

Will the Sleeping Buffalo Rock be Able to Rest?

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Phillips County is full of Native American history from teepee rings to buffalo jumps. If it weren't for the buffalo, who became very sacred to these Native Americans, the tribes wouldn't have been able to survive in this vast, barren country. The Sleeping Buffalo rock, which is held in high reverence with these native people, is located just east of Malta at the entrance to the Sleeping Buffalo Resort. Controversy once surrounded the movement of this buffalo rock to this location from its original spot on the prairie.

The Sleeping Buffalo Rock, with its GPS coordinates of +48.46948, -107.54958 48 degrees 28'10"N, 107 degrees 32'59"W, is now located at the Junction of MT 243 and U.S. 2 (Landmark Hunter). It was posted in the National Register of Historic Places on May 17, 1996 as a ceremonial site (Landmark Hunter). There has been controversy about this sacred rock being moved to this site. As stated in the Phillips County News, tribal representatives from two reservations on either side of the Sleeping Buffalo Resort favored moving the Sleeping Buffalo rock back to its original location.

The Sleeping Buffalo rock was moved to the resort's entrance in 1967 after consulting with Indian spiritual leaders. About 30 years later a few Native Americans said they felt the sacred rock should not be involved as part of a commercial venture and should go back to its original resting site or as close to it as possible. This site was on privately-owned ground, though, which may have made it difficult for Indians who wanted to visit the site to worship the buffalo rock ("Native Americans Say Sacred Rocks Should Be Moved Back").

Sleeping Buffalo Resort owner, Roger Ereaux, hoped to work out a way to better protect the rock in its existing location, and also acknowledged that it served as a tourist attraction for the resort (Ereaux). But he agreed to abide by the wishes of the Indians on area reservations, since they questioned how sacred and spiritual things can co-exist with economics. Sacred

things were not meant to generate revenue (Klinko). Indians were starting to change spiritually and placing greater importance on old ways. Klinko expressed that the Native people felt that a lot of things were being done at their expense, and that they were kind of getting tired of being exploited. Roger Ereaux wanted to have the Native American's blessing or not have a part of it. The final outcome of the controversy was to let the buffalo rock stay, so the many elderly Indians could access it easily (Ereaux). All Indians would be able to worship the Sleeping Buffalo, since it wasn't relocated to its original site on private land. The Sleeping Buffalo rock rests at the entrance of the Resort. Though one never knows what the future will bring down the road (Ereaux).

So how did the Sleeping Buffalo rock come to be so revered by the Native Americans in Phillips County? Legend has it that a crudely carved likeness of a sleeping buffalo pre-dates the Indian tribes who lived in this area when the white men came ("The Stone Buffalo is Back on his Home Range"). These large, lichen covered boulders crowned a ridge on the east side of the road leading to Cree crossing and near the foot of Nelson Reservoir. The Gros Ventre, fearing the wrath of the strange gods of the conquered tribe, made sacrifices to the sleeping buffalo of feathers, choice meat, and pieces of their own flesh. Legend grew up about the stone buffalo among the Gros Ventre along with similar stories found among the Assiniboine. These legends reflect the reverence in which all tribes held the stone.

According to the Gros Ventre story, the Indians during a time when the world was young, became greedy and cruel. It was a time of plenty, when living was too easy for the people. Now they knew that the buffalo had been placed on earth for the purpose of providing food, shelter and all other necessities and that for these things he must be honored. They were obsessed with a lust for killing and slaughtered the buffalo by the thousands. Meat was left to the wolves and

coyotes, for their people were rich in meat and robes and had no need for more. They only cared to see their arrows strike quivering flesh and red blood gush forth upon the ground. Then there came a dream to a maiden of the tribe. In this dream the girl was told that unless the slaughter of the buffalo was stopped, the tribe and all others would hunger for many years for the taste of fat buffalo meat. The young woman went to the chief and told him of her dream. He laughed at her and continued with plans for a greater hunt than ever.

When the morning of the hunt dawned the young men appointed as scouts to locate the herds returned with word that there were no buffalo within a day's reach. The search widened and continued over a great distance for days and weeks and months. The supplies of dried meat became low, robes wore thin and teepees no longer kept out the wind, but still no buffalo were sighted.

Then one evening a scout came to the village with word that a small herd of buffalo had been seen near the Council Hill, four miles from what is now the Sleeping Buffalo Resort, at the crossing on the Milk River where the river turns to form the Big Bend. The most cunning hunters approached the place and saw quite plainly the herd of buffalo grazing on the slope of the hill. They waited until the animals had lain down and then crept closer for an attack. When the hunters were within arrow shot of the herd, they sprang up with a shout meaning to startle the buffalo to their feet so they could more surely be killed. But before their eyes a strange happening took place. The buffalo began to look less and less like living creatures and more like boulders scattered on the hillside. The frightened hunters went closer until they could touch what had been flesh but was now stone. The leader of the herd was there and the cows and calves, but all were stone.

The hunters returned to their village to report the strange happening. A council was called and it was remembered that a maiden of the tribe had dreamed a strange dream of the buffalo. She was brought before the chief medicine man and instructed to go to the place of the stone buffalo and fast there until her dream was made clear.

After three days and nights of fasting and prayer, the girl returned and told the people they had been punished for their cruelty and greediness and that henceforth, unless they killed only for the necessities of life, the buffalo and all other game would return no more to the hunting grounds. This was many generations ago and therefore the buffalo returned and became plentiful. But the people remembered the time of hunger and killed only for meat and for skins to make their lodges and robes ("The Stone Buffalo is Back on his Home Range").

The group of boulders, from which the Sleeping Buffalo rock was taken, might be said to resemble a herd of buffalo. This particular boulder was believed by the Indians to have been the leader of the herd. The unknown sculptor carved the ribs and neck of a buffalo bull. When white men first came to this country it was customary for all Indians, no matter what tribe, when passing the Sleeping Buffalo rock to leave sacrifices at the spot (Klinko) .

Native American tribes have carved petroglyphs on other sacred buffalo rocks in the county beside carvings found on the Sleeping Buffalo rock. These symbols include bird tracks, human feet, and hooved feet, and sometimes the rocks are used as directional markers. Some reported sites in and around Phillips County of these buffalo rocks with petroglyphs include Indian Lake Rock, 14 miles north of the Missouri River in the Larb Hills, the Henry Smith Site in the Malta area, Beaucop Site, Trafton Park, Cree Crossing Petroglyphs, and Tank Coulee 6 miles north of Indian Lake (Klinko).

The lands in and around Phillips County are full of Native American history. Even today, the buffalo, alive or stone, are considered very sacred. Much of the Native American Indian culture is trying to preserve their ancestral past along with protecting their history without commercializing it. Will there be future controversy or can the Sleeping Buffalo rest, for good?

Works Cited

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