

# Rock Lake Revisited

By Mike Ault, Copyright 2007

About 2 years ago I read about the pyramids of Rock Lake. In Native American legends there were the “stone teepees” visible from the shore or canoe when the water level in Rock Lake was low, early settlers also reported these structures. Then in the early 1800’s the level of the lake was raised by 10-20 feet to allow for a mill to be constructed, inundating these structures and driving them from men’s minds until the 1900’s when again the levels in the lake were low enough and the water clear enough (in the early spring and late fall) for the tops of the structures to be visible. In the late 1960’s these structures were documented in the 1967 issue of "Skin Diver" magazine in an article by John Kennedy. Several popular books such as “THE LOST PYRAMIDS OF ROCK LAKE” and “ATLANTIS IN WISCONSIN” by Frank Joseph and “THE DRAGON IN THE LAKE” by Archie Eschborn, brought the structures to the attention of the world generating interest from several television shows that specialize in ancient mysteries.



Skin Diver Magazine

Even more interesting is a 1989 account of a complete side-scan sonar search of the lake by Frank Joseph however, these scans don’t seem to be available.

Intrigued by these reports I decided to go to Rock Lake and dive on the structures myself to see what I could find. Various work issues delayed me by almost a year but I was finally able to make the journey to Lake Mills, Wisconsin and dive the mysterious Rock Lake in late April of 2007. I made my arrangements through a local dive operator, Cambridge Divers, specifically Randy Peine, who is as interested in the enigmatic Rock Lake Pyramids as I am. In preparation I had downloaded a high resolution satellite image of Rock Lake and using that, with the various references and Google Earth to get GPS coordinates gave Randy several sets of coordinates to investigate.

I arrived in Milwaukee, Wisconsin on a Thursday night and drove to my hotel in Madison (about a 72 mile journey) as I passed the exit on I-94 for Lake Mills I tried to catch a glimpse of the lake as I went past at 65 plus miles per hour but wasn't able to in the evening gloom. Upon arrival at the hotel I had to run over to Fontana Sporting Goods where I picked up 4 scuba tanks and about 20 pounds of lead weights. Finally, back at the hotel I called Randy (who was on his way home from Minnesota) and we discussed the possibility of diving the next day.

Given the overcast and windy conditions, we held off diving until Saturday and instead I went to Aztalan Park and took some shots of the mounds there. I figured that the structures at Aztalan would prepare me for what we might find at the near-by Rock Lake. At Aztalan there are two large mounds (actually recreations) one smooth sided mound that rises about 12 feet above grade and the other a 2-level platform mound that rises about 20 feet above grade.



1-level Platform Mound at Aztalan



2-level Platform Mound at Aztalan

Also present were several small (20 feet in diameter, about 6-10 feet above grade) conical mounds, originally used to support vertical poles, only about a dozen remain of the original 40 or so that were present when settlers first arrived in the region.



Conical Mounds at Aztalan

As I reached the top of the single level platform mound a hawk circling overhead cried out, I hoped it was a good omen for the rest of the trip. On the southeast side of the 2-level pyramid I found a fairy-circle about 6 feet in diameter hopefully another good

omen. As a child I had been told that the fairy circles were where the fairies danced at nights of the full moon, when I got older they told me it was because of a lightening strike, I think I like the first explanation better. Of course it could just mark an old Aztalan septic tank...



Fairy Circle at Aztalan

After tramping around the Aztalan Park for about an hour I went over for my first real look at Rock Lake. The sky was grey with clouds and a brisk wind made it a bit nippy as I stared out over the water. I could see that the water clarity, at least close to shore, appeared to be pretty good as I was able to see the stones on the bottom out to about the 5-10 foot depth.



My First Look at Rock Lake

I returned to my hotel and called Randy and we decided to meet at 8am the next morning for our first set of dives, it was supposed to be partly cloudy and warm.

The next morning started cloudy but turned to partly cloudy to clear, there was a light breeze that cooled you off a bit, I was glad I was diving a dry suit as the breeze would have made a wetsuit a chilly proposition during the surface intervals. I met Randy and his 14 year old daughter Bren, at Rock Lake Park boat ramp at 8am sharp. We loaded the gear onto the pontoon boat and set off for our first dive site.

Randy had chosen Fremont Bar as our first dive site. It is likely that Fremont Bar is probably at least one of the sites that led to the stone teepee legends. The bar is in about 20-30 foot of water and consists of a sand bar with a pile of rocks on each end that are roughly the same size and shape. The placement of the stone piles on Fremont bar reminded me of the placement of the earthen mounds at Aztalan. Unfortunately in my haste to get setup and get ready for the dive I missed the fact that my lens was set on manual focus so as I tried to photograph the stones making up the piles on the bar, I struggled to get a good focus. In addition the water clarity at depth was only 10-15 feet maximum due to a diatom hatch that made it appear that it was snowing underwater. The final insult on this first dive was the Canon 20D locking up with an ERR99 signal. This ERR99 seems to happen with annoying regularity on the first dive of set of dives I make with the camera, unfortunately to correct it you must take out the battery for 20 seconds then replace it, not something you can do with the camera in an Ikelite housing, 20 feet underwater.

The Fremont bar seemed to me to definitely show the hand of man in the placement of the stone piles and their uniformity. Some experts have claimed that they are only glacial drumlins but why would a glacier leave two nearly identical piles of stone on either end of a sand base? Also during the dive at Fremont bar I found what I believe was a mortar

stone. The mortar stones used by Native Americans were usually 2-3 feet in diameter and have a depression chipped into the top side that when used with a pestle stone worked as a primitive grinder for grain or for shells to add as binder in pottery clay. The stone I found was about 2 feet in diameter, about a foot and a half thick and had a depression on the top that fit the typical mortar stone description exactly. In most cases mortar stones were left behind when a site was abandoned as they were too heavy to be transported. I wish I could have photographed the stone but with the camera on the fritz I was unable to, however, Randy has the GPS coordinates for the area where we found it so on a return dive next year I should have better luck.

On the next dive we examined the so-called “Delta Mound” site. It was a uniform 10 feet depth and had very well defined sides. From our examination it was impossible to determine if it was man made or natural. Heavy silting on the delta mound and the lake in general covered any possible signs that human hands had been at work at the Delta site. In addition to silt loading, milfoil has also taken over any shallow, well lit areas, making finding any artifacts difficult.



Top of the Delta Mound

On my dive trip to the USS Oriskany three weeks earlier I had reconfigured my regulators from a doubles setup for use with a dry suit to a single setup for use with a single tank and wetsuit. When I packed for this dive trip, since I was using a single tank configuration, I just grabbed the regulator as-is and packed it, I neglected to replace the dry suit inflator hose that I had removed, so I ended up on this first set of dives using my wing inflator on my dry suit and using the manual inflator on the wing. This led to me getting quite exhausted as I treaded water on the surface and filled my wing. By the end of the second dive I was ready to call it a day. In addition the wind was picking up to around 15-20 mph and the lake was getting a bit choppy with whitecaps so we packed it in. We agreed to meet at 8am on Sunday for our final set of dives.

On Sunday morning we met once again at the Rock Lake Park boat ramp, Randy had procured a spare inflator hose and I had ensured that the camera was properly set up. Two additional divers, Deb and Bill joined us to aid in the search efforts. We decided to try and locate what Randy called “The Alter” a flat, single level mound with stone circles (probably the remains of Pukaskwa pits) on its flat surface. Using dead reckoning and some coordinates I had gleaned from my satellite photos we were able to find the site. As I said before I wasn't in the water for more than 4 minutes on the first dive and had just come upon the first Pukawska pit when the infamous ERR99 started flashing on the 20D display. Surfacing, I guided Bren through the method to open the housing and clear the error. A tip of the hat to Bren who really saved the day!

The top of the mound had numerous stone circles, some with stones weighing at least 100 pounds or more. All of the stone circles we found had the same accumulation of silt and moss as the underlying stones of the mound which seemed to indicate they had been underwater the same length of time. The silt and moss is easily removed from the stones if they are handled and there were several stones laying about that had obviously been handled as they were clear or partially clear of silt and moss.



Possible Pukaskwa pit remains



Another Possible Pits Remains

After diving the alter we pulled up the anchors and sought out the location of the effigies reported to be of a turtle and a headless man. In the approximate location specified by a simple map we were able to locate we dropped anchor (looking at the depth indicator from the fish finder also helped) and Bill and I and Deb and Randy splashed as two dive teams to try and locate the effigies.

We found odd shaped cutouts that ran about 4-5 feet in diameter and to about 3 – 4 foot in depth. I followed the edges and they seemed to be a partial shape of some kind but whether it was a turtle, headless man or just some weird natural formation I am not sure, if I was a betting man I would have to place money on it being the partially silted in turtle effigy, I have never seen a natural phenomena that could produce that type of pattern to that depth. While at this site I found a cast iron buoy weight, Bill found a gallon coffee can buoy weight with a couple of feet of rope attached and together we found, I kid you not, a wheel from a Ford Model A. Given the number of buoy weights we found I assume someone was trying to mark the site, of course the deep marks we found could have been from someone searching for the rest of the Model A or maybe they were Winnebozo nest sites (Winnebozo is the Native American name for the serpent like monster with a horses head that guards the stone pyramids).





Bill holding the Model A wheel

On the way to the various dive sites Randy showed me how the bottom would be going along nice and smooth then suddenly there would be a 5-10 foot high bump just out of no where. I couldn't help but compare these to the small mounds at Aztalan used to hold up poles, unfortunately we didn't have the time (or the tanks) to explore these so I'll save them for a return trip.

So all-in-all we located stone teepees, pukawska pits and a turtle effigy partly buried in silt. We also found a Model A wheel, an old broken fishing net and several buoy weights. Of course we saw some under water life as well, one interesting creature that makes Rock Lake it's home is the Mud Puppy, I believe it is in the salamander family but never loses it's aquatic nature, retaining gills and living always under water, we chased up three of these with the largest being at least 18 inches long.



Rock Lake Mud Puppy

We also chased up a juvenile Gar and a softshell turtle and Randy spotted a couple of large bass in our search for the Rock Lake Pyramids.



Shy Softshell Turtle



Juvenile Gar

After recovering the wheel, we noticed that the sunny day had turned partly cloudy and the wind was beginning to gust up to 15-20 mph again, I guess the spirits of Rock Lake had decided they had shown us enough for this trip. We pulled in the anchors and headed back to the boat launch.

You may notice that like others before me I am not publishing any GPS coordinates for these features, I do this because I don't want everyone diving on, and ruining these sites, they still hold a strong position in the belief structures of the Native Americans in the region and it would pain me to no end to see a "Joe was here" scratched into some of the rocks. If you want to dive the sites, contact one of the local operators like Cambridge Divers and do it under guidance. Remember to take only pictures and leave only bubbles (we didn't feel the Model A wheel really added anything to the site, so we felt justified in removing it.)

So, after 5 dives in the enigmatic Rock Lake, what can I conclude nearly 40 years after the original article in Skin Diver? The lake is still there and so are its mysteries. I saw enough to convince me that there are Native American ruins of one sort or another under the lakes surface and there are many signs that the hand of man had some measure of credit for the Rock Lake structures. I can't wait to go back next year (earlier before the diatoms and algae bloom) and do some more investigations!