

Conservation Corner

By Corinne Peterson
Pocahontas County Naturalist



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We should build with the stones we have. – Swedish Proverb

Last week I accompanied the Gilmore City-Bradgate Preschool class to the West Bend Grotto as part of their Nature Connections project on rocks. Like Father Dobberstein, we should all build with the stones we have. When is the last time you visited the largest man-made grotto in the world and viewed the largest collection of precious stones and gems found anywhere in one location?

Many of you know the story of the Grotto, how Paul Dobberstein contracted pneumonia as a young man and prayed for healing, promising that he would build a shrine if his prayers were answered. For a decade he collected rocks and precious stones before starting construction in 1912 on the grounds of Sts. Peter and Paul Catholic Church in West Bend. Over the next 42 winters and summers, he designed and built nine grottos centered around the theme of Redemption.

The preschoolers recognized many of the rocks and gems that they had been collecting and studying, easily pointing out geodes, crystals, rosettes, and petrified wood. Some of their favorite rocks included the pink ones, the shiny ones, and the colorful ones created out of glass and crayons. One of my favorite spots is the exterior walls of the Rock Studio and Gift Shop that feature agates from around the world. The end result is well worth the 16 years it took to cut, polish, and integrate those agates into a wall of art.

Last weekend, Conservation celebrated the 30th Anniversary of the Halloween Hike with Wagon Rides along Three Rivers Trail. While viewing the fall colors, we also envisioned the First Iowans to travel the trail including people of the Paleo-Indian, Archaic, Woodland, and Historic Cultures. As we held in our hands a basalt axe, sandstone abrader, or chert point, it was easy to travel back in time and imagine what role that stone played in their lives. Perhaps it was used to hunt mammoths at the end of the Ice Age, scrape deer hides during the Archaic Period, or pound grain or nuts into flour during the Woodland Era. And, as we considered the past, it was rather disconcerting to think about the future and the legacy we're leaving for those who follow. What artifacts of our culture will travelers along this Corridor Through Space and Time find and collect 100, 1,000, or even 10,000 years in the future?

As always, we'd like to thank everyone who helped us celebrate. Special thanks to the Humboldt County Historical Museum for lending us parts of the Dunn Family collection of artifacts found in the Lizard Lake area over the past 100 years. We hope to create a traveling display this winter featuring the stone artifacts of these early Iowans. If you have any local artifacts you would like to share, please contact us. We'd love to fill the Nature Center with the stones of our heritage.

With what stones are you building your life?

