

THE ORIGINAL TABLE ROCK

Personal Recollections
of
Ann Dobson Wert John Randolph Allen
Lydia Giddings Holmes Gabriel Joseph Morton

With notes
of
Ruth Lekert Nickelson Mary Haywood Wood
Nancy McNeil Morton
Fannie Giddings Norris Percy Pepon

Interviews
by
Elsie Pepon Sutton
1933

Retyped by Kim & Kris Vrtiska 1998

In the spring and summer of 1933 a controversy raged in the Argus and then in the State Journal -- a sort of "Who Killed Cock Robin" affair -- the matter in dispute concerning Who Tipped Over Table Rock. Now as a matter of fact nobody tipped over Table Rock and the whole controversy had to do with Mushroom Rock, quite a different matter entirely. It was established, conclusively I think, that J. D. Harrison tipped over Mushroom Rock, but he most certainly did not tip over Table Rock, as Table Rock for which the town was named fell before the summer of 1869 which was previous to the time the Harrisons came to the Table Rock vicinity.

That summer of 1933 my cousins, Mr. & Mrs. E. D. Howe, were visiting me in Lincoln and we were discussing the original, real, simon-pure, honest-to-goodness Table Rock. Mrs. Howe wondered how many people there were left at that time who had actually seen the Table Rock and we made a list of them. Mrs. Fannie Giddings Norris of

Table Rock, her sister Mrs. Lydia Giddings Holmes of Kansas City, Mo., John R. Allen of Axtell, Kansas, Oscar Foale, Gabe Morton and his wife Nancy of Table Rock, Mrs. Mary Haywood Wood of Corpus Christi Texas, Mrs. Ruth Eckert Nickelson of Elk Creek, and Mrs. Ann Dobson Wert living between Table Rock and Elk Creek. Just nine people. It happened that I had talked with two of these, Mrs. Wood at Corpus Christi and Mrs. Nickelson of Elk Creek, and while both said they knew they had seen the Table Rock neither could give a description of it, so that left seven who might remember it. Mr. Howe thought someone should make a point of seeing these few remaining before it was too late and get their stories, and also try to establish about when the real Table Rock fell. We knew it was standing when my parents, Joseph B. Pepoon and wife Bessie (Shaw), my uncle John Wesley Shaw and wife Maria (Eckert), my aunt Eunice (Pepoon) and husband Eli T. Boone, and my cousin William G. Lyman came to Nebraska in March, 1867, for we had heard them speak of it many times. Mrs. Howe urged me to come down to Bunker Hill later with Dr. Thomas D. Howe and call on as many of these as possible and this I did.

On Monday, September 11, 1933, I went with Thomas D. Howe to the farm at Bunker Hill. We stopped in Elk Creek to see Ruth Eckert Nickelson. She came to Nebraska in the fall of 1867 when only eight years old. She remembered seeing the Table Rock but could not give a description of it. Her record is of value only in reference to the Table Rock standing at that time.

That same evening Thomas and I called on Mrs. Ann Dobson Wert. Mrs. Wert is an old friend I've known all my life, and a neighbor there in Bunker Hill where I was born. The James Dobson farm joined ours on the west. In reply to questions she made the following statement:

Ann Dobson Wert -- born 1860 near Cincinnati. (Du Bois).

Went to see her Monday evening, Sept. 11, 1933, with Tom Howe.

“Was born in 1860 on a farm near DuBois, (Cincinnati then). Moved up to Table Rock when a small girl. Lived in Table Rock in the upper town site when there were only two houses -- one large with four families living in it. They were one of the families. Had seen the Table Rock many times. The table was on the large sand-stone rock, and was flat as this table, (laying her hand on a round dining table), and round. Did not remember any pictures on it, when asked, but later spoke of pictures of Indians on ponies. Indians would come and camp at the rocks and when they left she and her twin sister, Jane, and Ann Pangburn would go down to the rocks and pick up beads”

My mother told Eddie Howe you and Jane had a string of Indian beads you found at the rock. Is that so, and have you any of them?

“Yes, I have some around somewhere.”

“Could we see them?”

Ann went into another room and fetched out a machine drawer and found a bead. It was of white stone that glistened, with a hole that looked like it had been burned through, but could not tell exactly. It was a perfectly round, flat bead, about a quarter of an inch or more thick. Like this -- As large around as a lead-pencil or larger.

Ann also said she had other beads shaped more like a cork, which were strung on a string of spools, but she didn't know just where they were. Would look them up and have them ready to show us when we came again, but the heavy rain prevented us from making a second call. Hope to do so again at some later visit to Bunker Hill neighborhood.

“Moved out to Bunker Hill a year or so after your father (J. B. Pepon) came there. She and Jane and Ruth Eckert (Nickelson) picked corn for him. Didn't remember seeing the Table Rock after coming out to Bunker Hill.”

Do you have any idea about when the table fell from the rock?

“No. Oh, yes. The whistle of the first train shook it down.”

(Rained hard that night and most of the next day.)

(Could not get away from the farm until Thursday)

(afternoon, when we went to see John Allen at Axtell, Ks.)

John R. Allen -- Born 1846 (87 years old). Thursday, Sept. 14, 1933, drove with Tom Howe to Ezra Feller's farm near Axtell, Ks.

“Table rock had a table on top of the old rock. Back rested on the seat (on top of the present base) with two legs in front. Lightning struck an oak tree and broke one leg and the table slid off. We could get under the table, but I never got on the top.

“There were names and dates and fine pictures of Indians on ponies and Indians shooting with bows. It was a splendid sight.

“We came to Long Branch in 1865. Came to the Howe farm in the fall of 1866. George MacMahan took that place and my father got it from him. Cousin Dick Barrett was in the land office at Brownville and he told Father about it. MacMahan had never done anything on the farm and father needn't have paid any attention to MacMahan, but he went to see MacMahan anyway, and got it. Father started to dig a dugout-- that is the hole that still shows there. I was working for Bill McClure and bought a log house from his brother Dan McClure, and brought the logs from Dan McClure's place on Long Branch and we built a log house and father never finished the dug-out. We found a spring near where we built the log house. Brother (Bill) and I were over there and Mrs. Bob Morris, a girl then, told me about the Rock. One day brother and I saw some Indians

and followed them. I was riding a mule and brother on a horse. The Indians would go over a hill and down out of sight in the trees along the creeks. We didn't catch the Indians, but we followed until near the rocks when I thought of the rocks and we went to see them. That was the first time I saw it. I never found any beads, but I was interested in the pictures. There were pictures on the sandstone above the dam, too. A great many rocks were thrown into the mill dam, to make the dam. They might find pictures on those rocks if they were dug up as they were thrown in when the mill was constructed and the dam built.

"The winter of 1865-6 was cold at first but after that was a good winter. In 1866 I put in a crop for father then worked for Bill McClure. We shelled corn for him. Shelled with a hand sheller. Bill and I started west with the shelled corn. We got to Kearney and they wouldn't let us go until there was a wagon train. We stayed a few days and Bill sold the corn. Then I went to breaking prairie. Then went to work for Old Man McClure, Bill and Dan's father, until '58 or '60. Then went to railroading. Down on the Missouri river, on the road from St. Joe to Council Bluffs. Then on one from Brunswick to Chillicothe. Then on the B. & M. road from Pacific Junction east. I don't remember when the rock was struck by lightning. I believe the rock was there while I was working for Old Man McClure, but cannot be sure. Never knew the Indians going to the rock especially.

"Father taught school in the back room of Charlie Libby's house up by Libby's Mill. Peter Foale lived in his log house down on the creek below our place when we came to our farm. It was not as big as our log house. Giddings said Mrs. Foale had to stoop to get into Foale's log house. He and Peter didn't like each other very well.

"George MacMahan came out in the 50s and lived then on the place on the creek near Uncle Theodore's. He never lived on the Howe place. Bill McClure's homestead was the Albert Kovanda place. Bill McClure sold it to someone and Johnson bought it from him. I was away when my sister Sophy and Will Lyman were married. I am 87, Sophy 85. (Born 1848). Ozman Griffing kept a store in Table Rock.

"The old Indian trail crossed the Nemaha on John Wood's place at the ford there, (Eddie Howe says it was called "The Indian Ford") on his place, and crossed Pete Miller's farm. There was another ford further down (The Morton ford). The trail went to Nebraska City. The trail crossed Turkey Creek on John Osborne's place and up onto the divide on Wider's place. John Wood's crossing was called the Indian ford.

Ruby Allen Fellers -- John's daughter.

"One time when we Pepoons had a picnic down at the rock when I was a little girl, I picked up a string of Indian beads. It was six inches or more long and tied together in a loop. Gertie Boone (Beverett) asked me for it and I gave it to her."

John Allen -- Addenda -- John sent a picture of the rock as he remembers, drawn as well as he could make it. He adds: in a letter received since:

“Where we climbed up to go under the table there was a place maybe two feet square that I could stand up straight. To get back to the seat under the table (rudiments of this still remain -- E. P. S.) I had to stoop or crawl almost. The pictures on the rock were of Indians, ponies, deer, elk and buffalo. They were all the same size and had the same expression..... I never believed the lightning knocked that rock down. I can't think lightning would have any effect on a rock of that size.” Every one I heard speak of it seemed to think the lightning knocked it down.”

“My second trip to the rock was with Miss Logson (Morris), Miss Skillet, John Wilson, a young man we called Jack, and me. We walked from Long Branch to the Rock.”

Mrs. Lydia Holmes -- 90 years of age. Came to Nebraska in 1857.

Went to see Mrs. Holmes and Mrs. Norris Sunday morning, September 17, 1933, with Mrs. Allie Wood.

Mrs. Holmes remembers the original Table Rock distinctly. It was a flattish, mushroom shaped rock standing on three supports on the large base of sandstone. The space under the “table” was high enough for her to stand under. Two couples could sit comfortably together in the space under the table and at picnics there was a scramble to the first at the rock. They climbed up the steps to the space under the table, then into and up a tree growing alongside to the top of the rock.

“At a picnic at the rock the first year we came, (I think July 4th, 1857), at which the Haywoods, Sampsons, Diamonds were there as part of the crowd, thirteen climbed on top of the rock at one time and stood up on it.” There were pictures of Indians and ponies on the soft sandstone base of Table Rock.”

She visited the rock on many occasions and is one of those who say the tree alongside was struck by lightning, but does not remember when it was. The table was round but shelved off at the edges in little steps.

Mrs. Fannie Norris -- Aged 92.

Knows she saw the rock but has no distinct memory of it. She and Mrs. Holmes told many incidents of early days in Nebraska but which have no part in this record. She told of the death of Mrs. Clayton, wife of the miller, who was killed in the mill. Her dress caught in the machinery.

Oscar Foale -- Born 1850. Came to Nebraska in 1854.

Went on from Mrs. Norris's to see Oscar, who lived close by. In reply to questions, said he remembers seeing the Table Rock many times. It was a flat rock like a table. Had

three legs in depressions in the sandstone base. Distance between base and table not very high, but high enough to sit under there. The legs were not very solid in their depressions. Could shade one of them, or turn it around. He scouted the idea that it was struck by lightning. But did not know just what caused it to fall. Most likely somebody pushed it down.

Gabriel J. Morton -- Born 1850. Sunday, September 17, 1933, he said:

“I saw the rock a great many times and remember it distinctly. If I could draw could make a picture of it, but I never could do anything in that line. The Table Rock was north of the mushroom rock and south of the cave, a flat rock on three legs. There was room for people to sit under the table but I couldn’t stand up in it, though I was a boy of only eight or ten when I first saw it. We climbed up the steps the Indians had cut on the north side of the rock. I never climbed on top of the table. You could climb from the rock into an oak tree growing right against one side of the rock and get up on top of the table, but I have never been able to climb up onto high places as I get dizzy, so I never climbed onto the table on top of the rock.

“There was a boy about my age, John Clayton, the son of the Miller Clayton, I used to play with all over those hills and around those rocks. And there weren’t many boys in the country then to play with. Yes, it was his mother who was killed in the mill. I remember coming down to the mill and to the mill pond. That looked like a good place for a swim, for I always liked to swim, so I went swimming in the mill pond. The John Clayton and I went on up to the rocks. That was the first time I saw it.

“There were pictures all over the soft sandstone base of the table-rock. They were beautiful, and it is a shame they were all destroyed by people cutting them off to carve their names there. The pictures were mostly of Indians on horses, but there were bows and arrows carved on the rock. To a boy the horses were the most interesting.

“One winter father sent me to the mill with a sack of corn to be ground. We had a storm and the snow had made deep drifts. There were a lot of Indians camped down there in the timber by the rocks -- a hundred or more. I wondered what their ponies got to eat. The Indians had cut down some cottonwood trees and the ponies nipped off the smaller branches and peeled the bark off the cut trees. Ate the buds from the ends of branches of standing trees, and would paw the snow away to find the dead grass underneath. The Indians stayed there a long time. Don’t know what Indians they were. Never heard any one say. They were just Indians. I used to pick up Indian beads, but threw them down again. Never kept any.

“I don’t remember when the table fell, nor what caused it to fall. The mushroom rock was pushed over -- a shame, too, -- but the Table Rock fell down. The table on top was round, as large or larger than an ordinary dining table, and thicker at the edges than towards the center. The legs were about as big around as a man could reach around. No, much larger than a man’s leg. As big as you could reach around.”

Mrs. Nancy Morton -- Born 1857 in Pawnee County, Nebraska.

Mrs. G.J. Morton said she saw the real Table Rock -- not the mushroom rock -- many times, but couldn't remember much about it. Didn't remember if it had pictures or not.

Mrs. Ruth Nickelson -- Born 1859. Came to Nebraska in the fall of 1867 with her Sister, Mrs. J. W. Shaw on the return of Mr. & Mrs. Shaw from Illinois who came to Nebraska first in March of 1867 with J.B. Pepoon and wife, E. T. Boone and W. G. Lyman.

Mrs. Nickelson, who was only eight years old when she came to Nebraska with her sister, remembers seeing the rock, but could not give a description of it. She was positive, however, that there were no pictures of Indians or horses on the base of the rock when she saw it -- nothing but names or writing.

Percy Pepoon, of St. Louis, Mo., writes:

"I know nothing as to the date of the wreck of the Table, except that it was prior to the spring of 1869. The summer of 1869 our family, then consisting of my father and mother, (sister) Alice and myself, lived with your father and mother until a cellar was constructed on our farm, then we lived there while a house was built over the cellar. Your mother told us the story of the rock and the lightning the first week after we arrived. About two years prior to the locomotive whistle.

"I first saw the rock in the summer of '69. We had gone to mill at Cummings' (afterward Blacklaw's) mill. The Nemaha was high and we couldn't get across. We found ourselves in the midst of a camp of about two dozen immigrant families, waiting for the river to fall so they could continue their trek to the free lands. We waited there while my father in some way crossed the river, and I made my way around to the Rock.

"My recollection of the first view of it is that its shape and size were about the same as in 1924 when I last saw it. There were steps cut in it by which I climbed to the top. There were positively no carvings or inscriptions except of recent date. It was completely covered with names of visitors. Every vacant place was covered with signatures and among the names was seen the curt rebuke to the morons: 'Fools' names are like their faces, often seen in public places'. It was astonishing to see so many signatures there in the woods in such a sparsely settled country.

"Cummings' mill was a busy as well as picturesque spot. Dr. Gandy had his lair there, there was a store or two, a saw mill, and a number of houses. People brought their grists from long distances; also brought huge cottonwood logs to be sawed into lumber, and there was the flow of homesteaders westward. Cummings held forth to all and sundry about the coming great city to surround his mill site.

“There ought to be a bronze tablet set into the rock telling its history. This ought to be carried through with the best accuracy possible. I will be glad to contribute a dollar toward the tablet.”

That completes the record of our investigations. I remember seeing the wreck of the table alongside the rock, and it was in that tangle of rocks and bushes that Ruby Allen picked up the string of beads she mentions. These personal recollections establish the fact that the Table Rock had three legs, was on top of the big sandstone base, now unhappily nearly eroded away, and that it fell prior to the spring of 1869. Of those who actually had seen the Table Rock only Mrs. Holmes and Mrs. Wert still survive, 1939. Perhaps I should have said supports rather than legs. An old picture I have shows the high back of the seat which John Allen says was one of the supports, or “legs.”

Elsie Pepoon Sutton.



Mushroom Rock

