

Project takes on sacred Kanza prayer rock that Lawrence made into monument to settlers



photo by: Rochelle Valverde

The Shunganunga boulder is pictured on Jan. 24, 2020. The boulder was once a sacred prayer rock for the Kanza tribe.

The Kanza tribe once sang prayers about the might of the Shunganunga boulder, but for decades it has not heard such a sound.

Instead, the 23-ton red quartzite boulder is inscribed with the names of settlers and sits near a city intersection and the sound of traffic.

Pauline Eads Sharp, who serves as secretary and treasurer of the Kanza Heritage Society, said the boulder was one of two sacred sites in Kansas for the tribe. Sharp said the boulder sat at the junction of the Shunganunga Creek and the Kaw River for thousands of years, and that the Kanza people would go there to make offerings and pray.

“Their prayers were to make us strong like the Big Red Rock, because it couldn’t be defaced — they thought,” Sharp said.

That was before the Kanza tribe, the state’s namesake, was forcibly removed to Oklahoma in 1873. And like the tribe that once sang to its resilience, the Big Red Rock, as the tribe refers to the boulder, was also taken away. It did not join the Kanza, but instead was made into a monument for the City of Lawrence that does not mention the tribe.

But a new project, *Between the Rock and a Hard Place*, aims to increase interest in the park and the monument and tell a more complete story about its past. Sharp and Lawrence artist Dave Loewenstein are leading a wide-ranging team of people, including historians, geologists, artists and filmmakers. The project will have its first public presentation Sunday at the Watkins Museum of History.

The approximately yearlong project will include presenting research, holding community workshops and creating a documentary film and book, and ultimately it will propose potential improvements for the park or the monument. The project is supported by a \$20,000 grant from the Interchange, a program of the Mid-America Arts Alliance that is funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. The project also received a \$5,000 grant from the Elizabeth Schultz Environmental Fund.

A long history

Geologists have said that the Shunganunga boulder was carried to Kansas from the area of the Dakotas on a glacier hundreds of thousands of years ago. The boulder came to rest on the banks of the Shunganunga Creek near Tecumseh, where the creek joins with the Kansas River.

In 1929, a group of Lawrence officials arranged to take the boulder — with the help of a borrowed crane and the Santa Fe Railroad — from its longtime resting place along the creek, according to newspaper archives reviewed by the Journal-World. The unusual heist headed off a competing campaign by a Topeka man to bring the boulder, due in part to its spiritual importance to the Kanza, to the lawn of the Statehouse. The Lawrence officials coordinated the boulder's removal from the creek and transport to Lawrence by railcar so that the boulder could be made into a monument for the city's 75th anniversary celebration.

"The Lawrencians sneaked over in the night, had planned it out, and stole away with it, which was a great surprise to Topeka," said Lawrence resident Dennis Domer, who has written about the history of the boulder. "I think there was some rivalry there. I don't know what Topeka would have done with it, but it wouldn't have been that much better than what Lawrence did to it."

The boulder was fitted with a plaque listing the city's founders — abolitionist settlers that departed from Massachusetts — and placed in Robinson Park, at the intersection of Sixth and Massachusetts streets. A group of the founders' descendants and state and city leaders unveiled the plaque, which reads, in part:

"To the pioneers of Kansas who in devotion to human freedom came into a wilderness, suffered hardships and faced dangers and death to found this state in righteousness."

Domer noted the irony of dedicating the monument to settlers, when settlement is why the Kanza and other tribes were forced from their land. He said attaching the names of settlers to a sacred prayer rock is the opposite of what the rock represents.

"That's our genuflection to history," Domer said. "We just take it and change it and put our names on it, and we don't have one wit of second thought about this at the time. If there were, they couldn't come up at that time."

Journal-World newspaper accounts of the boulder's relocation and the ensuing anniversary celebration do not mention the Kanza. However, in more recent years, some Kanza tribal members, who are part of the Kaw Nation, have asked that the boulder be returned to the tribe, and others have requested that its complex past be acknowledged, according to Journal-World reports from 1998 and 2004. Sharp said the boulder has been discussed over the years, but that

she does not believe the Kaw Nation ever formally requested to reclaim or relocate the boulder or make a change or addition to the monument.

A new conversation

Both Sharp and Loewenstein say they are approaching the project with an open mind and are not proposing a specific action regarding the park or the monument at this point.

Sharp's grandmother, Lucy Tayiah Eads, was chief of the tribe at the time the Big Red Rock was taken from the creek. Sharp said the project, whose committee includes other members of the Kaw Nation, aims to educate Lawrence residents as well as the tribe about the history of the boulder and the park. She said a lot of the Kanza people don't know the boulder's significance to the tribe and that she did a presentation this fall at the Kaw Nation's general council meeting. She said members of the tribe have varied opinions about what should be done, but she didn't want to provide examples at this point in the project.

"We're not trying to steer anybody in one direction or another; we're starting out with education and will just see where it goes," Sharp said. Once options are established, she hopes to send out a questionnaire to tribal members.

And there are other considerations. Loewenstein said he thinks because the park is between two busy Lawrence intersections and hard to access, not many people are familiar with the monument and even fewer know the boulder is sacred to the Kanza. He said there are opportunities to improve the park, and the project will help determine what those might be.

Loewenstein compared the upcoming conversations to ones that have happened in other U.S. cities regarding monuments, and he said the project will raise the questions of who gets to decide what public monuments are and what they signify.

"Around the country right now, there are lots of communities that are reexamining monuments that they've had in civic squares and parks for decades if not centuries," Loewenstein said. "And thinking about how they represent the people who live there now, and whether they need enhancement or they need to be reexamined."

In addition to hosting community meetings, the project team plans to meet with the Douglas County Commission and the Lawrence City Commission.

Robinson Park, named to honor the state's first governor, is owned by Douglas County and maintained by the City of Lawrence, according to the city's website. The park is within city limits, but county spokesperson Karrey Britt said the county owns the park because it was once the location of the county jail. Britt said the county would need to do more research to learn about the ownership of the monument.

Douglas County Commission Chair Patrick Kelly, whose district includes the park, said he didn't know about the rock's connection to the Kanza people. He said he would be curious to learn more about the topic and he thinks it would be great for the community to understand the history behind the boulder as well. Kelly said he would be open to hearing about what the project ultimately proposes.

"We all have a lot of catching up to do on this," Kelly said. "I think things that bring a community together to talk about our history are great, so I'd love to understand more."

Mayor Jennifer Ananda also said she was not aware that the boulder is sacred to the Kanza tribe. Ananda said she looks forward to finding out what the project's suggestions might be and that she thinks what the project is doing is valuable.

"When we talk about understanding our history, we have to remember that our history doesn't begin when Europeans show up in any given place," Ananda said. "And this sounds like an important project in acknowledging that and understanding the impact that we have had as a community over time."

The first presentation of *Between the Rock and a Hard Place* will be from 2 to 4 p.m. Jan. 26 at the Watkins Museum of History, 1047 Massachusetts St. It is free and open to the public.