

Honouring the slaves in the Townships

Recognizing the history of St. Armand's rock for what it was

By Ann Davidson

It's been several years since an ad-hoc group of individuals has been diligently and respectfully working toward recognizing the legendary limestone rock in St. Armand known as "Nigger Rock," recognized as an official historical site. The owners of the land are insistent that the rock should be a place of honour to those who, as lore would have it, were haphazardly buried in that area where the land had no worth for cultivation. A beautiful plaque has already been prepared to mount on the rock and is now getting dusty in the basement of St. Armand Town Hall. It is possible that the group's tireless efforts will come to a halt if Quebec's Toponymy Commission agrees with Rachel Zellar's plea to delete "Nigger" from eleven historical sites and monuments in this province.

The PhD student from McGill University, in her quest to prevent persistence of a less than appropriate term, launched a petition last August to remove the "N" word from specific locations within the province. Though the "Nigger Rock" organizing group agrees with Zellar's general mission, they believe that maintaining its legendary name is a critical part of the past. They want justice to happen for the people in the burial site to be finally set free. "It's about history that we cannot extinguish.

These people deserve more from us."

With just under two months left for the Toponymy Commission to render a decision on the matter of name change, they are scrambling to avert their work from being thwarted by Zellar's efforts. Frustrated that their efforts and intentions are not heard by media nor responded to by Zellar, the organizing committee feels that public opinion could be swung in the favour of Zellar's actions. For this particular location, the St. Armand group would relish the opportunity to speak with the author of the petition.

Some historians argue that by deleting or erasing the name, we lose the history of why the name came about in the first place. In this case there is potential for Canadians to never know that this country participated in trans-Atlantic slavery as well. It is not something to be proud of but it does highlight the evolution of society as it is today. There is a need to prevent a collective "historical amnesia."

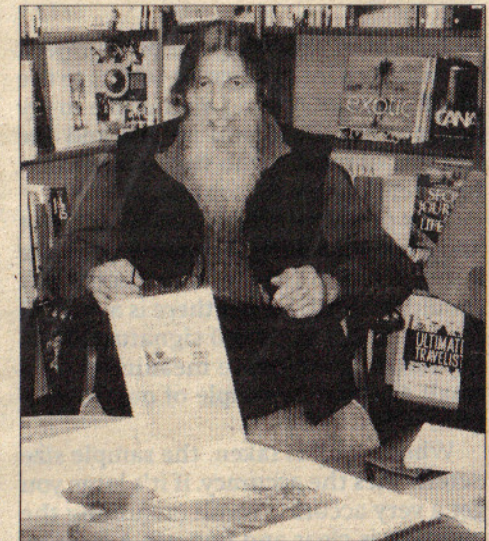
Several years ago, when Eastern Township storyteller, author, and poet, Bee Santori (alias Grampa Bob) heard about the mission of the project, he jumped in to support the group of history buffs. After undergoing extensive research, he has since gone on to publish two books based on the subject: "BIRDIE, The Saga Of Nigger Rock," and, most recently, "its

sequel, "Pilgrimage To Nigger Rock, In Search Of Miss Birdie" by Santori's pen name, Grampa Bob. The sequel was launched at Brome Lake Books during the recent Knowlton Literary Festival several weeks ago. Santori says that the books are intended to raise awareness about the strife these people suffered and endured.

He mentioned that the group's mission is in no way intended to be disrespectful and that the "Nigger Rock" project is much more profound than the rock itself. "Nigger Rock is now a part of history. As much as some may feel that this name is a pejorative, it is only if one chooses it to be. Our aim is to champion the people who, mostly black, toiled to clear and prepare, and maintain the land for Philip Luke and his successors."

Luke, a loyalist to the King of England back in the 1800s, fled the U. S. and settled on land in Canada that was granted by the King. Along with him he brought his black slaves. They were not the only blacks to settle in the St. Armand area. Some escaped via the Underground Railroad.

According to Santori's research, in 1833 Britain declared an end to slavery in all of its territories. This meant that the slaves in Canada were now free — free on paper but not in reality. They had no education or money, they continued to work for the same person in return for



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Known as Grampa Bob, Bee Santori, author, poet, and storyteller launched "Pilgrimage To Nigger Rock, In Search Of Miss Birdie," a sequel to "BIRDIE, The Saga Of Nigger Rock" during Knowlton's Literary Festival. With the contentious use of "Nigger" Santori explains why he is raising awareness to the importance of recognizing Nigger Rock by maintaining its legendary name.

one set of clothing a year, a plot of land for cultivating, and a shack to live in.

These people persevered and endured the rigours of the northern frontier along with the heartless discrimination

CONT'D ON PAGE 8

St. Armand's rock

CONT'D FROM PAGE 3

because of their colour in order to achieve whatever they could. They were not allowed to attend the all-white school. They had fewer rights. When they died, they were not allowed burial in a formal cemetery and regrettably were left by the limestone rock that became known as "Nigger Rock."

Santori agrees that being called "Nigger" was most likely one of the worst of

the names that they were called. However, the blacks used their strength of character and heart to circumvent all of this discrimination and succeeded in establishing their own educational system, which was very inclusive. People of all colors were welcomed.

"These people were wiser and more human than the bigots who discriminated against them," said Santori.

The mission of the Nigger Rock project is to recognize, celebrate, and most of all to set these people free, once and for all. Santori and the group he represents believe that no one can ever claim to be free if we do not set these people free.

"In their honour, I for one, firmly believe that we must retain the name Nigger Rock. By allowing this historical

name to stay, we are declaring that we are wiser, and more human than the bigots who may still have the yen to discriminate. Nigger Rock signifies strength, wisdom, and above all love. We must recognize this mighty rock for what it truly is — a monument to its people."