



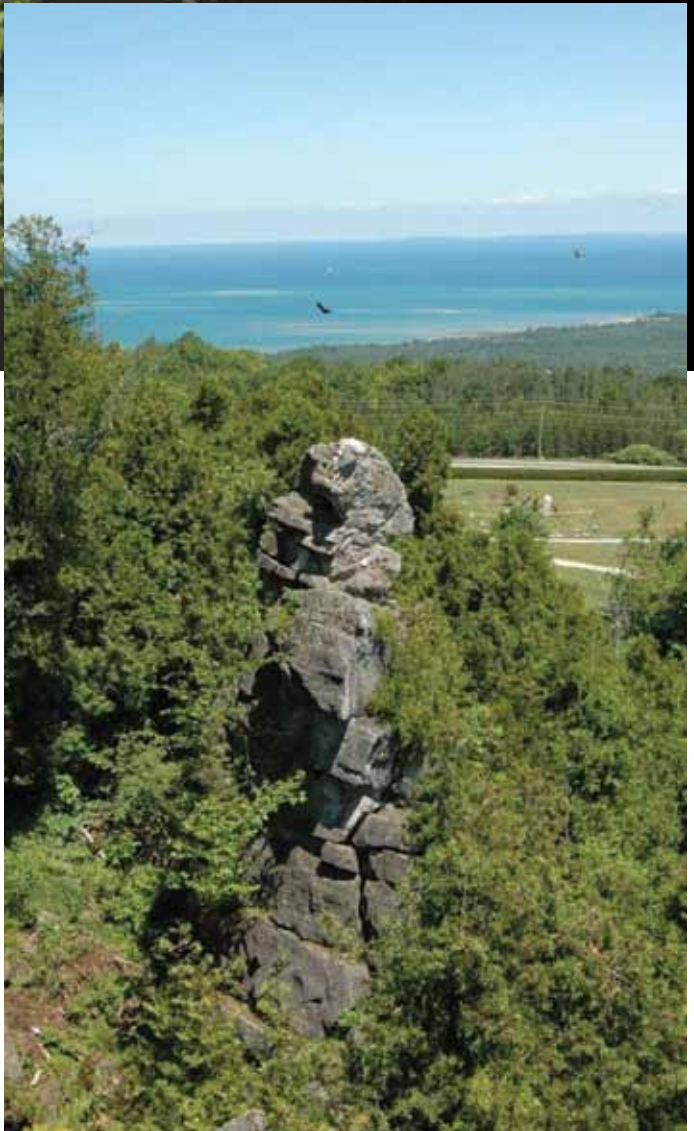
Mysteries of Ekarenniondi, “The Rock that Stands Out”

By Ken Haigh

Ekarenniondi or the Standing Rock had sacred meaning to the native people of the now-Collingwood area, up to their demise in the 1600s. PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS.



Standing Rock fascinated the native people of 400 years ago, as it does visitors today. PHOTO COURTESY SCENIC CAVES NATURE ADVENTURES.



One of the most mysterious landmarks on the Niagara Escarpment is a place that is almost forgotten today. It is a tall pillar of grey limestone called Ekarenniondi in Iroquoian, a name that means “the rock that stands out,” and it was once sacred to the First Nations people who lived in the southern Georgian Bay region. Today, it is found within the boundaries of Scenic Caves Nature Adventures.

To reach the standing rock, drive west from Collingwood and ascend a winding road which is paved and modern, but which has been here, in one form or another, for many centuries. At Scenic Caves, follow the well-marked trail to the top of the Escarpment. Descend a series of steep metal stairs into a confusing maze of fissures in the limestone, emerging at the base of Ekarenniondi. The view opens up to the east across Colling-

wood and Georgian Bay, toward the ancient home of the Huron people. Partially blocking the view is the pillar itself, which stands about 16 metres tall.

It’s easy to see why this place attracted the First Nations people of the area 400 years ago. It is hidden, gloomy and cool, the walls are damp and veiled with clumps of fern, and there are a number of dark passages leading back into the earth. It’s spooky down here, especially if you have the place to yourself.

Some people see faces and figures in the strange, 16-metre pillar of rock called Ekarenniondi. Here, vultures soar in the sky; Georgian Bay is in the distance. PHOTO COURTESY SCENIC CAVES NATURE ADVENTURES.



Descending steep stairs into fissures of the Escarpment leads to Standing Rock. PHOTO BY KEN HAIGH.



tunately, such a person exists. His name is Charles Garrad.

Charlie, as he's known to his friends, is an archaeologist who has conducted numerous digs in the Collingwood area, and who has probably done more than anyone else to reconstruct the history of the Petun people who once lived along the base of the Escarpment here. Charlie mentions another story collected by Brébeuf, the story of Oscotarach.

“On the same road,” Brébeuf wrote, “before arriving at the Village, one comes to a Cabin where lives one named Oscotarach, or ‘Pierce-head,’ who draws the brains out of the heads of the dead, and keeps them.” Despite his gruesome name, Oscotarach was a helpful deity, for, if he did not remove their memories, the dead would be tempted to linger in the land of the living and would become a nuisance. The Huron afterlife was no picnic, for life in the Village of Souls was much like life in the villages of the living, except that there, “day and night they do nothing but groan and complain.”

Interpretations

Charlie believes that the rock called Ekarenniondi and the deity called Oscotarach are one and the same. He even proposes that if you look hard enough at the pillar, and in the right light, you might see a figure: an old man, perhaps, or a standing bear, or a watchful owl, each an acceptable image of the deity. But what purpose did this pillar play in the religious life of the Petun, the Huron, and their Algonquin-speaking allies, the Odawa and Nipissing? Was it a ritual site? Or was it too sacred for ordinary mortals to approach? Or are these questions impossible to answer after all of these years?

“I would speculate that ordinary people avoided the place as too sacred,” Continued on page 22



Bird wing bones found near Standing Rock, were found *in situ*, or in their original place. Experts suggest the bird wing was used as a fan, probably for sacred shamanistic or ceremonial use. From the Charles Garrad collection. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE CRAIGLEITH HERITAGE DEPOT.

Charles Garrad holding part of a native pot with a scalloped lip, dated around 1600, found at an aboriginal village site close to Osler Bluff. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE CRAIGLEITH HERITAGE DEPOT.

The first mention of the standing rock in the historical record is found in 1636 in the writings of Jean de Brébeuf, a Jesuit missionary to the Huron. Brébeuf asked one of his parishioners where the Huron believed their souls went after death. The reply was that the souls of the dead went to “The Village of Souls” and that this village “was toward the Tobacco Nation [the Petun], that is to say, toward the West, eight leagues from us, and that some persons had seen them [the dead] as they were going; that the road they took was broad and well-beaten; that they passed near a rock called Ecarenniondi, which has often been found marked with the paint they use to smear their faces.”

There is no evidence of this paint, but, of course, Brébeuf’s account is now 375 years old. Any paint would have washed away long ago. A modern interpreter of Ekarenniondi might help. For-

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The view from Ekarenniondi or Standing Rock includes the land reaching beautiful Georgian Bay. PHOTO BY KEN HAIGH.

A view into the bowl of a remarkably well preserved carved coronet pipe. From the Charles Garrad collection.

The coronet pipe style, such as this one, was the most popular among the Petun. Since all smoking likely had religious significance, it could have been shamanistic, and probably for general ceremonial use. Experts speculate that all styles of pipes would have been smoked at ceremonies at Standing Rock. From the Charles Garrad collection. PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE CRAIGLEITH HERITAGE DEPOT.





Charlie explains, “but that shamans who specialized in out-of-body trances would frequent it. I also would speculate that propitiatory offerings were left there and sacred rituals conducted, because there are many Jesuit references to this being done at other sacred rocks. But ... it is impossible to answer these questions with certainty.”

Iroquois Conquest

Can we even be certain that this pillar is the one that Brébeuf described? It’s a fair question. Thirteen years after Brébeuf wrote his essay, the world he described would be brutally erased, as the invading Iroquois, the traditional enemy of the Huron, swept north from New

York State, massacring the Huron, the Petun and their Neutral allies and burning their villages. The survivors abandoned their land and scattered. Some went to Quebec. Others would head first west, then south, and their descendents would settle near Detroit, Kansas City and in Oklahoma where they would become the Wyandotte First Nation. In the next 350 years, the memories of their old lives would fade, including the exact location of Ekarenniondi.

So when, in the early part of the 20th century, there was a revival of interest in the Huron, and modern scholars tried to piece together their world through the surviving accounts of the Jesuits and the records of



This artifact, likely carved by a Huron artist in the 1600s, shows the face of a Jesuit missionary. Jean de Brébeuf is probably the best known Jesuit who worked to convert the Huron people to Christianity. From the Charles Garrad collection. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE CRAIGLEITH HERITAGE DEPOT.

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This clay bird effigy pipe in excellent condition, is similar to those found near Standing Rock. Pipes depicting birds are thought to have been used by shamans to smoke hallucinogenic mixtures in order to “get high” and undertake astral travel. From the Charles Garrad collection. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE CRAIGLEITH HERITAGE DEPOT.

French explorers like Champlain, one puzzle was the location of Ekarenniondi. Many locations were scouted, but this pillar at the Scenic Caves was selected as the most likely. Charlie concurs with that decision.

When asked if Native People are still interested in Ekarenniondi, he replies, “No, I don’t think such concepts are held among today’s First Nations

people. We have drummed it out of them, to our loss.”

If you stand by the pillar today, looking east, it’s still possible to imagine the world of the Petun and the Huron, a world of forests and fortified villages, a world that has vanished, but is remembered in places like Ekarenniondi. ■

Ken Haigh, author of Under the Holy Lake, lives in the Beaver Valley.