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"Vision Pits", Cairns and Petroglyphs at Rock Lake, Algonquin Provincial Park, Ontario

INTRODUCTION

This report represents an account of a series of pits, cairns and petroglyphs excavated, mapped and documented at Rock Lake, Algonquin Park, during August 15 to September 6, 1962. The work, directed by the author with the capable assistance of Mr. John M. Young, was carried out for Dr. J. Norman Emerson of the Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto, on a research grant supplied by the Canada Council.

The site has been known ever since the late summer of 1939 when Dr. Emerson received his introductory experiences in Ontario archaeology at Rock Lake under Mr. Kenneth E. Kidd (1948). At that time Mr. Kidd's three-man party excavated over 600 square feet of the late prehistoric campsite on the sandy beach at the extreme north end of Rock Lake (Fig. 1). During the 1939 excavation, Dr. Emerson had occasion to cross the north end of the lake to examine the west shore near the entrance of the Madawaska River draining from Whitefish Lake to the north. At a short distance south of this entrance he located a series of stonelined pits heavily camouflaged by underbrush and tree cover. Those pits readily visible, he subsequently mapped with a transit and a system of marker flags. The 1939 party emerged from Rock Lake to find World War II underway, and no further work was done in this area until 1962.

In July, 1962, Dr. Emerson returned with the author on a one-day visit to relocate the rock-lined pits. Many changes had taken place with the passing of time, including the construction of a new access road into Rock Lake, the conversion of the 1939 site into a tourist campground, the erection of cottages around the lake, and a much less dense cover of underbrush growing over the pits. Plans were made on this reconnaissance to pursue a new mapping and test excavation of the pits.

Accordingly, a two-man party under the author travelled to Rock Lake on August 15, 1962, with Mr. and Mrs. William O. Sopher of

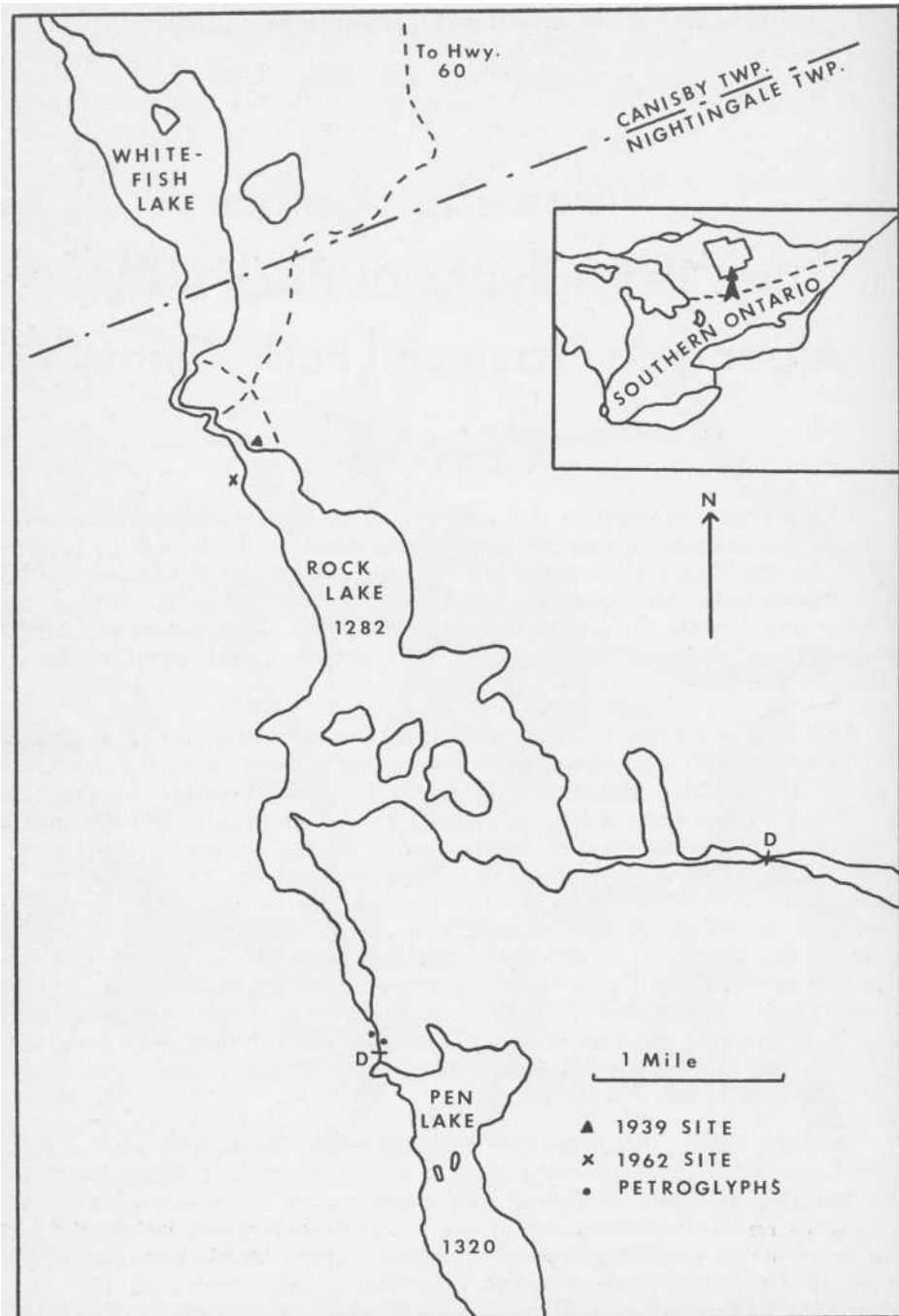


FIGURE 1

Map of Rock Lake area.

Orillia. Transportation across the lake to the pit site was generously provided by the park attendants at the Rock Lake campsite. Mr. Grant Tayler, Park Naturalist at the Algonquin Park Museum, also kindly arranged for a Work Permit covering archaeological excavation and surveying, in compliance with the Park regulations.

THE SITE AREA

Rock Lake is located in Nightingale Township of the County of Haliburton in a district now encompassed by the confines of Algonquin Provincial Park (Fig. 1). This three-mile long lake is but one of a chain of small, beautiful lakes which form the Madawaska River system draining southeast en route to its confluence with the Ottawa River near Arnprior. Many dams of this drainage system have since raised the river above its original level. Bare-faced igneous outcrops of the Canadian Shield jut out of the landscape and fall directly to the clear water's edge of many of the lakes. Stretches of sand suitable for camping are infrequent. The major sand beach at the extreme north end of Rock Lake was the site of the 1939 excavations. Virgin white pine has long since been timbered off the area, leaving only secondary growth of mixed maple, cedar and hemlock forest. The forestry town of Whitney lies 9 miles southeast of Rock Lake.

The site of the rock-lined pits and nearby rock cairns mapped in 1962 lies at the northwest end of Rock Lake, just west of the 1939 site (Fig. 1) . The pits lie about 400 yards immediately south of the Madawaska River entrance. More specifically, they cover portions of Lots 43, 44 and 45, and Crown Land adjacent to Rock Lake in Nightingale Township. Lots 4-1 and 45 are currently under lease by Professor Harvey W. Zarbough and Dr. William C. Russel, who willingly granted permission to work on their property. Latitude reading of the site is 45° 31' 08" N. by 78° 2' 1' 48" W. longitude, as compared with the 45° 31' 15" N. latitude by 78° 24' 45" W. longitude location of the 1939 site.

PITS

A total of 31 rock-lined pits were mapped in 1962 with a transit, and numbered consecutively as encountered (Fig. 2). The main concentration lay on Lot 43, 150 feet north of the Zarbough cottage in an area of dense cedars and swampy deadfalls. This rugged area of low relief, only 6 feet above the present lake level of 1282 feet A.M.S.L., lies 125 to 150 feet back from the lake edge. Surveying was difficult in this terrain, but considerably easier going among the cleared stands of hemlock around Professor Zarbough's cottage.

Lined with water-rolled rocks averaging 6 to 22 inches in diameter, all pits showed up as conspicuous depressions extending 11 to 16 inches below the present ground surface. Twenty-nine of the pits were circular, with diameters ranging from 4 feet 3 inches to 7 feet (Table 1). Two pits were rectangular, measuring 10 feet long east-west, by 7 feet wide north-south, and 11 feet 6 inches long north-south, by 6 feet wide east-

west. A difference in the orientation of these two rectangular pits was noted, but appears to have little significance.

Due to the exigency of time, 2 pits only were excavated numbers 6 and 11. Surface ground plans were made prior to excavation by a technique of cross-tape coordinate measurements from two stationary datum pegs. The pits were then half-sectioned to obtain a profile plan, and then completely excavated. Both features were backfilled when work terminated.

Pit 6 (Fig. 3).

This circular 5-foot 6-inch wide pit appeared as a rock-lined depression, 16 inches below the ground. With the removal of rocks and soil from the east half, several successive features were noted. First, evidence of a former burned fire horizon, demarcated by a 1-inch thick charcoal lens, appeared around the sides of the pit at a depth of 8 inches. A similar lens noted by Kidd (1918: 100) in the upper levels of the 1939 site may be contemporaneous. Second, black humic soil appeared around and under the numerous rocks filling the major portion of the pit; it contrasted distinctively with the undisturbed, yellow subsoil surrounding the pit's perimeter. Third, the above mentioned pit fill continued to a maximum depth of 41 inches where it was underlain by a "1/2-inch thin layer of tightly compacted leaf mold and pine needles. Fifth, the flat bottom of the pit had been dug down to the top of a hard, grey clay hardpan stratum ; this clay layer was crisscrossed with yellow limonite stains. Sixth, a circular wall of round cobbles had been piled up around the interior of the excavated pit. Judging from the abundance of these rocks filling the pit, the wall extended to ground surface or perhaps a little above. After the use of the pit, the upper portions of the rock lining were caved in to fill the hole.

Ten historic artifacts recovered from Pit 6 are useful for dating the construction and use of this feature. All artifacts were found buried in black humic fill well below the pit's depressed upper surface. The artifact tabulation follows : 1 subcylindrical blue glass trade bead recovered from the 20-inch depth; 2 small portions of clear lacquered clay pipe stem from a depth of 23 inches; an additional fragment of clay pipe stem bearing the hallmark "Montreal" from the 23-inch depth; 1 piece of ground and pecked gabro rock at a depth of 2-1 inches, which may be an unfinished implement; 2 small pieces of iron at the 27-inch depth; 1 bowl fragment of clear lacquered clay pipe at the 28-inch depth; an unlacquered clay pipe bowl portion from the 32-inch depth; and finally, a small 2-inch rectangular whetstone, cut and bracketed for insertion into some type of a handle, was recovered at a depth of 36 inches. These artifacts clearly testify to the post-1600 A.D. historic nature of Pit 6.

Pit 11 (Fig. 1).

This circular pit, having a diameter of 5 feet 6 inches, was depressed 16 inches below the present ground surface. Its flat bottom, at a depth of 39 inches did not have the thin lining of leaf mold and needles noted



a



b

PLATE 1.

a. Pit 6 looking east at Rock Lake.

b. Cairn 6 at Rock Lake.

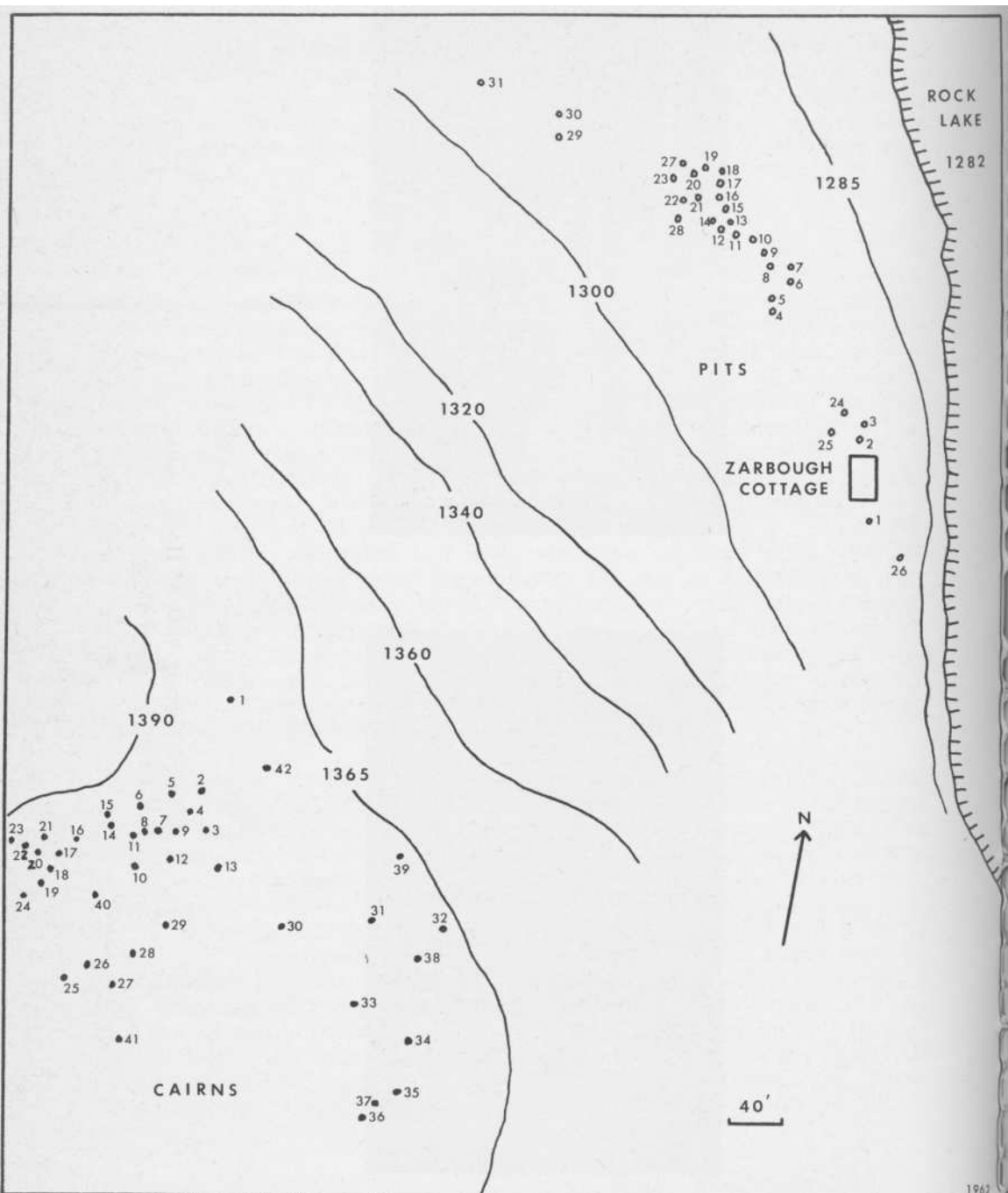


FIGURE 2
Distribution map of pits and cairns at Rock Lake.

TABLE 1 (CONTINUED)

Pit No.	Diameter	Shape	Comments
11	5' 6"	circular	Depressed 16" below ground level, this pit contains rocks averaging 6" - 18" in diameter. No artifacts were recovered upon excavation.
12	5'	circular	Lined with rocks averaging 8" - 12" in diameter.
13	11' 6" N—S by 6' E - W	rectangular	Lined with rocks averaging 6" - 20" in diameter; depression 17" below present ground surface.
14	5' 7"	circular	Lined with rocks averaging 4" - 13" in diameter.
15	5' 6"	circular	Lined with rocks averaging 8" - 13" in diameter.
16	5' 4"	circular	Rocks averaging 6" - 14" in diameter in depression 9" deep below present ground surface.
17	6' 7"	circular	Depth of depression is 14" below present ground surface; rocks lining it average 6" - 18" in diameter.
18	6' 6"	circular	Rocks lining pit average 8" - 18" in diameter.
19	5' 6"	circular	Rocks lining the pit average 5" - 17" in diameter.
20	6' 2"	circular	Lined with rocks averaging 6" - 18" in diameter.
21	4' 8"	circular	Lined with rocks averaging 5" - 16" in diameter.
22	5' 7"	circular	Lined with rocks averaging 6" - 14" in diameter.
23	5' 9"	circular	Lined with rocks averaging 7" - 18" in diameter; pit depressed 14" below present ground surface; low mound of earth around southeastern edge.

PIT DATA

TABLE 1.

Pit No.	Diameter	Shape	Comments
1	5'	circular	Pit lined with rocks in depression 13" below present ground surface.
2	5' 10"	circular	Rock lined, located just north of Zarbough's cottage.
3	7'	circular	Lined with rocks averaging 8" — 22" in diameter.
4	7'	circular	Lined with rocks averaging 6" - 10" in diameter.
5	5' 6"	circular	Lined with rocks averaging 6" — 12" in diameter.
6	5'6"	circular	Rock lined in depression 16" deep; also a low mound of earth around northern edge. Upon excavation this pit produced buried historic goods.
7	5'	circular	Rock lined and partially overgrown with roots.
8	7'	circular	Lined with rocks averaging 6" — 10" in diameter ; also, use made of large 4' wide stationary rock at northern edge.
9	10' E—W by 7' N—S	rectangular	This is one of the larger pits on the site and is depressed 21" below present ground level. The rocks lining the pit average 11" -- 20" in diameter.
10	5' 9"	circular	Lined with rocks averaging 12" - 23" in diameter.

TABLE 1 (CONTINUED)

Pit No.	Diameter	Shape	Comments
2	6'	circular	Lined with rocks averaging 6" - 22" in diameter.
25	5' 2"	circular	Lined with rocks averaging 8" - 26" in diameter; depressed 17" below present ground surface.
26	4' 3"	circular	This is the smallest pit; lined with reeks av eraging 6" — 22" <i>in</i> diameter
27	5' 4"	circular	Lined with rocks averaging 8" - 22" in diameter; depressed 14" below present ground surface.
28	6'	circular	Lined with rocks averaging 8" - 19" in diameter; depression 13" below present ground surface.
29	6' 2"	circular	Lined with rocks averaging 8" - 16" in diameter.
30	5' 6"	circular	Lined with rocks averaging 6"- 16" in diameter; depressed 14" below present ground surface.
31	5'	circular	Lined with rocks averaging 8" - 17" in diameter; depressed 11" below present ground surface.

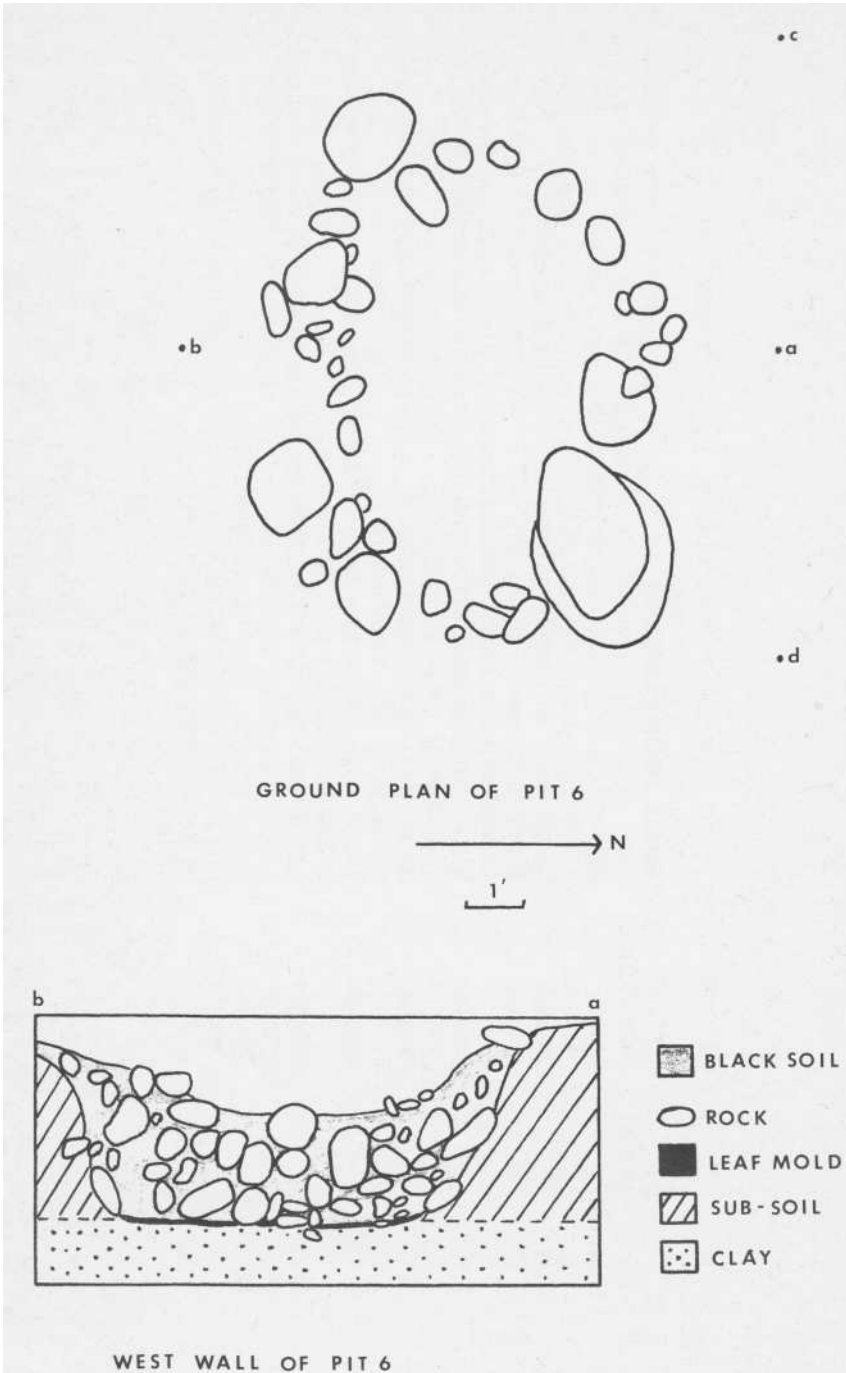


FIGURE 3
Two views of Pit 6.

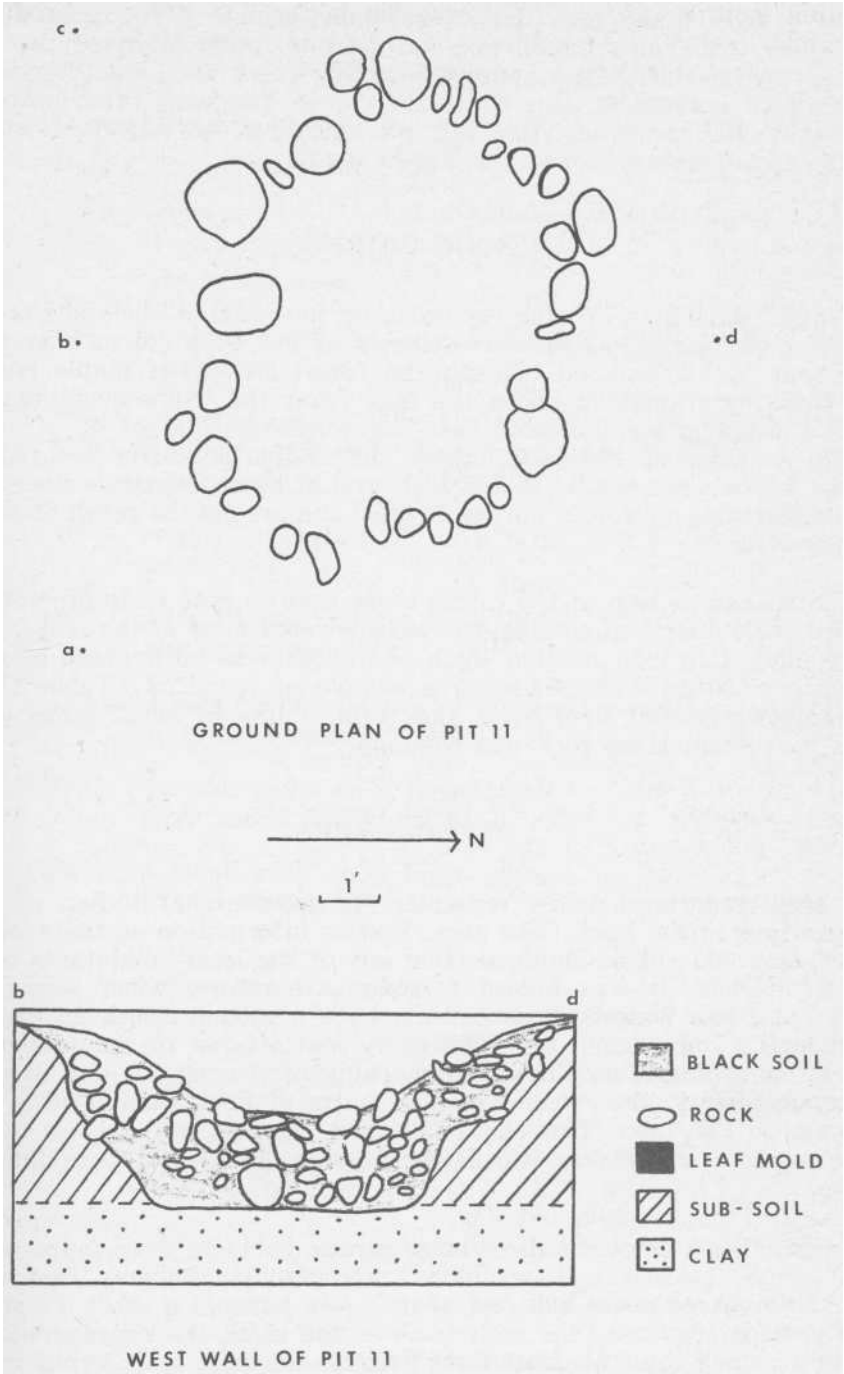


FIGURE 4
Two views of Pit 11.

in Pit 6. Pit 11 had been dug to hardpan through yellow sub-soil, and was filled with black humic soil and copious rocks. Many of the rocks around the base of the pit appeared as a piled rock wall, but those nearer the central surface of the depression were randomly distributed. No artifacts were recovered from this pit and, thus, no confident estimate of its date of construction or use can be made.

ROCK CAIRNS

In 1962, during an evening excursion up the steep hill behind Professor Zarbough's cottage, a distinctive cluster of low rock cairns was found. They sat openly exposed beneath the forest canopy of maple trees on the fir's major plateau above the lake front flat. Subsequent mapping of this cairn group indicated that there were a total of 42 structures within a radius of 160 feet; outside this radius no cairns occurred. The cairns lay between the 84 to 108 foot level of elevation above Rock Lake. All appeared to have been purposely piled and are not the result of natural phenomena.

Little can be said of the cairns other than to note their presence and record their distribution (Fig. 2). Moss covered most of the rocks, which were piled 2 to 9 in number upon one another to an average height of 20 inches. Notes were made on a sample of 8 cairns (Table 2) ; the remainder repeated their style and form. Piling of small rocks on top of a convenient large rock was common.

PETROGLYPHS

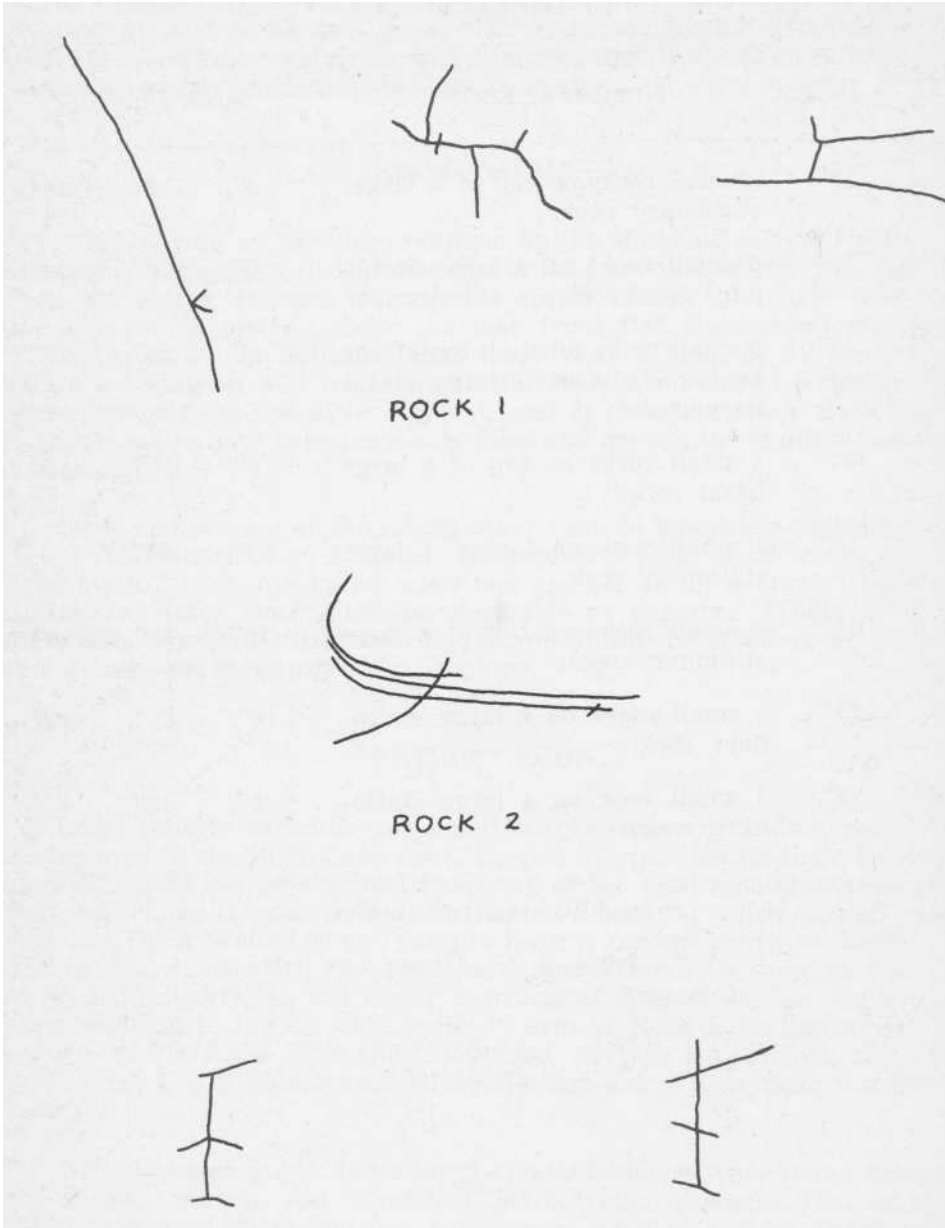
Local reports sketchily recounted the existence of Indian paintings or carvings in the Rock Lake area. Precise information on their location, however, could not be obtained from any of the local inhabitants nor the Park officials. It was indeed fortunate, therefore, when young nine-year old Dana Weiss, whose parents have a cottage south of Professor Zarbough's, approached the 1962 party and offered to show us the art work. Accordingly, on the sunny morning of August 31, our three-man party paddled to the extreme southern arm of Rock Lake leading to the portage to Pen Lake. This short 350-yard portage trail follows the west side of the South Madawaska River flowing out of Pen Lake into Rock Lake.

With Dana as guide, three large erratic boulders were found bearing six simple, pecked and scratched petroglyphic designs. Two of the boulders, spaced about 200 feet apart, were situated a short distance off the portage trail near the west bank of the river. As I measured it, the distance along the trail from Rock Lake to the first petroglyphs was 145 paces. A third boulder bearing petroglyphs lay on the east side of the river's edge, about 200 feet down from the old wooden logging dam at the north end of Pen Lake. All designs were pecked into the rock, 5 with simple linear strokes and 1 with curvilinear lines (Fig. 5).

CAIRN DATA

TABLE 2

Cairn No.	Height	Number of Rocks	Rock Diameter
1	18"	2 small rocks on top of a larger stationary rock.	6", 8", 16"
2	20"	5 small rocks on 1 large stationary base rock.	6", — 10", 26"
3	23"	9 small rocks piled on top of one another between 2 large stationary rocks.	8" — 10", 21"
	20"	8 small rocks on top of a large basal rock	8" 10", 30"
5	19"	1 small rock on top of a large stationary rock.	12", 44"
6	18"	4 small rocks on top of a large stationary rock.	10" — 13", 38"
18	25"	5 small rocks on a large stationary rock.	10" -- 15", 48"
40	18"	1 small rock on a large stationary rock.	9", 32"



ROCK 3

FIGURE 5

Petroglyph designs on the Pen to *Rock* Lake portage,
Algonquin Park, Ontario.

Rock 1

This large granitic boulder, 5! 2 feet high by 7 feet long, lay about 40 feet off the portage trail some 145 paces south of Rock Lake. Three pecked symbols were recognized on its eastern face. The first, a ½-inch wide pecked groove, ran 5 feet 4 1/2 inches in a straight line up the rock and displayed two short 1.2-inch pecked lines projecting in a V' from its lower half. This symbol had an appearance not unlike a walking snake. The second design occurred near the top of the rock to the right of that just described. This petroglyph covered an area 13 inches by 14 inches, and displayed a configuration of six connecting pecked lines 2-inch wide. To the right of this a third design was recognized. This had four pecked lines covering an area 15 inches by 7 inches.

Rock 2

The second large boulder bearing a single petroglyph was also found on the west side of the river, down about 200 feet north of Rock 1 and facing directly upon the river's edge. The petroglyph located here covers an area 28 inches by 18 inches, and was some six feet above the ground surface. Four distinct curvilinear lines have been pecked out of the rock to form the design.

Rock 3

A third large boulder, roughly 15 feet square, bore two designs. This rock was located on the edge of the river's east shore, 200 feet south of the waterfalls and dam out of Pen Lake. Two petroglyphs were noted 10 to 12 feet up the boulder and were examined by climbing a small adjacent tree. The two designs were basically similar, each having a central vertically pecked line 10 and 12 inches long, crossed by three thin horizontal lines 7 to 13 inches long. These two petroglyphs may be a form of stylized "Thunderbird".

No other petroglyphs were found at this time. The recorded finds are located at 45° 28' 45" N. latitude by 18° 23' 50" W. longitude.

INTERPRETATION AND COMPARISONS

The interpretations of the archaeological features recorded in 1962 at Rock Lake pose many problems and questions which prove difficult to answer in a direct manner. This is primarily due to the paucity of artifacts recovered and to the very nature of the features themselves. However, informative inferences and comparative analogies can be drawn. The interpretations which appear to offer the most plausible explanations are those of a socio-religious nature as indicated in the title of this paper.

The interpretation of the rock-lined pits is a case in point. The pits have clearly been dug intentionally and ringed with rocks for a definite purpose. Determination of their function is a key to their interpretation ; so also are the factors of determining probable ethnic affinities, and the period during which the pits were used. This latter factor is partially

clarified by the fact that at least one of the pits, (number 6), was constructed and utilized in historic times. Pit 11, on the other hand containing artifacts, may be prehistoric or present a ,historic pit in which the occupant (s) left no artifacts behind. Further excavation could perhaps clarify the temporal range during which the pits were used.

Many interpretations of the pits are not applicable. Suggestions such as hunting pits, storage repositories, snares or fish traps all prove unintelligible in terms of the site area and the closely spaced grouping of the pits. No game trails cross this area, and the terrain is relatively unpleasant. The one plausible interpretation is that the rock-lined structures represent "vision pits" constructed and utilized during aboriginal socio-religious ritual. Vision quest ritual used to be an integral part of the life-way of many Algonkian speaking bands (Rogers 1962; D5; Jenness 1963; 175), and other tribes influenced by Algonkians such as the Winnebago of Wisconsin (Radin 1917) .

The few historic accounts of vision quests reiterate the theme of a ritual carried out to obtain the blessing or sanction of spiritual guardian deities. The ritual was usually performed in an isolated area from the social group, and entailed a fast. Under such conditions it is not improbable that psychological inducements in the nature of "visions" would occur. Vision quests were primarily undertaken by a single individual, but sometimes in small groups. While the main and perhaps original concept of the quest was part of an initiation ceremony conducted at puberty, late historic accounts indicate that it was also undertaken during many major crisis in late life. In general, males were the primary participants, but females are also known to have pursued vision quests, as documented among the Sanpoil of eastern Washington (Ray 1932).

The rock-lined pits at Rock Lake are located in a relatively rugged area. This is keeping with the lonely and desolate location of the famous Puckasaw Pits around the north shore of Lake Superior (Emerson 1959), which are most adequately explained by a socio-religious function (Wright 1963: 7). Differences exist between the latter pits and those at Rock Lake, but the underlying conceptual purpose appears to be common. Six major pit types recorded at Red Sucker Point north of Marathon include the rectangular and circular forms at Rock Lake. Another common attribute is that the pits in both regions are located near and overlooking lake fronts. In view of this comparative data and the inapplicability of other interpretations, the Rock Lake pit structures are considered to represent "vision pits".

The circular structures at Rock Lake are large enough only for one or two individuals. In Pit 6, 2 different clay trade pipe portions suggest that 2 persons occupied it and, further, that they were males. That the mind of one was not entirely devoted to the quest of supernatural sanction is inferred from the presence of an unfinished gabra implement recovered near the pit's bottom.

The 2 recorded rectangular pits at Rock Lake were larger than any

of the circular structures. Conceivably, they were utilized by groups comprising more than 2 persons.

In view of the numerous rock-lined pits (31), it seems reasonable to believe that this locality at Rock Lake was a favoured spot for "vision" quests during the past.

The rock cairns behind and above the rock-lined pits at Rock Lake cannot definitely be demonstrated to be associated with the latter structures. However, it does seem possible that such a connection did exist. The 42 cairns approximate the number of pits recorded, and they too suggest a socio-religious theme of interpretation. Could the cairns not be "tobacco-drops" or dedication cairns erected to a guardian spirit after a successful vision? Three somewhat similar cairns were found at Red Sucker Point, Lake Superior (Emerson: personal communication), one of which was seen by the author during a visit to that site in 1960. Perhaps "vision pits" and cairns are combined in an integrated pattern.

The petroglyphs on the Pen to Rock Lake portage also constitute archaeological and art features of probable socio-religious import. They are neither as elaborate nor as numerous as other aboriginal art work reported from the Canadian Shield, such as the Peterborough petroglyphs near Stoney Lake (Sweetman 1955), or the famous rock paintings around Lake Superior (Dewdney and Kidd 1962). Two of the Rock Lake petroglyphs may represent a "walking snake" and a stylized form of "Thunderbird".

Establishing the ethnic affiliations of the Rock Lake pit users remains inferential. In the early 1600's, this Shield region of central Ontario was occupied primarily by hunting and gathering Algonkian speakers (probably Nipissings). The nearest Huron Iroquois resided 50 miles south of Rock Lake in the agriculturally fertile region of Victoria and Simcoe Counties. Thus, it is assumed that Algonkians are the most probable cultural group responsible for the use of the Rock Lake "vision pits".

Did the people of the prehistoric Rock Lake site excavated in 1939 construct some of the "vision pits" across the bay? It is possible, but this association is difficult to prove. Clearly the 1939 site represents a single prehistoric component and not a multi-component campsite as originally believed by Kidd (1948: 105). The blend of quartzite, slate and other atypical Iroquois lithics alongside Huron ceramic rim sherds at the 1939 site is typical of other excavated Algonkian sites. The historic component of the Shebishikong site on Georgian Bay (Wright 1965: 192) produced Huron ceramics in association with a predominantly Algonkian lithic assemblage. Cultural borrowing of concepts and material items is characteristic on Algonkian sites excavated to date.

Authors Note: Miss Helen Devereux of The University of Calgary has recently informed the author that she found groups of pits (2 to 30) on the cobble beaches of Notre Dame and Exploits Bays on the north coast of Newfoundland in the summer of 1965. She noted similarities to the pits

around the north shore of Lake Superior. As she suggests, there may be a patterned distribution of such pits across the Algonkian homeland of northeastern Canada. \V. C. N.

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