

We don't often look at our surroundings with a sense of history. But, if we do, we can walk around a farm like ours in openmouthed wonder at the events that must have taken place hundreds of thousands, millions, billions of years ago to create what we see now. Gullies, stream beds, hills, valleys, and the soils and stones that make up our environment are not recently produced. Ancient forces were at work that made our area what it is.

Nothing brings this back to me so clearly as looking at stone piles on the farm. In the townships east of us in our county, there are even more stones than we see here. But, we have enough so that farming this land involved "picking stone" year after year, decade after decade. We don't do much of that now, concentrating on keeping our land covered with sod permanently, but the practices of homesteading and a century of farming by previous generations in our family provided the evidence we still see today.

One might wonder why stone piles were located in the places we sometimes find them now. A tree in the middle of what was once a farmed field is a sign that there was, or still is, a stone pile there. Why in the middle of a field? A closer look at an existing mound of rocks will often show that there is a very large rock at the center of the pile. This was usually a stone that was too large to be moved to the edge of the field, and perhaps not easily blasted with a little dynamite—the tool of choice of homesteaders and early farmers.

Poking around in stone piles usually produces some interesting specimens. Looking around farms in this part of Michigan, one can often see "pudding stones" made up of quartzite with pebbles of colored jasper. A lot of the large ones find homes in and around flower beds. These conglomerates are also highly prized by rock collectors, and they are amenable to polishing, creating lovely decorative pieces and even jewelry. There is a flat slice of polished pudding stone on our table. A cousin made this for us, and we have many comments from people who sit around our oak table sharing a cup of coffee and a cookie.

I'm not sure everyone among our ancestors was as careful in preserving pudding stones as some other people are. At least, I know that one big stone of this kind ended up in the concrete floor of the old milk house. When Runo knocked down the walls of this defunct building many years ago, I picked up a stone to keep, just because it was from the milk house. He asked what I wanted that for. I told him, and he said he had found a much better one—a large pudding stone, completely covered by concrete. That is now in our yard. I would not be surprised if more have found their modern home in the foundation of the barn.

But, I like all kinds of stones, and the variety in the old stone piles tells one something about the place we live long before any animals or plants were present here. I don't know much about rock formations, but just looking at the stone piles, at rocks I recognize as granite, slate, quartzite, and sandstone gives me a sense of the antiquity of our land. That, to me, is a profound realization. How can we not want to use all the resources at our disposal to take good care of this Earth that we inhabit for such a short time?

I seldom cross a field or pasture without detouring to the nearest stone

pile. I poke around, often finding a stone I had not seen in previous excursions. There are some pudding stones in these piles, but I find as much pleasure in the plain gray granite rocks—some very large—and try to imagine what the area looked like when they came to rest there.

A few times during the past decades, someone has come along wanting to buy stones for landscaping in new suburbs. A lot of farmers are happy to get rid of those stone piles that are in the way of their farming practices. We resisted, though, and our mounds of rocks are still here, attesting to both ancient history and the record of human occupation on this land. I suppose our ancestors who homesteaded here would have been happy to find a better way of disposing of stones than piling them along the edges of a field or even in the middle, around a giant rock. And, I can't say that I enjoyed "picking stone," as we said, when we had to help our dad remove small stones from a field he had worked up. Throwing stones on the "stone boat" pulled behind the tractor was not much fun. Although, I usually ended the day with a pocket full of "pretty stones" to keep.

So, we will keep our stone piles. And I will continue taking the "long way around" as I cross the farm, just to have a look at the stones in those mounds. To avoid being startled, it is also good to remember that blue racers and other snakes also like these ancient artifacts, now piled so invitingly in pleasant locations.