

A Real Rock Star

By Mike James

Ashland Daily Independent

The Indian Head Rock's star power just keeps on growing.

A documentary on the bodacious boulder has been selected for inclusion in the 2017 River's Edge Film Festival, the longest running such festival in Kentucky.

Produced by Morehead State University instructor of mass communication Steven Middleton, the film traces the saga of the mammoth rock that rose briefly to national prominence after an Ohio historian wrestled it out of the Ohio River — an act that inadvertently launched a legal and political tussle between Ohio and Kentucky for its custody.

The festival, which starts today and continues until Sunday in Paducah, is an ideal venue for showing "Between the Rock and the Commonwealth," Middleton said. "It's the River's Edge festival. It's kind of poetic," he said.

The documentary has aired more than 50 times on KET-TV and more than 25 times on WOSU-TV, Middleton said, and showing it at the festival will bring it to the attention of serious filmmakers and film enthusiasts.

To Middleton, whether it wins any awards is secondary. "The honor is being selected."

The film tells a compelling story.

Indian Head Rock had lain dormant just above the surface of the river since time immemorial, and was known in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a picnic spot and resting place for swimmers.

Crude carvings on its surface were believed to be of native American origin. Some visitors inscribed initials in their own bid for immortality.

Construction of locks and dams in the 20th century raised the water level permanently and the rock disappeared permanently. But it was not forgotten.

In 2007, an Ohio historian named Steve Shaffer organized a team of divers and history buffs to find and remove the boulder from the river; he presented it to Portsmouth for display as a historical monument.

However, in his enthusiasm Shaffer neglected a basic historical imperative.

Removing artifacts from their original site obliterates clues future researchers might use to determine origin and purpose.

He also failed in legal due diligence. The state line between Kentucky and Ohio falls on the low water line on the Ohio side — and Kentucky officials were livid when they learned the stone had been snatched from the Commonwealth's waters.

Shaffer was charged with violating the state's antiquities act and for a while was in peril of facing time behind bars.

Politicians got into the act too. Kentucky lawmakers denounced Shaffer and his team; their Ohio counterparts sponsored resolutions of support for the historian and his expedition.

From there, the story assumes an almost comic quality: There was no documentation on the provenance of the carvings and in the end charges against Shaffer were dropped because prosecutors could not prove conclusively that the rock was the same one registered as an antiquity with the University of Kentucky.

The tug of war over a rock of debatable origin and archaeological value soon drew the attention of national media, including major broadcast networks, the New York Times and other prominent papers.

Viewers and readers from coast to coast chuckled over the antics of — so it seemed from the coverage — fractious yokels hurling threats and accusations across the river.

The legal challenges were eventually settled, with Kentucky clinching custody of the rock, which was moved unceremoniously to Greenup. It remains there to this day in the county garage.

Based on his correspondence, the film has gotten attention from a range of viewers, Middleton said. “A lot of people have written to me, from archaeology professors to night owls (who see it late at night),” he said.

Many of his correspondents ask him if they can see the rock.

While it is not on public display, Greenup County officials are willing to show it on request, Judge-Executive Bobby Carpenter said.

To do so, call Carpenter’s office at 473-6440 or county road superintendent Joe Taylor’s office at 473-5261, he said.

Showings at the festival include: 3 p.m. Friday at the Maiden Alley Cinema and 11 a.m. Saturday at the Market House Studio Theater.