



Autumn is upon us, bringing a sea-level chill. October has arrived in western Oregon, that magical time of the year when intermittent drizzle and falling leaves are churned together, underfoot, into a damp and pungent brown paste. But in Oregon's high mountains it already feels like winter. Snow starts to fall there and I hasten my pace. You see: the remote, backcountry portions of the Northwest's most mountainous lands have always been, and continue to be, essential to the lives of native tribes. It is a place far away from the mundane world. And in the last century and a half, it has been a place pleasantly distant from the world of whites. Some of these people go to the mountains for religious reasons, visiting sites from creation tales, seeking visions. Some of these people go to the mountains for hunting, berry gathering, the collection of distinctively alpine medicinal plants. Some of these people go to the mountains to dispose of grandpa's ashes.

The places they go to do this have been visited and revisited by their ancestors for perhaps thousands of years. And federal agencies now find themselves with a strong mandate to accommodate (read "not drive a damned bulldozer through") the many culturally important sites associated with each of these practices that stand on the West's vast federal lands. Recently, I have been asked by an Agency of Our Federal Government to consult them on these matters, lest they bulldoze something they shouldn't. (It is hoped that the documentation of these practices will be of enduring value to the Tribes, themselves, both conserving their sites and conserving the knowledge of their collective past.) So I have been up in the high mountain backcountry, trying to see what I can see before the snow begins to pile up in deep white drifts.

And I have been seeing rocks. Lots of rocks, piled up this way and that. Throughout much of Oregon, native peoples used to pile rocks as part of their most sacred ceremonies. Building them to mark the sites of their vision quests. Building them to mark sacred places. Building them to cover the ashes of their family and friends, so that the person might always sit, spiritually or symbolically, in that spot. Even here on the soggy coast, people used to pile up rocks for these purposes. Our coastal rock piles toppled long ago, though, torn apart by misguided artifact collectors, liquored-up vandals with time on their hands, and - far more often - by the workaday collateral damage brought by the loggers and their machines.

In a few rare and spectacular cases, though, this rock-piling practice never really ceased. Today, some traditionally minded tribal peoples still climb to the last wild places, awesomely inaccessible, isolated and wind-whipped cold. There they undergo vision quests and other religious rites. Often they choose those sites where one can glimpse the landmarks that stand prominent within their tribe's creation tales. There they might meditate: on the moral lessons of the tale associated with the landmarks before them, or on the elders who once sat, viewing these landmarks from the same

general spot. As they do this, some will still stack up rocks on or around the site.

And there these rocks sit, in circles, in stacks, in pyramids, in piles. And they appear in other forms that I attempt to sketch, crudely, in my field notebook: an impressive rock figure in the form of an animal, for example, a prayer circle in the center of its belly, all oriented to a nearby sacred peak. Sites documented a year or two ago have been much rearranged in the course of regular use. Grieving relatives may still entomb human ashes there. The practice persists. This fall, it draws me to the backwaters, to clamber over the cliffs and through the woods. When winter snows conceal the rocks, I will be back in the valleys, indoors, meeting the people who stack them. Mapping these things out plainly lest the bulldozers find them first.

But this is a sensitive business. These are not mere rock piles, but repositories of heartfelt sentiment, power, and the abiding attachment of a people for a particular place. If ever you see a curious pile of rocks in the remote backcountry, leave it alone. There are never artifacts in them, but the odds are fair-to-middling that the rock pile you find may conceal charred human remains. Not only is it illegal to disturb these sites, but it is just plain wrong, the moral equivalent of digging up a grave or burning down a church. And if the builders are nearby, it's a pretty good bet that they will not be amused. We should only take away that thrill that comes from brushing up against a side of the human experience seldom seen, a side almost forgotten by the late 20th century world.

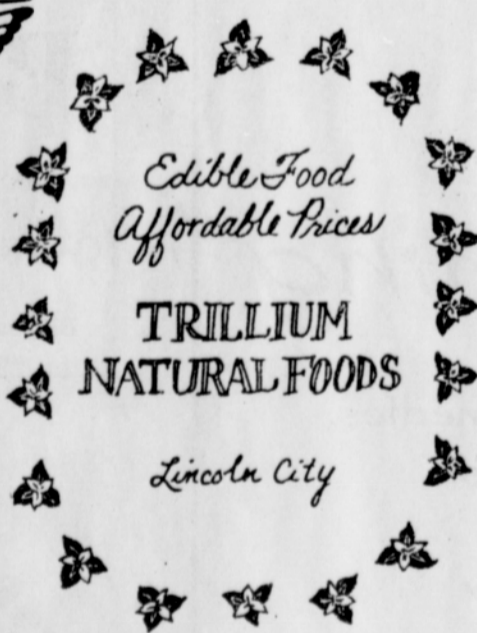
Ultimately, piles of rocks are piles of rocks. Rock piles are inert referential vehicles: to each of us, they mean what we want them to mean. Rocks were stacked for religious purposes by many of our ancestors, and rocks are stacked for expressive ends by some of our contemporary, professional artists. Amateur archaeologists have gone giddy over piles of local rocks, thinking them sacred cairns, never learning that the piles were built as survey markers a decade or two before.

Today, in our own backyard, we see the emergence of a new type of rock stacker, placing piles in north coast forests and on north coast shores. Some of our modern rock stackers see their creations as artistic achievements, the working of a subtle aesthetic, human imprints manifested in the media of the natural world. Others, a goodly contingent, see our Anglo-nouveau rock piles as an invasive inscription of a human ego onto the unsullied land, shrines to the self, pretentious eco-graffiti marking up those very places to which one retreats to *not* see the imprint of human hands. Meanwhile, religious rock-stackers may view this new practice as trivializing. These new rock piles are toppled, both by the vacuous vandal and by thoughtful hikers with an ideological axe to grind. Yet some of my most esteemed neighbors are closet rock-stackers, habitually reveling in the simplicity and rawness of the rocks; it is an art form for the masses, no cost nor credentials required, memorializing highly personal moments in an inspirational place. Perhaps, in these agnostic times, a heartfelt tradition does not require a thousand years to warrant respect or the gloss of legitimacy. These are contested stones, no doubt about it.

While they are just piles of rocks, they mean different things, often big things, to different people. And this is how humans are - it the nature of the species to ascribe *something*¹ to *everything*, even if that something differs dramatically from person to person, from culture to culture. As you build piles up, or tear piles down, do bear this in mind. No mark on the land is neutral. One man's rubble heap is another man's monument. Of course, it is only a pile of rocks. But to someone else, it may mean the world.

1. (Some people might call this thing "meaning.")

One of the most enlightening studies of Native American views of, and attachments to the land is Keith Basso's *Wisdom Sits In Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache*. (1996, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press). When it comes to understanding how this all works, it's hard to beat Basso; unfortunately, in his writings, he doesn't seem all that interested in stacks of rocks. No-one's perfect.



MOMOKAWA SAKE TASTING DINNER

OCTOBER 11, 1998

MOBY DICK

HOTEL & OYSTER FARM

30 PERSONS

Home of the Wild Oyster on Willapa Bay

FIVE COURSE DINNER \$60 per person gratuity & tax included

Nahcotta, Washington 98637

FOR RESERVATIONS OR INFORMATION (360) 665-4543 • FAX (360) 665-6887

columbus day weekend cranberry festival

chef Jeff McMahon of the "Saucebox" Portland, Oregon

OREGON COAST SUPPORT GROUP

P.O. BOX 50 CANNON BEACH OREGON 97110

503-436-2420 503-436-0527

Hope L. Harris
Licensed Massage Therapist

503/325-2523
ASTORIA

BISTRO

Memorable Meals Of Honorable Mention

RESERVATIONS: 436-2661
263 N. HEMLOCK • CANNON BEACH

Philip Thompson
architect

Personalized custom designs for your unique site.

architecture & environmental planning
25925 N.W. St. Helens Rd., Scappoose, OR 97056
(503) 543-2000

Steve's Maintenance
Licensed
Specializing in:
Environmentally Friendly
Window Cleaning

Steve LaMontagne
P.O. Box 669
Cannon Beach, OR, 97110
(503) 436-0942

PACIFIC MEDIATION ASSOCIATES • PACIFIC MEDIATION

Disputes? Conflicts?
Communication Problems?

TRY MEDIATION

- Economical • Cooperative
- Constructive • Confidential

Pacific Mediation Associates
(503) 717-1172

PACIFIC MEDIATION ASSOCIATES • PACIFIC MEDIATION

World Wide Web
Consultation/Production
www.teamweb.com/~vrb

12110 NW West Rd.
Portland, OR 97229
vrb@teamweb.com

Team WEB

Virginia Bruce
503-629-5799

"Progress might have been all right once, but it has gone too far."
Ogden Nash

BANK OF ASTORIA
Member FDIC

Astoria Warrenton
Seaside Cannon Beach

CANNON BEACH LEATHER

239 N Hemlock
503-436-0208

SANDRA L. WARD

A Celebration of Portland's Charles Erskine Scott Wood

Multnomah County Public Library
October 8-10, 15, 17

Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission
PO Box 3588
Portland, OR 97208
503: 285-8279

Email: encanto@teleport.com