Portsmouth Indian Head Rock: A Love Story
By Todd Book

A long time ago in a land not so far away there was a comely sandstone rock that majestically sat overlooking the Ohio River on top of a hill in what is now Kentucky. The eight-ton boulder was about 5 feet tall, 8 feet long, and 3 feet wide. Like most rocks it was inquisitive and adventurous, and it longed to travel to the beautiful North Shore of the river.

One warm spring day about 12,000 years ago, after a long cold spell, when the ground thawed and started to give way, the rock seized the moment and began tumbling down the hill sure it could roll all the way over to the North Shore of the River. It started out slow, but about 500 feet down the hill it startled a wooly mammoth, as it roared past. As it hit the shore it was really busting butt.

The rock was sure it could jump right over that big river when by luck it hit a slight ramp at the river’s edge and went soaring into the air. But alas, just like Evel Knievel’s ill-fated Snake River jump several millennia later the poor rock only made it about 40 feet before the law of gravity kicked in and the big boulder did a giant belly flop right in the river.

Slowly it oscillated down until it hit bottom in about 10 feet of water. As you may expect, the rock was bummed. It so wanted to get to the North Shore. For several years its tears added to the river’s water level.

But never fear, this rock’s heroic journey wasn’t over. It was just beginning. You know those Greek tragedies where the Gods just keep messing with lowly mortals; so was the rock’s life for the next 10,000 years. You see, the Ohio River would rise and
fall dramatically in pre-dam days. So about every decade the river would get real low and a little bit of that rock would pop out of the water and take a look around. It would always look toward the North and the Promised Land it so wanted to get to.

This continued until one day the rock was able to take a look topside and saw people floating around in hollowed out wooden canoes. These reddish colored people didn’t speak English so the rock couldn’t understand them and they were too busy surviving to worry with an old rock.

Soon thereafter, (relative to a rock’s lifetime) the rock was taking a look and saw some different people on that North Shore. And it was like Fourth of July with all the sparklers you can light, love at first sight. Those people loved that rock and that rock loved them right back. The people came over straight away in their boats and gazed on that rock and they coveted it. Not to take it, but they wanted to get to know it better and make it their own.

They started scratching their initials and names on the rock. It hurt the rock a little but it was so happy to get some attention from the good people on the North Shore that it didn’t mind. In fact, one day in the early 1800s when the water was really low and more than half of that rock was showing off its beauty to those on the North Shore, someone came over and carved a Charlie Brown-looking face on the rock. Someone else carved a log cabin. Although the rock was still in the river it felt loved.

It didn’t take long for that rock to get a name and become famous. It got its name when the people started calling it Portsmouth Indian Head Rock because the people on the North Shore loved the rock
and named it for their settlement. They also called it Indian Head because some weren’t aware that little Johnny Book had made the face a few decades before, not the Native Americans.

The famous part comes in 1848, when two renowned archeologists Squier & Davis write their book, *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley*. These archeologists wrote about all the ancient Indian sites of interest in the Ohio & Mississippi River Valley. They actually visited Portsmouth, Ohio, to see the Portsmouth Indian Head Rock, but unfortunately the river was up and the rock could not be seen. But Squier & Davis realizing that *eyewitness accounts* are always accurate talked to the Portsmouthians who described the Rock and face as a “Colossal human head cut in outline upon the vertical face of a large rock extending into the river. It is always under water, except when the river is at its very lowest stages, and is not exposed more often than once in four or five years.”

Let me tell you, the description of a colossal human head got folks’ attention. In fact, a Dr. Dickinson - who had to be a relative of P.T. Barnum - heard about this Rock and depicted it in 1850, in one of his traveling panoramas. As you know a panorama is a large canvas scroll with various pictures and scenes painted on it. A scene would be shown and a narrator would tell about the picture and educate the audience then move onto the next painting on the scroll. In a time before TV and movies it was the hottest thing going. Well, Dr. Dickenson depicted the Indian Head Rock as a giant sculpted stone bust sticking up out of the water, kind of like an Easter Island Head sticking out of the Ohio River.
These two descriptions made their way around the country and as you may expect the next time the river got low lots of folks wanted to be in Portsmouth. It was common for thousands of people to look at the rock, but rarely would the water get so low as to see the face. These intermittent sightings of the rock went on throughout the 1800s as more names and initials were added to the rock.

The rock had almost resigned itself to never make it to the North Shore when in the early 1900s there was a development. The river was going to be dammed and the water would never get low enough for the rock to be seen. At first the rock was distraught and thought it would never see the North Shore again, but it was soon delighted when in 1908, it was decided that before the dams were built the rock would be retrieved from the river and placed in a park in Portsmouth. Nirvana was within reach. For some unknown reason however, the rock was never retrieved and the river was dammed. By 1920 the rock was all but forgotten by most people of Portsmouth.

The rock gods were not finished with this rock yet though. In 1920, a down river dam was damaged and the water level dramatically dropped, exposing the rock. Henry Bannon, a local historian and attorney from the North Shore had heard stories of this rock. Henry and his brother went out to see the rock but the water was still too high to see the face. Ohio ingenuity kicked in, and while one camera toting Bannon brother stood in the water the other circled the rock in the motorized boat creating a wake that allowed the face to be seen and photographed. Quickly, the dam was repaired and the rock sadly sank into oblivion. Henry Bannon wrote in his local
history book that “It was not at all probable that the Indian Head, nor the rock upon which it is cut, will ever be seen again.” And so it was from 1920 until the beginning of the 21st Century. Most everyone had completely forgotten about the rock and the rock had given up hope of ever reaching the Shangrila of Ohio.

Enter the rock’s superhero – Steve Shaffer. As a young Southern Ohio boy in the 1960s Steve loved history and rock art (Petroglyphs as the fancy people call them). Through the Bannon local history book, young Steve learned of Portsmouth Indian Head Rock and decided that someday he would find this Rock Art Holy Grail.

Fast forward to 2000, a middle aged Steve Shaffer wants to fulfill one of his life goals and gaze upon the rock. Utilizing clues of the rocks’ location left in newspaper articles and the historic record he spent the summer of 2000 looking. No luck. He spent his free time the next summer scuba diving in the Ohio River—again nothing. To be fair, it is a big river. Luckily, Steve is a dedicated fellow, and has the patience of a rock. He spent the summer of 2002, looking and finally he found his long lost love. As you may expect the rock was overjoyed to see a North Shore person again.

Steve was so proud of his discovery that he told the world – Kentucky, Ohio and the Army Corp. of Engineers— but no one really seemed to get the full weight of the discovery. He talked about bringing the rock to the North Shore but without money and equipment it seemed impossible. But love is a powerful motivator and as the years went by the rock sent messages to Steve Shaffer not to forget about it
and to come save it from its watery grave and finally deliver it to the North Shore. In short, Steve's head was full of this rock.

In 2007, one of Steve's scuba diving buddies comes to see the rock and he falls head over heels too. The idea of picking up the rock had seemed impossible but the diving buddy is in the Navy and he advises that air can be used to pick up almost anything underwater. So on September 7, 2007, Steve lovingly strapped some lift barrels to the rock and, shazaam, up it floated.

Steve slowly pulled the rock toward the North Shore where a crowd of onlookers awaited its final arrival. 12,000 year later, the rock finally made it to its laughing place and everyone should have lived happily ever after.

But that's not what happened...

*The Rest of the Story*

The people of the North Shore were so happy to have their rock that they held festivals and wrote stories and poems about how important the rock was to them and their history. They even planned on putting the rock in a place of honor in the city. The rock was rapturous and the North Shore people were swooning over their long lost love.

Enter the jilted lover, Kentucky. Even though the rock had been liberated from Kentucky territory, everyone knew that the rock had wanted to come to the North Shore for over 12,000 years. Everyone also knew that all the carvings and initials on the rock were put there by the North Shore residents. The
absence of any Xs is overwhelming proof that no Kentuckians put their signatures on the rock. Nonetheless, several in Kentucky were really enraged and claimed their Southern pride had been besmirched because their rock had been stolen. Surprisingly, Kentucky didn’t seem to care about the rock’s discovery in 2002; now, however, they wanted their rock back. One Kentucky “statesman” suggested a raid on Portsmouth to take back the rock if necessary. He compared the loss to Kentucky as what Massachusetts would feel if the Plymouth Rock was taken.

Shockingly, the Kentuckians said they wanted the rock back so they could put it back in the river where it belongs. The North Shore residents ripped their clothes, ashened their faces, and gnashed their teeth at the thought of their beloved rock being put back into that abusive relationship with the Kentuckians. Criminal charges were filed by Kentucky (later dropped). A Federal Civil lawsuit was filed by Kentucky. It was clear the jilted Kentuckians really wanted to put this rock back in the river where it could be left, and forgotten for good.

In an attempt to find a truce, the North Shore residents suggested the rock be shared or even that periodic rock, paper, scissor battles be held between the states to determine temporary custody of the 8-ton beauty, but the Kentuckians would have none of it. While the court proceedings went on, the rock sat on old ties in the Portsmouth city garage, awaiting its fate. Would it be returned to its abusive relationship or be left to enjoy the rest of its days on the North Shore?

In the end, the rock’s dreams were shattered and it
was ordered that the rock return to Kentucky. The rock still awaits its removal to that awful land but it is savoring its final days on the North Shore where it is beloved and will be missed.

Through it all, the sad folks on the North Shore have learned quite a bit from the experience. For one, they have a better appreciation for Twain's maxim, "It is better to take what does not belong to you than to let it lie around neglected". And more importantly, the next time they will heed the advice, "You ought never to take anything that don't belong to you -- if you cannot carry it off."