

A Rock that refuses to be forgotten

ENTERTAINMENT

By T. Vincent Herman - PDT Contributor

Award winning documentarian and respected Instructor of Mass Communication at Morehead State University, Steven Middleton, screened his latest film at the Scioto County Welcome Center this past Saturday, and it was nothing less than interesting.

When describing his work to MSU paper, The Trail Blazer, Middleton states, "I think [my documentaries are] just an outpouring of what I'm interested in, which is kind of the strange and obscure, not really political or the stories that the national media looks on our region with."

This is an accurate summary of *Between The Rock And The Commonwealth* since I had never even heard of the rock or the "Battle Between Two States" before seeing this documentary.

With that in mind, it occurs to me that you may be a little lost as well. So, here is a brief history of the rock as it was presented to me before the screening of the film:

The rock is originally believed to have made it's way into the river as a result of a landslide. The first known known reference to the rock is in log kept by a local resident in 1849 who used it as a river gauge, which is one of two theorized purposes for the for the simplistic face carved into the lower portion of the rock.

Another story surfaced in 1908 notable county resident John Book having carved the face in the 1930s as a boy, but nobody seems to know the truth. The other being a marker for river pirates to find their buried loot.

An illustration of Indian Head Rock appeared in *The Portsmouth Blade* depicting a variety of names, initials and crude drawing of a house. Some of the names have been identified as prominent Portsmouth names or families, e.g. F. Kinney, C. Molster, R.M. Lloyd and more.

The rock had always drawn visitors over the decades but, in 1908, the *Daily Times* reported over 1,000 people visited the rock in late September and 1,500 visitors in early October. This inspired Henry A. Lorberg to make a proposal to have the rock removed and put on display in York Park which sadly failed.

In 1917, The Ohio Lock and Dam No. 31 was completed and permanently raised the water level and submerging the rock, except for in 1920 when the dam was damaged by a steamboat, exposing the rock for the first and final time until 2007. During this time in 1920, Henry T. Bannon took a boat out to the rock and, with a well laid plan and perfect timing, was able to take the first clear photograph of the unsubmerged Indian Head. Years later he wrote about the rock in his book "Stories Old and Often Told" and stated that it may be the last time the rock will every be seen again. That statement and the book itself imprinted on a 12 year old Steve Shaffer and would stay with him all his life until 2007 when Shaffer and his crew successfully removed the rock from the river after several years of

searching. This sparked a three year legal battle between Ohio and Kentucky that almost lead to the Supreme Court. The rock now resides in a county garage in Greenup, Ky., where it has sat since 2010 surrounded by tires and caked in dust and cobwebs.

The documentary itself focuses largely on the removal of the rock and the three years prior. While it does seem to get distracted at times by re-relaying information it's already covered in what I assume is an attempt to provide filler for padding out the runtime, it paces it's self well enough and tells a story of what Randy Yohe, a reporter for WOWK Channel 13 News, said in the film was "one of the strangest stories I ever did."

And strange it was. So strange that, while many were very serious about the legality of bringing to Ohio the rock from the clearly designated Kentucky side of the amusingly titled (in this case anyways) Ohio River, it didn't go without it's light-hearted side as many recognized just how ridiculous the disagreement was. This is what gives the movie a diversity in tone and adds it's greatest entertainment credit — humor. Civil War reenactors guarded it while in Portsmouth storage, it was proposed, possibly jokingly, that they settle it in a game of Rock, Paper, Scissors at the center of the bridge and, my personal favorite, the Steve Hayes April Fools broadcast in 2008 that said a Kentucky militia had come and stolen the rock and had even planted callers such as Randy Yohe, Carl Smith and Ohio Rep. Todd Book, who had fought to keep Indian Head Rock in Ohio.

Any other criticisms I have about *Between The Rock and The Commonwealth* are minor at best such as obviously overused shots and an odd soundtrack change for bluegrass to soft jazz in the middle, which eventually switches back to bluegrass. I'm glad I had the opportunity to see this documentary and thankful to it for teaching me more about the rich history of a place I've called home for 16 years.

What the future for the rock holds is unknown, but a plan to build a gazebo for displaying the rock in South Shore, Kentucky is being reviewed and, during the Q&A segment, Steve Shaffer said "The grants are in." One local woman suggested during this segment that Portsmouth should request to make a mold of Indian Head Rock to make a replica for display on this side of the river. While a good idea, it's doubtful that will be an option, however, Portsmouth is not at a total loss. Robert Morton, CEO of Portsmouth Murals Incorporated, was also in attendance and made the announcement afterwards that they are discussing using the center of the five open slots on the floodwall facing the river for a Indian Head Rock mural and it will be perfectly place to face when the rock once sat 16ft below the water. Despite it being mostly forgotten for almost 87 years, it seems this is a rock that refuses to let time forget.