

The Picture Rock of Crooked Lake

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WHAT THE HIEROGLYPHS on ancient Pharaohs' tombs are to Egyptians, what the carvings and symbols on Maya and Aztec temples are to Mexicans, the Indian picture rocks on border waters are to Minnesotans. They are bold, sheer cliffs on which aborigines have painted or carved, high above water usually, the figures of animals, birds, and men, as well as other representations. There is a picture rock on Lac la Croix, famous for its bright colors and accessibility; another on Hegman Lake in Superior National Forest; and one on Darkey Lake in Quetico Provincial Park. Several others could be mentioned.

The most famous of these cliffs is the Picture Rock of Crooked Lake, a narrow, tortuous body of water between Basswood Lake and Lac la Croix. Its renown is due not only to its painted hieroglyphics, but, more especially, to its history.

The first explorer to report this rock was also one of the most explicit in his account of it. This was Sir Alexander Mackenzie, whose trip to the Arctic Ocean in 1789 resulted in the naming after him of one of North America's greatest rivers. In 1801, after a second trip, this time across the continent to the Pacific, he published an account of his two expeditions. It is in this book that one reads a description of the Picture Rock of Crooked Lake: "Then succeeds the portage of La Croche. . . . Within three miles of the last Portage is a remarkable rock, with a smooth face, but split and cracked in different parts, which hang over the water. Into one of its horizontal chasms a great number of arrows have been shot, which is said to have been done by a war party of the Nadowasis or Sieux, who had done much mischief in this country, and left these weapons as a warning to the Chebois or natives, that, notwithstanding its lakes, rivers, and rocks, it was not inaccessible to their enemies."

It will be noticed that Mackenzie does not even mention the

paintings on the rock, which today, at low water, are just above the reach of a man standing in a boat or canoe at the foot of the ledge. They represent a number of animals of the region, including some that are practically extinct, like the elk. There are also figures of canoes with canoemen, loons, pelicans, suns, moons, horned creatures, and some illegible symbols. The pigment is of a brick red color, and many have been the theories regarding its origin. As close at hand are two lakes both of which bear the name that is translated "vermilion"—that is the Indians' paint or pigment—it is fairly safe to assume that it was the red ocher found everywhere in the vicinity of the Minnesota iron ranges which was used for the pictographs. Indeed, both the pigment and the binder—sturgeon oil—were close at hand. A traveler of 1823 along the boundary waters, Major Joseph Delafield, states specifically in his diary that sturgeon oil was used by the natives in preparing their paint.

If we would read these "books" or "newspapers" of the Indians, we must get native assistance. Fortunately, an educated Indian missionary, George Copway, published a book in the middle of the nineteenth century giving an account of the picture writing of his tribe, the Chippewa. It is called *Traditional History and Characteristic Sketches of the Ojibwa Nation*. In it he shows and interprets many of the hieroglyphics: a circle with a dot in the center, which signifies "spirit"; a plain, empty rectangle, meaning "great"; the human foot, indicating "passed"; the human hand, telling that some feat has been "done" or "accomplished"; an empty circle meaning "life"; and a black one showing "death." With the aid of half-breed relatives, Henry R. Schoolcraft, the explorer of the source of the Mississippi River, has even interpreted whole stories told on Lake Superior rocks by Indian paintings. One such story relates that a war party had invoked successfully the aid of the leader's totem and clan, and in addition the gods or spirits of animals and birds—"Mong," the loon, signifying the power of foretelling the weather; "Mooz," the moose, representing wariness; horned serpents, depicting swiftness and power over life; and "Mukwah," the black bear, who stood for strength and sagacity. In all likelihood a similar, triumphant war party wrote its paean on the Crooked Lake rock,

where it can still be seen and read by those who understand such things.

Of all the early travelers who have recorded their impressions of the Picture Rock of Crooked Lake, only one has been found who mentions the pictographs. All the others are content to tell merely the story of the arrows. In fact, if Major Delafield in 1823 had not mentioned the paintings, we should wonder whether the hieroglyphs had not been produced later than the printed accounts of travelers. Delafield was the American agent under the provisions of the Treaty of Ghent for ending the boundary dispute over the line between British and American territory in North America, a controversy that began in 1783 and ended in 1842 with the Webster-Ashburton Treaty. He passed up the old Grand Portage canoe trail to Lac la Croix in 1823, nearly a quarter of a century after fur traders ceased to use that route. When Fort William replaced Grand Portage as the inland headquarters of the North West Company about 1802, the old route up the Pigeon River to Lac la Croix was generally abandoned for another, which started at the mouth of the Kaministiquia River on Lake Superior and joined the old route at Lac la Croix. It is almost useless, therefore, to try to find accounts of the Crooked Lake rock, which is on the old trail, after the first years of the nineteenth century. The boundary dispute, however, caused several men of science to explore the Grand Portage route in 1823, notably Delafield, Dr. John Bigsby, the secretary of the British section of the boundary commission, and David Thompson, long the renowned cartographer of the North West Company. All of these men have written of the Picture Rock on Crooked Lake.

Delafield's account is one of the fullest and most interesting: "A narrow strait with high granitic ridges on the sides and of deep water leads us to the Crooked Lake. In this strait, and on the left side just before emerging into the lake is a high perpendicular granite cliff rendered famous by the circumstance of its having in a fissure of the rock between 20 & 30 feet from the water a number of arrows, said to have been shot there by a war party of the Sioux when on an excursion against the Sauters or Chippewas. The party had advanced thus far and, not finding an enemy, shot their arrows

in the fissure as well to shew that they had been there, as to convince them of their deadly aim. The fissure presents an opening of two inches, and there may be seen still the feather ends of about twenty arrows driven nearly to the end. The cliff is about 100 feet high and of red granite containing masses of green stone, singularly distributed in distinct patches, giving the whole a compound character, but not sufficiently so to call it otherwise than granite. Took a fragment of the rock, as somebody, I noticed, had done before me. The traveller has left his mark on this rock in various ways; some by name & some by date & some by strange device." We can only wish that the major had copied all the names, dates, and strange devices that he saw so clearly in 1823 and that have all vanished now except the Indians' red paintings.

Thompson noted the Picture Rock as early as 1797, for in his diary of that year he tells of coming to "Arrows stick" in a Rock on the left" of Crooked Lake as he journeyed westward. He also dates the reputed visit of the Sioux to the rock at about 1730. If he is correct, the Sioux war party may conceivably have been the one that killed the son of the Sieur de la Vérendrye in 1736, five years after he ordered the building of Fort St. Pierre at the western end of Rainy Lake, and four years after he built Fort St. Charles on the Northwest Angle of Lake of the Woods.

From these references to famous travelers it will be deduced by even the most casual reader that the Picture Rock looked down on a busy canoe thoroughfare from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century. The fur trade of the West flourished from La Vérendrye's day till settlements encroached on the Indians' hunting grounds in the nineteenth century. As early as the late 1680's it is known that Frenchmen traveled the canoe route—the voyageur's highway—from Lake Superior to Lake Winnipeg, which passed by the foot of the Picture Rock of Crooked Lake. After La Vérendrye's day that route was a very busy highway even in winter, for there was some passing of express dog teams carrying the winter mail over the same lakes and streams, as well as much snowshoeing on the route in the ordinary course of winter trading.

The younger Alexander Henry reveals the bustle of travel and

excitement in his diary. On July 28, 1800, for example, he wrote thus: "We proceeded . . . to Lac la Croche. At the Rock in Arrows we met nine canoes loaded with Athabasca packs." Nine canoes meant at least fifty men. Up to that point, in his week out from Grand Portage, he had met or passed "many canoes" on the New Portage near Rose Lake, "some canoes" near Rose Lake, "Three canoes from Rainy Lake" in the east end of Basswood Lake, "four more canoes from Rainy Lake . . . and . . . a light canoe" farther west in the same lake, and "several canoes" that "overtook and passed me" in the same body of water. Thus it can be seen what a busy summer anyone camped on the Picture Rock that year of 1800 would have had keeping track of all the canoes, traders, and voyageurs that passed below him.

There were even maps to guide the canoe traveler. The writer has in her possession one such guide, without date or author, but reputedly and obviously drawn about 1818. Entitled merely "Canada and Nova Scotia," it shows the northeastern United States and the upper Midwest, with adjacent Canadian territory up to the southern half or so of Hudson Bay. On this map, clearly intended for the use of canoe travelers to the West, there is an interesting reference to the Picture Rock of Crooked Lake. The map is colored and shows the Great Lakes edged in a vivid green. The chief portages and lakes of the voyageur's highway are outlined in the same bright color. Basswood Lake is mentioned as "White Wood Lake and Portage." Next, as one travels westward, come "Flat Rocks" on one side of a lake and "Crooked L. and Cliffs in the Crevasses of which a quantity of Arrows are Stuck" on the other.

Dr. Bigsby, the genial English doctor, geologist, and secretary of the English boundary party of 1823, comments on the beautiful colors of the Picture Rock: "Next came to a narrow of still water, the entrance in fact of Lake Croche . . . about twenty miles long. This narrow is walled in by high precipices of shattered granite, beautifully striped downwards by broad bands of white, yellow, red, green, and black stains (vegetable). Until lately the arrows shot by the Sioux, during a conflict at this spot, might be seen, sticking in the clefts of the rock."

The men of the two national boundary surveys of 1823 were friendly and co-operative with one another, despite the dispute over the line between Canada and the United States. Their attitude was prophetic of what was to come. In 1842 the Webster-Ashburton treaty settled the dispute and placed the line where it is today. In Crooked Lake it runs through the narrows at the base of Picture Rock. The treaty stipulates that "all the water communications and all the usual portages along the line from Lake Superior to the Lake of the Woods, and also Grand Portage . . . shall be free and open to the use of the citizens and subjects of both countries." In 1909 another treaty between Great Britain and the United States established a commission—the International Joint Commission—which has jurisdiction over all cases involving boundary waters or rivers crossing the boundary; and it is also given the power to settle any matter of any nature that the governments of the two countries may agree to refer to it.

In 1909 the Superior National Forest was created by Congress. One of the largest forests in the United States, it stretches along the border line some hundred and eighty miles westward from Lake Superior. On the opposite side of the boundary extends a similar Canadian public area of lakes, forests, and magnificent wilderness called Quetico Provincial Park. What an opportunity for another display of leadership toward peace and international co-operation! This joint playground, of which the Picture Rock has been such a unique symbol for generations, is known the continent over as *the* canoe country. May it long endure as such, revealing to a world too full of national hatreds, suspicions, and jealousies how neighbors can work and *play* together!

Mr. Francis Lee Jaques' beautiful canvas, painted for permanent preservation by the Minnesota Historical Society at the behest of a donor who has likewise made possible its reproduction herewith in all its colored magnificence, reveals the strong contours of the ledge, its colors, and its exquisite lichens. Some of the pictographs are still plain enough to be photographed. But the red-capped voyageur has gone. Only through the genius of artists like Mr. Jaques can we recapture the colorful scenes of the eighteenth century, when

French-Canadian voyageurs in canoes with brightly painted prows and red paddles in their brawny grip were silhouetted against the rock as they dashed by at top speed to some lilting canoe song; or as they relaxed from their arduous toil for a "spell" with their clay pipes, their bright sash ends resting on heavy "pieces" of fur trade merchandise while their blue eyes beneath raven locks studied the rock for the meaning of the paintings or scrutinized its clefts in search of feathered arrows left by the Sioux war party. Then, their "pipe" ended, they grasped their long red blades, bent to their task again, and with the gaiety that endeared them to all travelers and employers, they broke out into an old Loire chanson, perhaps the one they loved best in all their extensive repertoire:

A la clai-re fon-tai-ne M'en al-lant pro-me-ner,
J'ai trou-vé l'eau si bel-le Que je m'y suis bai-gné.
Lui ya long-temps que je t'aime, Jamais je ne t'oublierat.



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