species of insect fossil has been christened the "Kennacyprphaeus Harrisiae" and will now be listed in geology journals and museums around the world.

"It would have been nice to name it after the whole geology club at the college, instead of just me," Harris said, "but it is pretty neat. I was excited."

Harris has been digging through rocks and collecting fossils since she was a toddler. Although her travels have taken her to a number of remote places around the country and world, she said it's fitting the find that made her a star came practically from her own backyard.

A Syracuse native, Harris now lives in Cazenovia and regularly explores the Central New York area for evidence of life eons ago.

"This is one of the best areas for geologists because it used to be covered by a shallow ocean," Harris said. So many rock layers are exposed, it's fairly easy to

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Geology Becomes Treasure Hunt

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trace history, she said.

Harris has taught geology at Onondaga Community College for 10 years and regularly takes her students out on local digs. Some of her favorite spots include the Jamesville quarry, creek beds in Skaneateles and Pompey and Pratt’s Falls.

She was reluctant to divulge the exact location of this find because she didn’t want hundreds of people converging on the area and making it commercial.

“We have some fossils all over Central New York that are rare in other parts of the country,” Harris said. “People in California and Chicago don’t have the same layers we do and they pay for samples to study. I would hate to see people thinking they could get rich from something like this. It’s not the type of thing you do for the money.”

The rare fossil she unearthed is sort of an ancient cross between a horseshoe crab and a saw bug, an insect found near lumber that curls up in a ball when threatened.

The trilobite was an insect with jointed legs and an external skeleton that lived on the ocean bottom and ate mud. As it grew, it would molt and leave behind pieces of legs, tails and thorax. The trilobites ranged in size from 1 to 5 inches long and lived millions of years before dinosaurs roamed the earth. Harris’ species has a jagged fringe along the bottom that distinguishes it from other trilobites.

Geologists believe those marine animals became extinct at the end of the Paleozoic era and meteor cycles may have contributed to the massive climate changes that caused them to die off.

Her samples have included dozens of trilobite heads and tails — the best of them are now at the Museum of Natural History in New York City. She and her students are now searching for intact thoraxes, or mid-sections of the insects.

“We go out with rock hammers and eye protectors, and I think they’ve always enjoyed getting outside and learning about how things got the way they are, but now, it’s kind of like a treasure hunt,” she said. “There aren’t very many of these, so it’s a real challenge trying to find them.”

They’ve searched along roadsides, in gravel pits, near lakes and streams and throughout county parks. Each fossil they find, no matter how common, is always a thrill, she said.

“It’s evidence of an ancient life — a clue of what used to be here,” she said.

Fossils are typically formed when the creature dies and its body fills with mud. The skeleton or shell disintegrates and creates a mold. The mud then hardens and turns to rock, forever preserving the life form.

Although Harris shrugs off all the hoopla, her colleagues are enjoying the stir her discovery has created.

“This is a major contribution to the store of knowledge of the world, and we’re just very excited that it came from one of our faculty members,” OCC President Neal Raisman said.

Harris’ discovery was recently reported in a bulletin of the American Museum of Natural History. She continues to look for other examples of the new species and turn them in.

“There’s no use being piggy about it and keeping them — what can I do with them? The best thing is to publish what’s found to disseminate that to the widest audience,” Harris said. “It’s something everyone can learn from.”