

Where Stones Come From

by Justin Isherwood

This article is reprinted from the June 1991 issue of the Badger Common Tater, the magazine of the Wisconsin Potato and Vegetable Growers Association. Justin Isherwood is a potato grower from Plover, WI, and regular columnist for the magazine.

Farmers often ponder where stones come from. It troubles some more than others, usually for the reason those who are not troubled do not own stony land.

Farmers think about stones because they have picked stones, picked them last year and the year before. Picked stones as far back as they can remember and their pa too. Every spring more stones, stones where none existed before. Stones grinning their damn little smiles, smirking their damn little smirks. You've got to have an intimate working relationship with stones before you can see them grin.

This is hard on the heart of farmers, some become bitter and insular because of stones and the way stones grin. Others devote their lives and those of their offspring to the eradication and defeat of stones. Steady work they believe will free them and one day spring will arrive without stones, the gun hammer will click on an empty cartridge because there are no more stones to load in it and he and his generation will have won the last battle.

Farmers always believe they are close to final victory, believe this to their last days, believe this when they die and are buried beneath stones.

In the valleys and ruins of Buena Vista, in brown-earthed Stockton, in the stone-rimmed fields of Lanark and Amherst Junction are farmers who have written their wills. Prudent men who declare by all that is sane they will not in the last place have their burial marked by stone. Let it be pine, they say. Chisel my name in pine and leave me be. Shape my initials and passage in clay, identify my remains with cardboard, plaster, stitch it on a horse blanket but please, dearest kinsman and heir, do not weigh down my chest with granite stone. Let me to go nameless as spend forever under a stone.

The next of kin intent on mourning do not understand. They follow ritual scrupulously, going so far as to import stone and pay dearly for it and therein notch their beloved's name. Marking the grave with unforgiving stone.

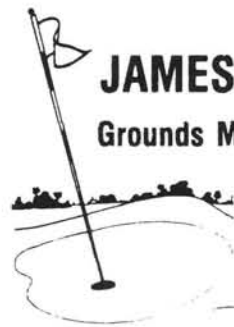
If ghost and ghouls are spawned by human torment then the valleys are in for a Stephen King dose of heck some day, from all those farmers with an external grudge on their chest.

In the farmships why stones reappear every spring is routinely discussed. Village folk argue other things, troublesome subjects like national debt, greenhouse effect and acid rain. Transitory things like apartheid, black holes and stock prices. But in the glacial valleys, in the dim of rural taverns late at night they talk stones and why stones come back to the fields year after year like migrating geese. One farmer confesses he has taken to painting the rocks he picks because he swears they look like the ones he picked several years previous.

He believes stones come back, how he throws 'em on a rock pile and they won't stay put, instead crawl off like wounded dogs to lick their wounds and return again to the field.

This farmer has read about people talking to plants, damn

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(Stones continued)

silly he thinks. Read how some scientists have demonstrated that plants feel pain and pleasure. Geez, he says, is that ever stupid. But he knows for a fact stones migrate. And not only do they feel pain, they exact it.

Stones have a homing instinct. Dump 'em in Romania, he says, and they'll find their way back, which is why he is painting stones. Green one year, blue the next, white another. Some day when a blue stone shows up he will have his proof. This is for the same reasons sea shells are found halfway up Mount Everest, the whole load of plate tectonics is driven by stones crawling their way home. If people had left stones plumb alone in the first place none of this would've happened. What with all the coal dug out of the ground and shipped thousands of miles away, the copper and iron ore and gold ... the surface of the earth is crawling to beat heck.

Another farmer believes he has solved why stones come up every spring. 'Cause we've been burying too many dead people. Same reason you get pus out of a wound by squashing down next to it. Go out west and you don't see no stone, that's 'cause the Pawnee stored their dead outdoors and this don't squash the stones. The more cemeteries you see the more stone there is. Seems this farmer has been to Scotland and it has an awful lot of cemeteries and the worst outbreak of stone he's ever seen except on the road to Galloway. New England is stove-up with cemeteries too and also has stone bad.

There is always a scientist or two among any farm coven and mythological stone lore sets them off. "What a bunch of jerks. Where did you guys get your science? Ripley's Believe It or Not? Stones don't think, crawl or get squashed out of the ground. The reason stones come back every year is 'cause a rock sucks, this according to a recent issue of Science magazine. Ever feel the bottom of a rock? Colder than dirt, ain't it? Cold in May when the top of the rock is hot enough to fry sausages. Cold and wet. Sometimes after weeks of warm weather you find ice there. Tain't the ice that does it though, it's the dark side of that rock sucking water that does it. Frost heave won't get you any altitude even if you wait a thousand years. But the cold side of a rock sucking water, day after day, season after season, brings rocks up from hundreds even thousands of feet down. We ain't ever gonna be free of stones. If it was frost alone, we'd have won the war a couple of generations back. It ain't ice, it's them stones sucking water and and just like a hydraulic cylinder lifts the stone out of the ground."

The back end of the tavern goes real quiet on hearing that. Had to admit it makes sense and overcomes the theoretical obstacles of frost heave and stones with a homing instinct. Sucking stones, who would have guessed? Does make it easier to talk about stones and at the same time get bile off your chest. Maybe this is what my grandfather meant when he talked about "those sucking stones," he wasn't talking dirty, he was waxing theoretical. Ain't science wonderful?

(Thanks to Jim Latham for sending this article which he clipped from "Agronomy News".)