Pilot Rock: A Lighthouse to the Past

Long, long ago a massive chunk of pink quartzite was left behind in the immense wash of a turbulent inland sea. It's impossible to imagine a rock 20-feet high, 40-feet wide, 60-feet long--getting carted anywhere, but that's what happened. An ocean swept that massive thing south and east from its moorings on the outcropping of Gitche Manitou or Pipestone. In its fingers, the glacier picked it up and unceremoniously left it behind.

Once upon a time, Pilot Rock got orphaned on the northwest Iowa plains. Geologists call it a "glacial erratic," which is to say an oddity, which it was and still is. There that massive rock sits up on a hill, all by its lonesome.

You might think it hard to miss something that big on open land, but it isn't. Because Pilot Rock is on private property, you can see it only from afar, atop a hill overlooking the Little Sioux a couple miles south of Cherokee. The County is kind enough to keep up a little park just off highway 59—a picnic table right there if you pack a sandwich. Pull over, get out of the car, and look up the hill to the east to where that huge glacial erratic sits, one skinny sympathetic sidekick tree beside it.

It's just sort of sad.

But, as always, there's a story.

For centuries, Pilot Rock was a pilot to countless generations of our aboriginals. The only available maps were the rivers: you had to learn to read them to know your way around. But here and there goofy oddities like big, forlorn glacial erratics helped. Long before there was a Cherokee, if you were in sight of Pilot Rock, you knew where you were. Breathe easy. Sleep well. Sweet story.
There's more. Some Cherokee-ans will be happy to point you at a book by America's first popular novelist, James Fennimore Cooper of *Last of the Mohicans* fame. It's a stretch, but give those Cherokee-ans an ear because they claim Pilot Rock plays a role in Cooper's novel *The Plains*. They'll be more than happy to give you chapter and verse. Hearken, thus, to the voice of James Fennimore Cooper: Amid the monotonous rolling of the prairie, a single naked and ragged rock arose on the margin of a little watercourse, which found its way, after winding a vast distance through the plains, into one of the numerous tributaries of the Father of Rivers.

That "single and naked rock" appears in chapter 8. Look it up yourself. Pilot Rock becomes a rest stop for the ragamuffin Ishmael Bush and his a covered-wagon gang of pioneers looking for a life on the frontier.

Sometime during the Civil War, white folks started drifting into valley of the Little Sioux, and started chipping away at Pilot Rock, looking for stone for building foundations. A James Fennimore Cooper fantatic, a man named Riggs from way out east in New Jersey, determined the rock James Fennimore Cooper made famous in *The Prairie* should not and would not suffer sacrilege; thus, he bought a goodly chunk of land around it to protect the rock from frontier infidels.

This Mr. Riggs is long gone, but Pilot Rock is still on private property. If you stop to see it, promise me you won't walk up the hill without permission.

But down beneath, you can't help feeling sorry for that old chunk of quartzite. It has such an illustrious past: a beacon for souls who've lost their way, a rock of ages given celebrity status in a Cooper novel where the Deerslayer, that noble Native hero, is delivered at last to the happy hunting ground.

Here's an idea. Grab a quarter-pounder from McDonalds just down the road. Maybe fries. Then drop by that little park, nicely kept, spread out a napkin or
two, and get that novel up on your phone (it's public domain), flip to chapter eight, and have lunch just down the hill from that massive glacial erratic, once a lighthouse above an ocean of grass.

Go ahead and have lunch with a pink quartzite orphan, a celebrity, once upon a time a star.