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Presenting  
EXCERPTS OF LAKE COUNTY HISTORY



"SOLSTICE ROCK AT SUNRISE"  
Somewhere in Northern Lake County

Photo Courtesy of Steve Bartholomew

# Solstice Rock

A Lake County Prehistoric Observatory

By Steve Bartholomew

On the first day of the first summer of the first year of a new century, we witnessed a silent miracle. We were myself, my wife Carol, and Rae Eby, who has a background in professional archeology. I have been studying this particular site for more than two years now, but this was the first occasion on which Rae had seen it. The site has been locally known as "Indian Rock", or "Baby Rock." However, I have tentatively decided to rename it Solstice Rock, for reasons which shall become clear.

By one of the strange twists of fate, Rae's home is within walking distance of this artifact, but she had never heard of it until I brought it to her attention. Rae had for some time been exploring the fields and woods around her home, looking for pictographs and other artifacts but in the opposite direction.

When she first took witness to Solstice Rock, I think she was as stunned as I had been the first time I examined it. In my own first experience, I had observed several features immediately. The first was to me clearly Ogham<sup>1</sup> writing. I was unable to read it, but it was easy to make out individual letters; in most cases there was the characteristic baseline, with letters formed one to five strokes, up, down, and across the base. There were also numerous cupules of various sizes and depths. These I attributed to a Native American cultural signature. Prominently displayed near the top of the rock was a shallow cupule, or circle, with an obvious pointer-triangle aimed at the northwest. By taking a compass bearing, I quickly realized this might be a summer solstice indicator. In the very center of the circle was a small, bored hole which invited insertion of a twig or reed to be used as a gnomon. Although various investigators have studied this artifact since at least the 1930s, none had recognized the markings for what, to me, they obviously are. One commentary, published in the 1950s, describes the marks as "apparently without pattern."

In June of 1999, one of my co-investigators, Suzanne Lansom-Bley, and myself went to the site to observe sunrise at summer solstice. I was excited and highly gratified to find the shadow of my makeshift gnomon bisecting the pointer at first light. (I had simply inserted a wooden pencil in the center hole.)

It was only at that time that I realized this petroglyph had not one, but two pointers. The other pointed northeast, and could only be an indicator for the solstice sunset. At that time, I was baffled how I could have earlier missed such an obvious feature. Since then, I have had

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<sup>1</sup> [Editor's note:] Ogham is an ancient Irish script used in the 4th to 6th centuries AD. Claims of its presence in North America are highly controversial. Native Americans had their own rich traditions of symbols, pictographs, and developed writing systems.

opportunities to observe the rock in different lighting conditions and realize how easy it is to miss details. In this case, the northeast pointer is slightly more eroded and fainter; in low contrast light. It can be easy to overlook.

The same can be said for other characters on Solstice Rock. Each time I observe it I seem to find details I had not seen earlier, while other details previously observed had disappeared. More than once, I have thought of this artifact as a finely tuned machine, still running, never static but always in motion. On June 20, 2000, a solstice sunset, we watched the shadows with patience. It was like waiting for a clock to strike.

Official sunset was not until 9:15. However, due to the range of hills to the northwest, the actual sunset was about an hour earlier. We had arrived a little after seven.

As I had hoped, Rae Eby-Carl noticed a number of details which had previously escaped me. Her professional experience in examining artifacts was highly useful. One fact she pointed out immediately was that not all of the markings are aboriginal. There are several deep grooves in which she recognized the striation patterns of metal tools. Two of these grooves form a right angle around some of the more interesting glyphs as if someone, at some point, had decided to try sawing off part of the inscriptions to take home as a souvenir. Fortunately for us, they had apparently given up when the rock proved too hard to cut. However, the majority of the glyphs are felt to be quite old. Rae thinks some of them may go back more than a thousand years. It is clear that some of the inscriptions are much older, fainter, and more eroded, and that a number of people contributed to the inscriptions over a long period of time. I felt that one of Rae's more important observations was that this stone does not at all resemble a typical Indian fertility or "baby" rock. She has seen several others and the markings are not the same. Most fertility rocks are inscribed with spirals and other types of glyphs which bear no resemblance to the signs on our solstice rock. Local history records two other "baby rocks" within this general ethnographic area, one located a few miles north of Hopland, the other at Ft. Bragg. Unfortunately, we have not yet found any good pictures of them. A future project will involve trying to locate them again, if they still exist.

Rae was also interested in some of the other obviously astronomical symbols. One of them resembles a comet below a star, with a round object, perhaps representing the Moon, in between. She also pointed out that the angle between the two pointers on our solstice indicator could theoretically be used to determine local latitude.

Further, she agreed with my previous impression that this tone had been shaped by many people over a long period of time. Some of the inscriptions are so faint as to be barely visible. Others may have been inscribed sometime during the 100 years.

Previous Pomo informants have stated that this rock had been used in fertility rituals. This may well be true. Our impression now is that the site may have been multicultural, and that this rock was used for different purposes by different groups. However, there can be no question that it was an observatory. Eroded as it is, the stone clock ticks on.

Watching the shadow of solstice sunset, we determined that the degree of accuracy is the same as for the solstice sunrise. That is, at the moment of sunset the gnomon's shadow is displaced just slightly to one side of the pointer's centerline. Rae points out that there have been a number of earth movements in this area in the past. One major event was the San Francisco earthquake of 1906. Rae is planning to research old geological records to determine what effect this might have had on our stone's orientation.

Another small mystery was resolved during this observation. I had been puzzled by two grooves on the sunset pointer, which were across the triangular base, that is, parallel to the inner circle's perimeter. Watching the shadow move as the sun sank, I realized that if I were to use a smaller gnomon, I could make its shadow extend to the inner groove just as the sun's rim first touches the horizon. Then, as the sun sinks, the shadow will extend to the outer groove, disappearing just as the sun vanishes. In other words, the distance between these two grooves represents the apparent diameter of the sun. Of course, what purpose this refinement served is yet another question.

In summary, we feel that the most important function of this artifact was in astronomical observation. This impression is based on the prominence of the solstice indicator and other markings which are clearly related to astronomy. This function, of course, does not rule out ritualistic or "medicinal" uses of the rock. Ancient peoples did not draw distinctions, as we do, between science, magic, and religion.

The Ogham writing remains untranslated. It would be interesting to test Barry Fell's conclusion that some of the Ogham found in California was Old Norse rather than Goidelic. This is yet another future project. Solstice Rock is a complex mechanism, bearing information from a lost and unknown people, telling stories we can barely comprehend. We are attempting to unravel the secrets of an ancient technology, without knowing even its exact purpose. Solstice Rock has much to teach us, and we are only beginning to learn.

#### Editor's Note:

In a recent interview with Mr. Bartholomew at his home in Lake County some conditions were discussed prior to this article being published. One of which was not to reveal the location of the solstice stone in order to protect the delicacy of the surrounding area and that of the stone itself. He did however say it is located in Northern Lake County. He also said that a similar stone exists outside the door of the Mendocino County Museum in Willits, CA. Mike Anderson, EAL Sept. 2002

Article discovered by Kim Riley. She says "[Deborah](#), it's in the public domain, Deborah, so sure. I photocopied it from an old copy of the Pomo Bulletin which was put out by the Lake County Historical Society."



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