

The township east of us has a deeper layer of glacial drift than we do, but we have plenty. It shows up in the stones that have been taken off the fields during the past century and a half since our family came here as homesteaders. I love stone piles, and every time we walk through the pastures, fields, or woods I have a good look at the stone piles. I know where all of them are, and as I pull aside the smaller specimens to look at, I think about my great-grandparents, grandparents, parents—and, yes, even those of my own generation, who picked up those stones and threw them on—in the earliest days the horse-drawn stone boat, then the same homemade tool pulled by a little Ford tractor, and most recently, into the loader bucket of the tractor.

We don't do that anymore. We don't break up ground, and the stones that are there can lie where they are. Of course, there is still the possibility that I will see a pretty or interesting stone as I walk across the farm, and then, it is likely to end up here in our yard. Keeping Mother Earth covered with sod for water retention and carbon sequestration is our goal, but I still find stones.

Any crossing of the farm on foot is liable to take me past a stone pile. If it does not, I am likely to detour so that I can spend a few minutes looking at what generations of my family threw in a pile.

There are always huge stones under the stone piles. That is why a pile ended up there in the first place—there was a stone too large to move. Of course, a lot of big stones were also moved, since dynamite was the “tool of choice” of homesteaders and the subsequent generations. Even my father found dynamite both useful and interesting. I accompanied a few dynamite details when I was young.

The pudding stones that are favorites in our part of the state are interesting and often spectacularly patterned, but I am more intrigued by the rough, plain granites that seem to broadcast their origins in the earlier days of the planet. I like to look at them and wonder what it looked like here on what is now this farm during one of the glacial ages, or as the ice receded.

Today, I took a walk with a stone pile my destination instead of just happening by. And, this is what I saw:

On the north side of the Maple Tree Field, the woodsy spots are near the old line fence that divided the original homestead from the Speicher Place that later was added to the farm. There, under a

big basswood tree, is a nice stone pile. It isn't big, but it is—as all stone piles are—interesting.

The dominant stone is a thick pink and gray slab that is flat on one side. It would make a good “door stone” for a cabin. And surrounding it are other stones of various sizes and colors. Some have been lifted from the ground by the basswood's roots. Others are nestled between two roots. The pile of stones is composed of round, smooth gray stones, some craggy and pink, red, blue, or green, and some with stripes and spots of different colors. There are no pudding stones in this pile. They range from fist size to large slabs I couldn't lift. Near the basswood are a couple of popple trees that are bringing stones to the surface with their roots.

I didn't pick up any stones to bring home today. But talking about stones made me think of a curious fact. So often, we can tell something of a person's age, background, and area where they grew up by their use of words. And, for anyone growing up when we did here in this particular place, we were always “picking stone,” not “picking rocks.” It doesn't indicate any judgement on correctness or worth, but these small clues to a person's background are always interesting.