

On Saturday, August 14, 1971 at 3 p.m., a provincial historical plaque commemorating Dreamer's Rock was unveiled at the rock, on the Whitefish River Indian Reserve, Birch Island Lodge Road, east off Highway 6 about 7½ miles (12 kilometers) northeast of Little Current.

This is one in a series of plaques erected throughout the province by the Department of Public Records and Archives, on the advice of the Archaeological and Historic Sites Board of Ontario (now the Ontario Heritage Trust).

The unveiling ceremony was sponsored by the Whitefish River Indian Reserve Band Council in co-operation with the Espanola-Manitoulin Regional Tourist Council; Mr. Austin H. Hunt, president of the Tourist Council, served as the program chairman. Speakers included: The Honourable Robert Welch, QC, Ontario's Minister of Education; His Worship L.A. Foucault, Mayor of Espanola; His Worship A.J. Little, Mayor of Little Current; Stan Farquhar, MPP (Algoma-Manitoulin); Dr. Maurice Foster, MP (Algoma); Professor K.C.A. Dawson of Lakehead University, a member of the Archaeological and Historic Sites Board of Ontario; Mr. Daniel McGregor, an elder of the Whitefish Band and a former band councilor; and Mr. Frank A. Myers, a noted authority on the history of the Manitoulin area.

The plaque was unveiled jointly by James McGregor, Chief of the Whitefish River Indian Band and The Honourable Robert Welch. A prayer of dedication was offered by the Reverend D.J. Horrigan, parish priest.

The plaque reads:

### **DREAMER'S ROCK**

This tall quartzite rock derives its name from a local Indian tradition that it was used for dream visitation. On reaching puberty, Indian boys of the surrounding area were sent to the summit where they fasted and, through dreams, received powers from a "guardian spirit". The spirit would also advise them of their calling. Shawwan-ossy-way, a famous chief and medicine man of the early 1800s, is reported to have acquired his healing powers after several visits to this rock where he lay in the shallow five-foot depression at the summit. Little used after the arrival of the Europeans, "Dreamer's Rock", with its incomparable view of the surrounding countryside, stands as a reminder of ancient Indian beliefs.

## Historical background

For the native people of North America, the quest for a guardian spirit or "manitou" seems to have been one of their most important religious customs. This search, undertaken at the age of puberty, usually entailed inducing visions through fasting and solitude. Such dreams amounted to communion with the spirits and were often seen as predictions of the future. The spirits were everywhere in nature: "They make the grass and plants grow, the winds blow and the clouds float across the sky ..."

For the native people who inhabited Birch Island, Dreamer's Rock – a tall, quartzite rock located on what is now the Whitefish River Indian Reserve – provided an ideal site for solitary fasting. At the age of approaching manhood, a native youth would be sent to the top of the rock. There he would recline, face to the sky, in a shallow five-foot-long depression in the rock. He would eat no food, and drink only a little water each day. Hunger usually brought visions within 10 days. The dreamer would then interpret his dreams with help from the elders and the medicine man.

There are reports that the famous war chief and medicine man Shaw-wan-ossy-way – whose exploits were recorded by the painter Paul Kane in his book *Wanderings of an Artist* – fasted and dreamed at Dreamer's Rock on at least three occasions. Shaw-wan-ossy-way was described as "venerable and dignified ... skilled in knowledge of the past, present and future of this people ..." It is believed that Shaw-wan-ossy-way ("the one with his face to the west") acquired his prophetic powers through visits to the rock and the resulting contacts with his guardian spirits.

As a medicine man, Shaw-wan-ossy-way was called upon to interpret the visions of youths who had visited Dreamer's Rock. Generally, a young native would dream of his particular totem – usually an animal, plant or bird. Interpretation of his dreams often linked characteristics of the totem to the dreamer's adult life. For example, if a youth dreamed of a deer, he would be fleet-footed and a good hunter; if a squirrel, he would be smart; if a bear, he would be strong. As well, the dreamer could always call on his guardian spirit in times of trouble or need.

Although Dreamer's Rock has long ceased to be used as a site for inducing visions of the future, it can offer those who climb it a bracing panoramic view of the countryside.



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