EDITORIAL PAGE

NORTH COUNTRY NOTEBOOK FOR MAY 22 (WITH PHOTO)

JOHN HARRIGAN

Out in the Dartmouth College Grants, northeast of Errol, a big granite boulder rests on the east shore of the Swift Diamond River. You drive in to the information center buildings, take your left there, and about a mile up the road a trail leads down to the river.

And there you find the Hand on the Rock, one of the more captivating and enduring mysteries of a little-known territory that is very much a mystery itself.

Forty-two years ago, in 1960, I got my first look at the hand on the Rock when Colebrook eighth-grade teacher Marguerite Wiswell took four of us on a field trip out into the Magalloway country. One unforgettable stop was to inspect the hulk of the old log-booming lake steamer Diamond, hauled up for good on the shore of the Androscoggin.

Another was a stop at Sam Brungot’s cabin. Sam was the caretaker and unofficial historian at the College Grants camps. A character of the highest order, he had tales to tell about the old days of logging, and hauled a tub-thumper out from under his bunk to show us one way the loggers made music. A tub-thumper, for the musically challenged, is a broom handle propped against the bottom of a washtub, with a cord running through the tub’s bottom serving as the sounding string—a homemade bass violin.

Sam steered us down to one of the last active logging camps left in the entire region, where the cook and cookee were getting ready to cook supper for the hungry crews that would soon return after a hard day in the woods. The cook handed out cookies the size of dinner plates.

But it was the mysterious Hand on the Rock that really got our attention. We had no idea why we were being led down a steep trail to the river until someone in the group hopped onto a big round boulder and peeled back a thick mantle of moss. And there, neatly carved onto the top of the rock, was what looked to be a woman’s left hand, the inscription “WMDOW,” and a heart.

Clearly the inscription has been there for a long time, and clearly it had required a good deal of time to execute. Why would anyone go to so much trouble to create such a thing in such a remote, seldom-visited site? What did it mean?

Sam Brungot, of Scandinavian ancestry, was fond of telling visitors that researchers...
had found similar carvings on ancient gravestones in Norway and Sweden, dating back to pre-Columbus times. It was a short leap for Sam to begin hinting at Viking explorers somehow finding their way deep into the Diamond country.

Later on in life I often bumped into Bob Monahan, long the leader of the Dartmouth Outing Club and a man steeped in the outdoor lore and history of the College Grants. Bob, who could make up stories with the best of them, never could quite spin a yarn about the Hand on the Rock. He just didn’t have any answers.

About ten years ago, Herb Gifford of Colebrook, who was a legendary family doctor but also a dedicated historian, asked a couple of us to take him out to see the Hand on the Rock. He had heard of it but never seen it, and was intrigued.

Down the steep trail we went, clinging to a rope, and there was the carving, unchanged in the three decades since I’d last seen it. But again, there were no answers.

But the other day I was rummaging around my desk, and there was a picture of the rock we took on our field trip visit 42 years ago. It got me thinking again.

I called Dick Pinette, well-known Errol region historian and the author of a couple of local histories. “I was never able to find out much of anything about that rock either,” he said. “I’ve always wanted to know.”

So I unloaded my long-held theory on him, which is simply this. Back around the turn of the last century, when the big long-log drives were being run down the Swift and Dead Diamond rivers, it was not uncommon at all to lose men to log jams and drownings. Often, the marker for such a tragedy was the victim’s caulked boots, hung from the nearest tree. I well remember Pittsburg’s Andy Anderson showing me such a pair of rotting, ancient boots hanging from a limb on upper Indian Stream, saying that he had been told by the old-timers that a riverman had drowned there.

And what I think is that a worker on the log drive, known fondly in the trade as a river hog, was killed in an accident on one of the spring drives there on the raging Swift Diamond.

And someone loved William Dow, loved him very much, enough to carve a hand, a name and a heart on a rock in that lonely place where he died.

(John Harrigan’s address: Box 39, Colebrook, N.H. 03576. E-mail: <hooligan@ncia.net>)
EDITORIAL PAGE

NORTH COUNTRY NOTEBOOK FOR MAY 29, 2002

JOHN HARRIGAN

After writing last week's column about the Hand on the Rock in the Dartmouth College Grant, I wound up, in all places, at the Dartmouth College Grant. The occasion was a Coverts Program workshop and field trip, in which participants heard about how landowners can enhance habitat for all manner of wildlife and then got a close-up look at some work on the ground.

But during the interim between the column and the field trip I had a chance to do a bit more followup on the mystery of the Hand on the Rock. For readers who might have missed last week's column, the carving is on top of a boulder sitting on the east bank of the Swift Diamond river, and shows a woman's left hand pointing southwest, the letters "WMDOW," some nearly-indistinct Roman numerals, and a heart. It is ancient by New World standards, around a century and a half old.

During the five years I worked for the New Hampshire Sunday News, I got to know Bob Monahan as the keeper of the flame at Dartmouth College when it came to matters such as history and outdoor legend and lore. Bob, an enthusiastic outdoorsman, had a lot of stuff filed away in cabinets and a lot more stored in his head. I could call him up with just about any question and get an answer, or at least a lead to someone who had it.

But Bob's long gone now, and when I began asking around about whether anyone had ever written anything about the Hand on the Rock, nobody knew. I figured that if anyone would know about source material, Errol's Dick Pinette would. But he too had delved into the mystery of the carving a few years back, and hit a dead end.
Perhaps, I thought, Bob Monahan's son Dan kept some of his father's papers. So I went hunting for Dan, who held the unique position of town forester for the town of Concord, Mass., before his retirement and was said to be living in the Hanover area. No luck—dead end.

So I called the Dartmouth Library, got a pleasant woman named Bonnie, and asked if she'd ever heard anything about the Hand on the Rock. No, but on a whim she punched "William Dow" into the data base, and—presto—there appeared the name of William Dow, Dartmouth graduate, Class of 1861.

Now, my old theory—aired last week—was that William Dow might have been a river hog, a fraternal term among the men who worked the log drives during the days of the first big cuts in the mid-1800s, and had been killed by a log jam or just drowned on the drive, a fairly common occurrence, and that someone had loved him enough to have a memorial carved near the spot.
This is a nice theory but one impossible to prove, unless someone could delve into the old Brown Company records, or maybe George Van Dyke’s Connecticut Valley Lumber records, to see if some bean-counter bothered to record another death of another river hog when manpower was plentiful and cheap and life was cheaper.

Then too, the incident might have been worthy of a paragraph or two in the region’s weekly newspapers of the day, some of which might have survived. But without a sure date, the search would be daunting.

Now, however, I have a second theory, which has to do with 1861 graduate William Wallace Dow, who as it turned out did not become grist for the Civil War but became a minister, serving in Portsmouth until his death in 1911.

Perhaps William W. Dow went up into the Grants during his college years, for the Dartmouth Outing Club has been extant in one form or another for nearly all the College’s ownership of the land. Maybe he camped along the Swift, and fished its clear waters, and carried his love for the place all his life, and asked, near the end, that his ashes be carried up there for introduction into a holistic cycle any good minister could easily understand. And so perhaps the Hand on the Rock is not for some poor nearly forgotten river hog, but for a minister from far below where the rivers meet the sea.

On the way to the habitat demonstration sites, we passed the new trail to the Hand on the Rock, a gentler approach well signed, and I didn’t have time to scoot down to take a third look at the carving, but I did have time, later, to sneak off to a promontory known as Sam’s Lookout, a pretty spot with a lovely view up the Swift Diamond Valley to the northwest.

Longtime Dartmouth camp caretaker Sam Brungot, of Norwegian origins, was fond of explaining the Hand on the Rock as a marker left by Viking explorers, as proof that they had penetrated the continent’s interior. He would somehow manage to drag the Kensington Runestone into his tale, and it all sounded authentic enough, although just why a bunch of famished, tired Vikings would be dragging big boats up a stream that’s too shallow for a canoe is worth some speculation.

But Sam would probably be happy with the real story behind the carving and the life and death of William Dow if it ever emerges, because the true story is often even better than the fiction.

(John Harrigan’s address: Box 39, Colebrook, N.H. 03576. E-mail: <hooligan@ncia.net>)