

The More Things Change
Rock Cut State Park's Environmental History

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After a long absence, visiting a much-loved place is always a disorienting experience. After moving away from Rockford, Illinois, the city where I, for better or worse, spent the first thirteen years of my life, visits back to the city were always vaguely surreal. I would visit my best friend and we would talk about all of the changes that had happened since I left: the ugly fence the new owners put up around my old house, the extra lanes added to North Second Street, the out-of-the-way stores that had been boarded up and died. But the surreality of the visits came from not what had changed, but what had stayed the same – although the details were different, almost everything remained as I had left it.

When my family visited Rockford, my dad would infallibly drop by what was perhaps *his* best friend –Rock Cut State Park, 3,092 acres of trails and lakes only a few minutes north of the city.¹ “Going running at Rock Cut” was often his daily ritual when we lived in Rockford. During visits, he would again run the trails and notice all of the changes that had occurred since he had left: some of the trails had widened to adapt to a new style of skiing, or a new concessions building had gone up to accommodate the influx of tourists, or a new burn had charred the prairie restoration area. But essentially, things at Rock Cut stayed the same. During one visit, another runner stopped my dad and asked him for directions to a certain spot. My dad rattled off the route – he had been down the wooded paths so many times he’d memorized the way, which hadn’t changed at all after his years of absence.

Despite his expert knowledge of Rock Cut’s trails, my dad’s expertise doesn’t extend to its history. He was surprised to find out that under the dammed waters of Pierce Lake lie stretches of abandoned railroad grade, which, before the park was a park, carried trains from Rockford to Kenosha. Although what was on the land changed drastically between the days of the railroad and today, the purposes of the park and the railroad were surprisingly similar. Both the building of the railroad and the creation of the park were attempts to link this patch of land to an outside market, whether it was grain buyers or tourists. The manipulation of nature was central to both of these attempts. The old limestone railroad bed that peeks above Willow Creek and the lake’s dammed waters a few steps away represent different stages of the same story on the same piece of land. My dad and I, when we visited Rock Cut and sat on the banks of Willow

Creek years ago, throwing rocks into the water, were participants in this story, although, I'm sure, blissfully unaware of it.

I have heard the words "Rock Cut" so many times that they have become meaningless – just empty signifiers. However, like so many other place names, Rock Cut's is far from insignificant, offering a compact history of the place it denotes. The name alludes to the railroad that once traveled through what are now park lands. In 1859, engineers worked to blast a "cut" through solid rock in order to provide a suitable roadbed for the Rockford & Kenosha railroad.² This railroad, like the others in the Rockford area, changed the land and the community more than almost any other development, linking (or, in this case, attempting to link) far off cities and markets to the settlers of Winnebago County.

The typical early settler of the area that is now Rock Cut came from New York or New England, arriving in the area around the mid 1830's. Most pioneers gravitated toward familiar habitats, sticking to areas that reminded them of home.³ Winnebago county is adjacent to southern Wisconsin, and, like its neighbor, is relatively New England-esque: rolling and wooded. In particular, the sections of Harlem Township that are now part of Rock Cut were in 1835 composed of timber and open woodland, with Willow Creek providing plentiful water. Campbell, in his history of the area, notes "most pioneers settled near springs or creeks without much regard to the soil for farming. Wood and water were far more in demand, initially, than land. This is the reason some of the best farmlands were not settled until later."⁴ The white oak, walnut, and hickory groves might have been troublesome to clear, but once the trees were felled, they offered ample resources for the construction of a large cabin.

Additionally, settlers in general preferred wooded areas to prairie, assuming that treeless land was unsuited to farming. The prairie posed many problems for a potential farmer: the grasses were sharp enough to cut up a pair of boots, and breaking up the tough roots and sticky soil required several yoke of oxen.⁵ But in 1837 John Deere developed the first self-scouring steel plow, which sliced through the difficult sod. The prairie suddenly became more desirable, and vast stretches were plowed under. As new

technologies opened up more land to “improvements,” Winnebago County began to grow and agriculture began to flourish.

Abiel Samuel Dennison, an easterner who spent time “hunting and getting lost” on the vast prairies near Rockford in the early 1850’s, tried to determine the prospects of this region. His biography describes it thusly: “Here was a fine looking, fertile country, with a healthy climate, that produced wonderful crops, but there was no market for anything, no railroads, or any prospect for railroads, no navigable rivers and no canals. Some grain three years old was still in stacks, not worth threshing and hauling to market.” The people had had plenty to eat, but wore poor clothing and lived in ramshackle houses unsuitable for the harsh Illinois winter.⁶ They had no access to markets on which to sell their fine crops or buy decent clothes and lumber. In 1857, however, “prospects for railroads” seemed to materialize, as plans to build the Rockford & Kenosha railroad went underway.

Another railroad had already transformed the city of Rockford. In August 1852, the first engine entered Rockford, riding on the rails of the Galena & Chicago Union line. Once the line reached Freeport in 1853, land values in the area doubled practically overnight. Chicago grain markets now had access to the “wonderful crops” Dennison had noticed – the city was now only a half-day’s trip away, rather than an arduous five to eight day wagon voyage. Grain production rose sharply, and within a decade Rockford’s population tripled in size.⁷ Rockford was no longer an isolated agricultural village – the speed and convenience of the new railroad had drawn it into the rings of Chicago’s market.

The Rockford & Kenosha railroad was an attempt to tap into that profitability. Investors like Charles Spafford from Rockford and Zalmon Simmons from Kenosha organized the line in an attempt to compete with the larger Chicago & Northwestern railroad. Southern Wisconsin was the nation’s wheat and grain belt in the pre-Civil War years. Spafford and Simmons speculated that, with the help of their rail line, Kenosha would become a competitive Great Lakes shipping center, sending grain to hungry markets along the river system that stretched all the way to the Gulf of Mexico.⁸ The railroad would serve as a means of connection: while the area’s fertile lands were important for the venture, the transient train cars passing through those lands, linking

their crops to needy markets far away, were the key to prosperity. Or at least such was the plan. Unfortunately, the railroad was doomed from the start. The Chicago line, with its connection to the booming city, inevitably won out, but not before the land that is now Rock Cut changed in the attempt to link local farmers with the rest of America.

In forested glens throughout the southwestern part of Rock Cut still stand the dolomitic limestone bluffs that played such a large role in the construction of the railroad.⁹ Some of these blocky towers, like Lone Rock, are well-known park landmarks. Others rise rather unobtrusively out of the trees, surprising only because rocky surfaces are the exception rather than the rule in this part of the world. The limestone bluffs, or rather their demolition, gave Rock Cut its name. Work crews blasted a roadbed through the outcroppings leaving the existing bluffs. Some of the original railroad grade that was assembled from these operations is still visible along Willow Creek. The cracking stone, shot through with tree roots and branches, tilts steeply into the creek. The passage of years has rendered it almost natural-looking, were it not for its suspicious flatness and the sporadic rusty wire loop emerging from the water.

The word “rock” appears so often in place names in Winnebago County – Rockford, Rockton, Rock Cut, Rock River – that it is worth dwelling on the importance of this substance to the region. Only a few years before the railroad crews blasted limestone bluffs in Rock Cut, the Rock River’s limestone ford a few miles away provided a secure base for a new hydraulic power dam. This dam, which residents of the town built and financed themselves, would become the mainspring of most of Rockford’s development in the mid-1800’s, giving birth to the Water Power District that would transform Rockford into the manufacturing city it is today.¹⁰ Limestone was a symbol of prosperity for the region: the ford was the city’s namesake and attracted early settlers, who used it as a crossing place. Later, when Rock Cut became a state park, the limestone cliffs, especially Lone Rock, became attractions for a different reason – they brought in tourists. But in 1857, the same limestone that supported Rockford’s dam would support the railroad track, which, local farmers hoped, would bring similar prosperity their way.

Farmers had such hope in the railroad that they sometimes risked everything to help finance it. Spafford, the president of the Rockford & Kenosha railroad, sold stock to farmers along the proposed route, telling them that “projected earnings from the railroad

would pay for the bonds before they were due in five years.” Some farmers even used their farms as collateral for the notes. But other area residents gave up even more for this ill-founded project. The coming of the railroad line along Willow Creek forced the relocation of the small settlement of Harlem to a new site, where it remains today.¹¹ The railroad not only rearranged nature, creating railroad beds from limestone bluffs, but also communities, unsettling settlers.

The railroad, unfortunately, unsettled more than just the physical communities. Construction soon stalled from lack of funds, and in 1864 the debt-riddled president of the Rockford & Kenosha line sold the railroad to Chicago & Northwestern, the very company the new line had hoped to compete against.¹² The bankruptcy forced farmers to sell their now-useless stock to the Chicago company, most likely ruining many of them. The railroad, now the Kenosha division of the Chicago & Northwestern, was extended, and ran as a modest feeder and passenger line until it sputtered out in the 1930’s. The rails were pulled up and the stations abandoned.¹³

Attempting to link the fertile but isolated land of Northern Illinois to trade networks that stretched from the East Coast through the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico, the Rockford & Kenosha railroad was perhaps a noble failure, or perhaps an ill-planned blunder. Either way, the name of the state park that contains the remains of the railroad is a subtle reminder of that attempt. However, the failure of the line may be what made Rock Cut State Park possible. Were the railroad, improbably, a success, the land would have been developed rather than abandoned, and Rock Cut might have never come to be.

It is surprising, actually, that a state park even exists in Winnebago county. A state park entails, of course, involvement with the state, and the Rockford area has had a rather standoffish relationship with the state of Illinois ever since its inception. In the 1840’s, Rockford residents were alarmed at the huge debt the state had incurred for “improvements” in the southern part of Illinois. So, in 1842, Winnebago County went so far as to hold a referendum to secede from Illinois and annex itself to the Wisconsin territory. The campaign continued until Congress officially defined the state boundary in 1848, permanently locking Winnebago county onto the state of Illinois. But Rockford

kept trying, usually in ways more subtle than secession, to separate itself from the patchwork flatness that is downstate Illinois. Lundin, in his history of Rockford, even claims that “if there is one thing that has characterized Rockford politics through the years, it is a resistance to outside controls.”¹⁴

In the 1950’s, however, many Rockford residents felt that they needed a state park – a refuge from worsening urban conditions and the industrial environment in the city. Since the last days of the Kenosha division of the Chicago & Northwestern in the 1930’s, the railroad’s land had sat idle and undeveloped. A small part of the Rock Cut area had been a popular forest preserve since 1930, but some Rockfordians, like Representative William Pierce, thought that the Rockford area had grown so large that it needed a recreational area with swimming, fishing, and other outdoor activities.¹⁵ A state park was the solution. Pierce and others knew that, although it involved extra-local controls, a state park could remedy the local deficit in wilderness and recreational areas. After several years of lobbying, Rock Cut State Park opened on September 6, 1962.

If Rockford residents supported the park’s opening so they could retreat from urban ills, the state supported Rock Cut because of the economic promise it offered. At the park’s opening, Governor Otto Kerner said that “lakes and conservation areas such as Rock Cut not only would draw tourists from out of state, but would discourage Illinois sportsmen from leaving the state for Wisconsin and Kentucky fishing.”¹⁶ Quite aside from merely serving the local needs of the heavily-populated northern Illinois region, the state hoped that Rock Cut’s services would extend farther. The park both would keep tourism dollars in the state and would draw money from outside of Illinois. The governor estimated that a program to draw recreationists could bring at least \$50 million dollars a year into Illinois.¹⁷ The state extracted money from these tourists from camping fees and hunting and fishing licenses, but the city of Rockford also gained business when non-local people came to the region. Much like the building of the Rockford & Kenosha railroad in the 1850’s, the creation of the park on this very same land tried to link the local to extra-local markets. But instead of grain buyers, these markets were now out-of-state tourists funding the Illinois government or Illinoisans buying camping supplies in a Rockford shop.

On the breezy 65-degree day of the park's opening, Gov. Otto Kerner stood near the dammed waters of Pierce Lake and summed up the two purposes of Rock Cut, noting that the new park would both contribute to the economy of the area and "assure all Illinoisans permanent access to their outdoor heritage."¹⁸ What Kerner left unspoken was that the tourist economy and this "outdoor heritage" were intimately linked – that nature and recreation were what drew the tourists to the area. But what did the tourists who would (hopefully) soon flood the park think about this heritage? What did they think about the "nature" in Rock Cut, and, more importantly, their presence in it?

The park was, and still is, meant to be a retreat to nature, a refuge from the urban. Bounded by highways and actually severed by Interstate 90, Rock Cut is tightly connected to the city but undeniably very different from it. The main road winds through the park, closely wooded at times, branches knitting overhead. From the main road trails fork off. In the roadless southwest part of the park these trails are fairly primitive – thin and secluded, surrounded by oaks and mature pines. The northern section of the park is filled with fields of native prairie grasses, which at first glance look surprisingly similar to the cornfields just outside the park's north exit. The wildflowers' blooms in the spring and the leaves' the changing colors in the fall draw city dwellers who have a difficult time seeing the signs of changing seasons in the urban environment.

On the other hand, the park is meant as a recreational area for people, and the human presence is apparent in almost every square foot of the park, even those that seem most "natural." Nearest the main road this is most evident: parking lots, boat rentals, concession stands, and telephone wires scream that this is a place for human recreation, and not necessarily for nature. But even farther away from these blatant signs, humans shape the more "natural" aspects of the park. Pierce Lake is entirely man-made, although on the lake itself the spillway is almost hidden from view. Rock Cut's wooded paths are carefully maintained – signs are posted at the trailheads stating, "this area is managed to retain or restore its unique natural features and vegetation." Even the fields of compass plant and switchgrass are not naturally abundant, but were brought back from the brink of extinction by human hands. The prairie restoration area in the northern section of the park is a conscious attempt to revive the Illinois landscape that John Deere's self-scouring steel plow upturned more than 150 years ago.

As Rock Cut's "natural vegetation" and prairie grasses suggest, the park not only creates human artifice but also erases it. The area's natural history, not its human history, is the park's focus. While the Rockford & Kenosha railroad's legacy lives on in Rock Cut's name and in its promotional brochures, the land itself bears little mark of the railroad's passing. Aside from a few meters of old railroad grade, some quarried limestone faces, and an tiny moss-covered stone foundation – perhaps the remnants of a railroad outbuilding – this land's human history is now largely buried under a natural facade. Tourists visit a state park to enjoy nature, even if, it seems, that nature is somewhat artificial. In Rock Cut State Park, like in so many other "natural" areas, there is the feeling that this is not necessarily a place for nature, but for humans to use nature for their recreation – there is an odd tension between the managed and the wild. This tension comes from the way in which the park's land is altered to draw visitors to a place that is both human and natural.

This hints at the history of the land that is today Rock Cut. The history of the park is not only a natural history, but also a history of people manipulating that nature to draw in outsiders. Today, the state park manipulates the land of Rock Cut much as the limestone blasting and quarrying did during the construction of the railroad 150 years ago. Although the ways the park now changes the landscape are very different from the ways the railroad did, the purpose of the changes was much the same: to link the land to outside markets. The only differences came with the times: in the 1850's, agriculture and grain markets propelled the construction of the railroad; in the 1950's, urbanization and people's increasing desire to flee it meant that the land was now better suited for tourism. In both instances, the story was the same: what was important was not necessarily who was settled on the land, but to whom it was connected.

The cover of the Rock Cut State Park promotional brochure encapsulates nicely the way that the land is viewed today. On the front cover is a long, narrow photograph of the lake, the water aesthetically framed with grasses and trees. Clearly, the brochure shows us Rock Cut as a place of the natural world: the telephone wires, the boat rentals, and the spillway are cropped out of the picture's frame. However, on the lake, in the distance, sits the tiny figure of a person in a boat. While nature comprises the bulk of this photograph, the tiny tourist is the focus of it – now riding on Pierce Lake, but before too

long leaving, transient. My dad and I were tourists like the one in the photo, sometimes coming from just down the street, sometimes from farther away. As he ran the trails, my dad was thinking mostly about the nature around him – the wildflowers or the reddening leaves – and not the human history that shaped that nature. When my dad and I were tossing rocks into Willow Creek years ago, we were listening to the sounds of falling stones and splashing water, not searching for artifacts from the past. But even had we noticed that we were sitting near a cracking block of old railroad grade, I doubt that we would have realized, or cared, that our own presence in the park was part of the same story as those bits of limestone rock.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Illinois Department of Natural Resources, "What's In A Name? The History of Rock Cut State Park."

² Illinois DNR.

³ Craig G. Campbell, *History of Loves Park, Illinois* (Rockford: Campbell, 1998) 14.

⁴ Campbell, 16.

⁵ Jon W. Lundin, *Rockford: An Illustrated History* (Chatsworth: Windsor, 1989) 32.

⁶ Nathaniel Thompson Allison, Ed., *History of Cherokee County Kansas and its representative citizens*, 1904, 14 Apr. 2002, <<http://skyways.lib.ks.us/genweb/archives/chokeee/1904/bios/dennisas.html>>.

⁷ Lundin, 40-42.

⁸ Campbell, 20; Patrik Vander Velden, "Zalmon Simmons: Industrialist, philanthropist," *Kenosha News* 2001, 8 Apr. 2002, <<http://www.kenoshacounty.com/community/book3folder/simmons.html>>.

⁹ Campbell, 112.

¹⁰ Lundin, 41-43.

¹¹ Campbell, 20.

¹² Vander Velden.

¹³ Campbell, 20.

¹⁴ Lundin, 12, 21.

¹⁵ Illinois DNR.

¹⁶ Quoted in Frank Maier, "Rock Cut Park Opened; Lake Named for Pierce," *Morning Star* [Rockford] 6 Sep. 1962: A1.

¹⁷ Maier, A1.

¹⁸ Maier, A1.