



Outcroppings of rose-colored Sioux quartzite are part of tallgrass prairie in southwestern Minnesota.
Opposite page: The new visitor center at Jeffers features exhibits and a multimedia theater presentation.

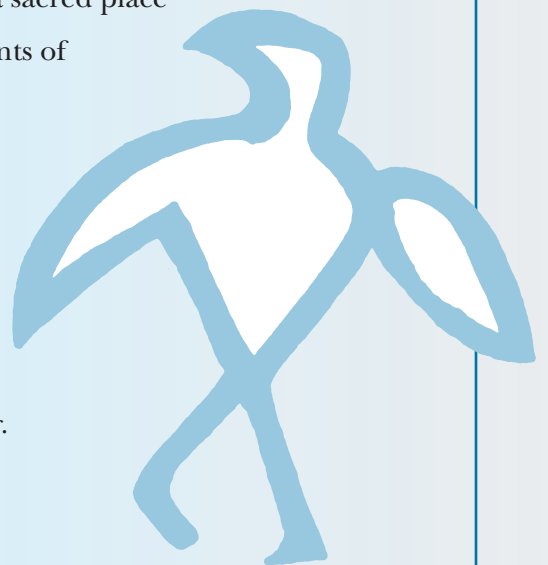
Listen to GrandmotherEarth

LORIS CONNOLLY

RISING HIGH ABOVE THE LITTLE COTTONWOOD RIVER in northeastern Cottonwood County is a long, wide deposit of rose-colored Sioux quartzite that plunges deep into the earth. It also rises upward, connecting prairie life to the world above the great domed sky. This ridge of rock retains ripple marks left from ancient river beds, crisscrossed scratches of glaciers coming and going, and almost 2,000 images chipped into the stone, called petroglyphs. The rock—as well as the 80 acres of tallgrass prairie surrounding it—holds millions of years of cultural and environmental history. Now known as Jeffers Petroglyphs, a historic site managed by the Minnesota Historical Society since 1966, it is a sacred place that retains spiritual power for the American Indian descendants of the people who first came to this region about 12,000 years ago after the area's last glacier receded. There is much that we do not know about these people, but we do know that this place is a treasured part of what American Indians refer to as Grandmother Earth.¹

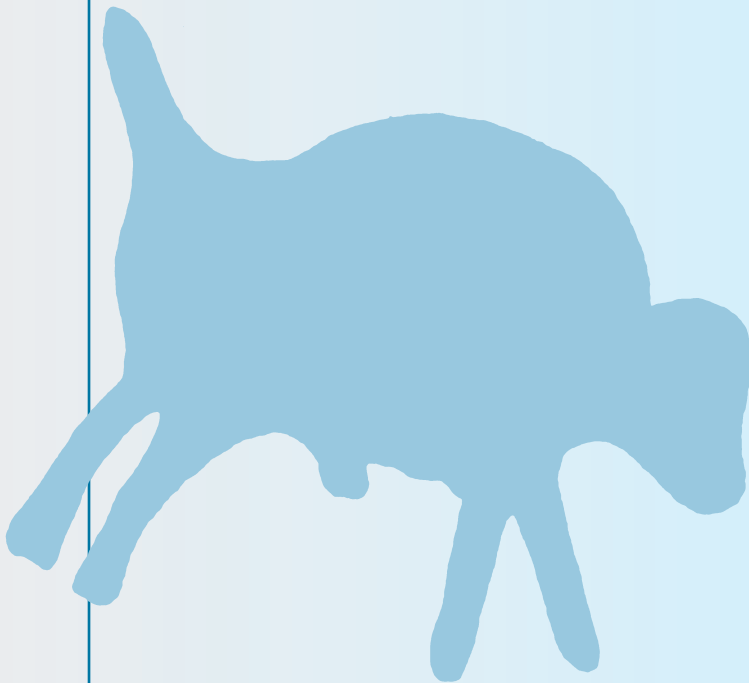
According to the Dakota creation story, Inyan (Rock) had no beginning because he existed when there was no other. His spirit, Wakan Tanka (Great Mystery), was the creator of

Loris Connolly, an exhibits curator for the Minnesota Historical Society, worked on the team that created the exhibits and outdoor interpretation at the Jeffers site.





Two stick-figure carvings hold dart-throwing hunting tools called atlatls.



Maka (Earth) and ancestor of all things. Inyan is always to be listened to and respected.²

The outcropping at Jeffers—more than 600 feet long and 150 feet wide—is part of the 23-mile-long Red Rock Ridge. Seventeen smaller outcroppings along it also include petroglyphs, making it the densest concentration of documented rock art sites in Minnesota. Red Rock Ridge is on the eastern fringe of what early French explorers named the Coteau des Prairies (Highland of the Prairies). This bedrock plateau, sculpted by glaciers and once covered by prairie, extends from southwestern Minnesota into South Dakota. It includes Pipestone National Monument in Pipestone County and Blue Mounds State Park in Rock County.

We can only speculate about when and why people started to leave evidence of their lives in stone at Jeffers. In the early 1970s, archaeologist

Gordon Lothson concluded that the earliest carvings may have been made from 5,000 to 2,500 years ago, based on the presence of representations of nearly 100 atlatl and atlatl weights. (An atlatl is a dart-throwing hunting device, sometimes weighted, that was used before bows and arrows.) Lothson dated other carvings to between 1,000 and 250 years ago, based on comparisons with motifs and symbols used by early Plains Indians.³

Some of the carvings are obvious representations of prairie life; many others are more subtle symbols. In the summer of 1885, a New Ulm group calling itself the Mound Creek Exploring Party recorded nine “peculiar Indian inscriptions” in the Jeffers region. They described what they saw as two turtles, a man with a feather headdress, a circle, a birdlike figure with outstretched wings, a deer with antlers, a mink, a geometric figure resembling a kite, and something looking like the much prized “Indian potato” (prairie turnip or breadroot) that grew abundantly in the surrounding prairie.⁴

Other symbols at Jeffers possibly represent bison, turtles, lizards, snakes, fish, hand and foot prints, hunters and other humans (including many figures wearing horned and feathered headdresses), spear and dart points, circles, lines, dots, and other irregular or presently unidentifiable carvings. The images help locate the petroglyphs in time. For example, there are few, if any, representations of bows and arrows, which began to replace atlatls and darts about 1,000 years ago, or of horses, introduced to the region about 250 years ago. Because all the marks are shallow, chipped-in indentations on the rock, they are often difficult to “read” and require patience from the viewer.

Similarly, the “why” of the images remains beyond our reach. People may have recorded the events and stories of their lives, making maps of journeys ahead or already taken. They may have used the symbols to communicate with the spirits of the worlds above and below, making the stone a visual journal of their dreams, their prayers, and their visions. Or they may have desired to leave a sign of their existence for travelers to come.

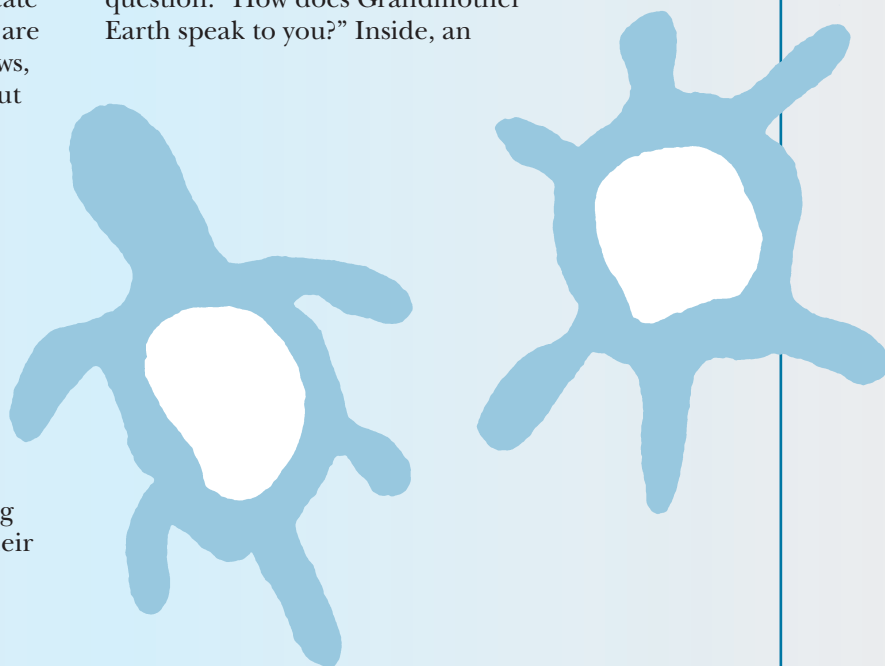
Memories of these people and this place are an important part of the oral tradition among

American Indians. For some, visiting the rock ridge means connecting to Grandmother Earth and to generations past, present, and future. For others, being at this place of power means reconnecting to memories forgotten. For still other visitors, it means opening up to new ideas and new experiences.

In 1996 the Minnesota Historical Society began a process of re-visioning the interpretation at Jeffers and started a discussion with the society’s Indian Advisory Committee. The exhibit team also consulted with elders and other members of the Cheyenne, Ioway, Dakota, Lakota, and Ojibwe tribes, whose ancestors lived and traveled in the prairie-lake region, along with the Oto, Ponca, and Omaha. When Europeans first arrived in this region around 1650, they found a place that already held evidence of thousands and thousands of years of human life.

At Jeffers the result of these discussions and new perspectives is a 4,000-square-foot visitor center and outdoor interpretation of the carvings and the prairie that opened to the public in May 1998. Exhibits, a multimedia presentation, and live interpretive programming began welcoming visitors in May 1999.

Walking into the new center, visitors first see a wall of glass that frames an expanse of prairie. On the wall outside a small theater is the question: “How does Grandmother Earth speak to you?” Inside, an



Jeffers Petroglyphs

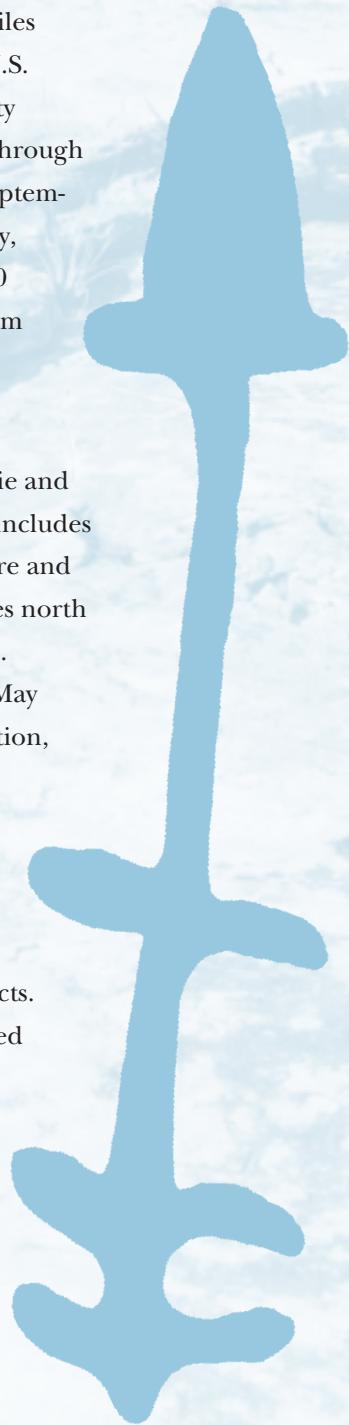
is approximately 8 miles northeast of Jeffers and 7 miles west of Comfrey. It is 3 miles east of U.S. Hwy. 71 on Cottonwood County Road 10, then 1 mile south on County Road 2. The site is open Memorial Day through Labor Day: Monday through Saturday, 10 A.M. to 6 P.M., and Sunday, noon to 6 P.M. In May and September, the site is open Friday and Saturday, 10 A.M. to 5 P.M., and Sunday, noon to 5 P.M. Admission is free to members or \$3.00 for adults, \$2.00 for senior citizens, and \$1.50 for children ages 6 to 15 (\$6.00 maximum per family). For information, call (507)628-5591.

Other Places to Visit

Blue Mounds State Park (Rock County) preserves 1,500 acres of prairie and grasslands on top of a massive outcropping of Sioux quartzite, which includes a 150-foot natural rock quarry. The park is home to a wide array of rare and common plants, wildlife, and a small herd of bison. The park is 4 miles north of I-90 and Luverne and 16 miles south of Pipestone—enter from U.S. Highway 75. The park also includes a small interpretive center open May through September, campsites, and naturalist programs. For information, call (507)283-1307.

Pipestone National Monument (Pipestone County) is a revered quarrying and carving site that is thought to have first been used by Ioway and Oto Indians in the early 1600s. Today, the monument is still used by American Indians for cultural and religious activities, including quarrying the Sioux quartzite to carve pipes and other objects. The monument includes an interpretive visitor center and a self-guided trail through the quarry and surrounding landscape. It is located just north of the town of Pipestone, off U.S. Highway 75, and is open every day except Christmas and New Year's. For information, call (507)825-5464.

Red Rock Falls County Park (Cottonwood County) is a 13-acre park that includes pathways along outcroppings of Sioux quartzite leading to a 30-foot waterfall over the rocks. Open year around, the park also includes picnic facilities. From the Jeffers site, travel 1.5 miles north on County Road 2, then 3 miles west on Highway 10, and 1 mile north on Highway 71, and then .75 mile east on a gravel road. There is no sign for the park on Highway 71.





Pinkish prairie smoke flowers blowing in the almost constant wind at Jeffers

eight-minute multimedia show immerses visitors in life on the prairie thousands of years ago through images, sounds, and light. Elsewhere, interactive exhibits provide visitors with cultural and environmental perspectives.

Outside the center, interpretive signs guide visitors through the prairie and across the rock outcropping. Portable sets of small color photos prompt trail travelers to take a closer look at the abundance of birds, butterflies, plants, and mammals that continue to thrive in the prairie environment. Guides engage visitors in the hands-on experiences of prairie life, including hunting, plant gathering, processing food, tools, clothing, and traveling by foot.

On the rock outcroppings at Jeffers Petroglyphs, the water ripples and the crisscrossed glacier scratches still speak to us of ancient river beds and the Ice Age. The tallgrass prairie survives as a valuable remnant of the landscape that once covered a third of North America. The petroglyphs offer us a rare glimpse into the richness of human lives past and present. The tallgrass prairie survives as a valuable remnant of the landscape that once covered a third of North America. This place has the power to take us across

space and time to the worlds of sky and earth, plants and animals, human beings and spirits. Open yourself to the spirit and wonder of this sacred place. □

NOTES

1. Scott Anfinson, *Southwestern Minnesota Archaeology: 12,000 years in the Prairie Lake Region* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1997), 28.
2. See Paul Durand, *Where the Waters Gather and the Rivers Meet: An Atlas of the Eastern Sioux* (Prior Lake, Minn.: Paul Durand, 1994).
3. Gordon Allan Lothson, *The Jeffers Petroglyphs Site: A Survey and Analysis of the Carvings* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1976), 3.
4. "Report on the Sojourn of the Mound Creek Exploring Party," *New Ulm Review*, Aug. 12, 1885.

The photos are courtesy the following: rock ridge, Eric Mortenson/MHS; visitor center, Jens Gunelson; carvings and prairie smoke flowers, Paul Jackson, Minnesota Native Landscapes, Princeton. The line drawings are from Gordon A. Lothson, The Jeffers Petroglyphs Site: A Survey and Analysis of the Carvings (St. Paul: MHS, 1976).





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