Upper Peninsula mine keeps tradition alive

GREENLAND, Mich.

Wearing a protective hat and steel-toed boots, Jim Hird circled a metal detector along a heaping pile of rock.

He eyed the smoky-gray load for unusual colors or jagged shapes.

"Mineral collecting is like gambling," Hird said. "You always try to hit it big and find that big, valuable piece. It's pure luck."

Hird, a 1968 Michigan Technological University alumnus, recently returned to the Copper Country from his home in Thorpe, W.Va., to dig for minerals at the Caledonia Mine in Greenland.

Caledonia is the Upper Peninsula's last operating underground mineral mine.

Richard Whiteman, who studied geology at Michigan Tech, purchased the mineral rights from the defunct Copper Range Co. He opened the No. 4 Caledonia adit - a horizontal passage in the mine - in 1985 to hunt for mineral specimens.

Whiteman hired two engineers and started his own company, Red Metal Explorations Inc. He works full-time in the mine, drilling and blasting rock, a method similar to that used by miners in the 1860s.

"Underground mining is a thing of the past," he told The Daily Mining Gazette of Houghton. "I think it's important to open this up for educational opportunities."

That's why Chris and Karen Albert, of Burlington, Wis., brought their three children to the mine site last week. Their 8-year-old daughter, Alena, sifted through a mound of rocks and uncovered a bucket full of minerals, including two slabs of sheet copper.

"We wanted to give the kids a chance to learn about minerals hands-on versus using a textbook," Karen Albert said. "We're using this as a schooling experience."

Whiteman began hosting private tours for science teachers, tour groups, students, professional mineral collectors and even bat lovers. He codeveloped a Red Metal Retreat, and also opens his mine to the Teachers' Earth Science Institute and the annual Keweenaw Week tour.

Sara Littau, of Charlotte, N.C., began collecting rocks and minerals 40 years ago. She visited Caledonia this week to hunt for new treasures.

"This is one of the few places in the country to find such a mineral collection," Littau said. "We're seeing bits and pieces of the mining industry."

The Caledonia Mining Co. boomed from 1862 to 1867.

"There's a lot of copper still down here," Whiteman said. "But it's not economical these days to get it out. By doing this, I'm not getting rich."