

Ontonagon, John Richardson

KEY IDEAS

- Folk tales such as Big Bad John commemorate heroic events based in reality that teach us about our history

STORY

The song, Big Bad John, by Jimmy Dean tells of a miner who turned into a folk hero. Big John was a mysterious and quiet miner who earned the nickname due to large size. One day, a support timber cracked at the mine where John worked. The situation looked hopeless until John “grabbed a saggin’ timber, gave out with a groan / and like a giant oak tree just stood there alone”, then “gave a mighty shove”, opening a passage and allowing the other miners to escape the mine. John, however, didn’t make it outside, meeting his demise in the depths of the mine. The mine itself was never reopened, but a marble stand was placed in front of it, commemorating Big John.

BACKGROUND

Ontonagon county is located in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan where the iron-rich Porcupine Mountains are located. *Ontonagon* is sculpted around a massive iron boulder. Visually it suggests the equipment used to mine, process and transport ore to create the finished product: steel trusses for the construction of such structures as buildings and bridges. By the end of the nineteenth century, Michigan was a leading producer of copper and iron ore, a role that shaped its industrial future.

The title of the sculpture makes reference to the Ontonagon Boulder, a 1.5 ton copper nugget. Rumors of the Ontonagon Boulder during the 1840s were known to French missionaries and explorers even before they arrived in the “Copper Country.” The first European to actually report seeing the boulder was trader Alexander Henry. In 1766, Henry traveled thirty miles up the Ontonagon River and cut a 100-pound piece from the boulder. Other early explorers reported that there were numerous ax and chisel marks on the rock, indicating that an unknown quantity of copper had been removed by prehistoric and historic Indians and souvenir hunters.

Fame, however, doomed the boulder. Julius Eldred, a Detroit hardware merchant, heard about the great copper rock and became determined to possess it. In 1843 Eldred and a twenty-one man crew built a “sectional and portable railway and car” using capstans and block and tackle, and they cut a 4.5-mile right-of-way over 600-foot high hills and dense forest. Eldred moved the boulder to the navigable portion of the Ontonagon River and then down to the mouth of the river. General Walter Cunningham, the United States mineral agent for the area, described the effort as “one of the most extraordinary performances of the age.”¹ The Ontonagon Boulder is now in the collection of the Smithsonian Institute’s National Museum of Natural History in Washington D.C.

This sculpture reminds us of the men who worked in the mines in Michigan’s three iron ranges. They, like the loggers, for the most part have remained anonymous. Still, their personal histories tell the story of the settling of the Upper Peninsula. It is a tale of immigrants, of Cornish people, Finns, Poles and other nationalities who came to work in the mines and the ore industry. The influence of these cultures can still be seen in the distinctive cuisine of the U.P. The pasty, a kind of meat turnover originally brought to the region by Cornish miners, is popular among locals and tourists alike. Finnish immigrants contributed nisu, a cardamom flavored sweet bread and pannukakku, a variant on the pancake.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What do you see in *Ontonagon* that reminds you of industrial equipment?
- Do you think this is abstract or representational? Why?



¹ The Ontonagon Boulder, used with permission, Randall Schaetzl, www.geo.msu.edu/geogmich.Ontonagon_boulder.html