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## The Legend of Starved Rock

by Katrina Favis

(English 1102)

Imagine one is standing on a cliff 250 feet above the Illinois River, overlooking the breathtaking scene of woodland, waterfalls, and canyons that nature gave rise to. The colorful trees sway to the beat of the wind and the birds are chirping as the scenario feels that it could be a part of a movie. This famous cliff, known as Starved Rock, is one of Illinois' most prominent, historical, and scenic landmarks. What many people standing upon this rock do not know though, is the origin of the name. Legend says that the name became "Starved Rock" from a war between two Native American tribes, the Ottawa and the Illini. The Starved Rock legend provides a symbol of the past by adding lore to the well-known area and by giving respect to the once known Native American tribe, the Illinois.

The Formation of Starved Rock is one of life's natural wonders. According to geologists, the creation of Starved Rock started between 15,000 and 17,000 years ago (Finney 240). Geologists claim that the melt waters from the Wisconsinian glaciations became too great to be restrained by the moraines to the north and east. The water broke through and flowed to the headquarters of the Vermillion River, a tributary of the Illinois Valley, and concentrated in the Illinois Valley. This flood is what geologists refer to as the "Kankakee Torrent" (Finney 241). It is believed that the flood created the historic features and the prominent summit of Starved Rock. Starved Rock is located in the northern part of Illinois along the Illinois River, right next to the city of Ottawa. Specifically, Starved Rock is an elevated cliff on the left bank of the Illinois River that consists of parallel layers of white sandstone. The summit is not less than 250 feet high and there are three perpendicular sides as it is washed at its base by the river (Finney 242). This famous cliff is covered with a soil of several feet in depth, bearing a growth of young trees. To this day, Starved Rock is now a historic state park. "It's a beautiful park, Illinois is filled with prairie and farms and all of a sudden right here, you have Starved Rock," Pam Grivetti, president of the Starved Rock Foundation, said about the prominent landmark (Walczynski 216). Starved Rock is a natural and historic place that Illinois is so proud to have. It is recognized as a unique archeological site because of its focal point in Illinois and in human history of the Illinois Valley.

Furthermore, archeologists suggest that human habitation around Starved Rock dates as far back as 8000 B.C. More recently, the earliest group of inhabitants recorded at the region was the historical Kaskaskia, whose large settlement on the north side of the Illinois River was known as the 'Grand Village of the Illinois' (Janvien 84). The Kaskaskia were members of the Illinois Confederation, or the Illini, who inhabited the region in the 16th through the 18th centuries. Then, in 1673, Louis Jolliet and Father Jacques Marquette were the first Europeans to mention Starved Rock, or as they called it "Le Rocher" meaning "The Rock" in French (Finney 246). They founded the place to build an area for trade and shelter. Soon after, other Frenchman in pursuit of souls and furs soon followed Jolliet and Marquette's lead. Chief among these were Sieur de La Salle and his lieutenant, Henri de Tonti. In 1682, the two constructed Fort St. Louis atop Le Rocher or what is known today as Starved Rock. Fort St. Louis was a part of the chain of western forts to prevent the westward expansion of the British (Finney 246). Eight years later, Fort St. Louis was abandoned at Le Rocher as the Frenchmen relocated to a more convenient location. The relocating of the Frenchmen led Native American tribes, like the Illini, to seek refuge atop of the rock during one of their most treacherous battles.

While Starved Rock is clearly of historical importance from both a Native and Western perspective, it is best known because of a legend from which it derives its name. On April 20, 1769, Pontiac, chief of the Ottawa, was brutally murdered by an Illinois Confederation Warrior due to a disagreement about land (Osmun). The alleged murder caused uproar with the Ottawa and their allies, the Pottawatomie. Pontiac was very respected by his fellow tribes, so once the news came out about his death, vengeance on the tribe that murdered their beloved master was beginning to rise. This was the beginning of the almost extermination of the Illinois tribe. According to legend, the Ottawa and Pottawatomie then attacked the Illini along the Illinois River. They terribly did revenge themselves upon their enemies because the Pottawatomies and Ottawas deemed it as a duty and glory to slaughter not only the strong Illini men, but also the women and helpless children of the Illinois tribe.

About 2,000 escaping Illini climbed the top of Le Rocher as a place of refuge (Osmun). They thought that it was a safe shelter from all the chaos happening around them. What they did not realize though, is that the Pottawatomies and Ottawas then sieged each side of the rock so no one could escape. As one can tell what happens next, most of the Illini died of starvation, thus having the prominent feature be named “Starved Rock”. Of course, there is a heroic twist to the legend. On a dark and stormy night, it is believed that eleven of the most athletic warriors broke through the besieging lines (Osmun). They had marked from below the isolated rock a nook where their enemies kept their canoes. Afterwards, the eleven warriors rushed with headlong speed, unnoticed by their foes, and hurried down the rapids of the Illinois River. Legend says that those escaping Native Americans knew well of every channel of the river so they were able to navigate throughout the darkness to seek safety at Fort St. Louis, a nearby French fortress. When the Illini reached St. Louis, they told their tale and received protection from the commanders. After escaping one of the most treacherous battles, the Illinois never claimed that name again. They ended up seeking new friends of a different tribe in the southern part of the state and that is the last of what people know of the Illinois Tribe (Osmun). The Pottawatomies and Ottawas were bent upon the utter extermination of their hated enemies and according to legend; they received what they wished for.

This horrible tale of the extermination of the Illinois due to starvation is a legend that may or may not be true. The legend comes from things that are said to have happened. None are supported by evidence other than frequent retelling. One can only wonder though, that perhaps this tale was based on something that did happen somewhere at some time. What is most important about the Starved Rock tale is whether a person is willing to believe that the incident actually occurred.

It is true that there are not many hard records of the total extermination of the Illinois, but there are a few accounts with chiefs that told their take on the alleged battle. One of the most authentic accounts of the great tragedy is obtainable from Meachelle, an old Pottawatomie chief. He told his side of the story to Judge J.D. Caton in 1833 (Walcynski 217). According to Caton, “Meachelle was present at the siege and the final catastrophe, and although a boy at the time, the terrible event made such an impression on his young mind that it ever remained fresh and vivid” (Walcynski 217). Ultimately, Meachelle claimed that the Illinois Indians ceased to exist. This is intriguing to read about and can be reliable if one believes in the treacherous tale of the Illini. Judge J.D. Caton believed that the legend was true also. Other accounts that support the truth of the legend include Henry Schoolcraft, who explored the area near Starved Rock in 1821. He was said to believe the legend and found fragments of antique pottery and stones that must have belonged to the Illini (Schoolcraft). There are also other secondary sources that reveal the proof of the massacre. These include fur traders, settlers, and visitors of the rock (Walcynski 219). Most of them claimed to have seen bones of the defeated Illinois. Dr. J.H Goodell states in his article that an early settler, Simon Crosiar, told him that the ground of Starved Rock was literally covered with human bones (Walcynski 220). These accounts help indicate proof of the Battle of Starved Rock to those that wish to believe.

The myth itself gives respect to the Illini. Edgar Lee Masters, a famous poet, wrote a book named after the alleged remnant of the battle between the Ottawas and the Illini. A line from his poem “Starved Rock” reads: “We are the children and the epigone of the Illini, the vanished nation. And this Starved scarp of stone is now the emblem of our tribulation” (Masters 3). This line specifically refers to the suffering that the Illini tribe had undergone. Masters poem has a way of providing empathy to anyone that reads about the challenges that the Illini faced. It provides insight of a mythical and historic tale. His poem also gives respect to the Illinois tribe because he writes about how the rock is theirs, the place where the last of the Illini had died. The legend gives value to the rock where the Battle of Starved Rock occurred.

Places like Starved Rock play important roles in the formation of regional identities and cultures with its legend. It is important for people to learn about the history of the famous Starved Rock because residents and newcomers alike can tie themselves deeply to a land far richer and more ancient than themselves. The Starved Rock legend has a very special place in Illinois and it gives respect to the Native Americans whose ancestors supposedly underwent the treacherous war. The legend is a teaching of the past so people could learn and even put themselves into what the Illinois Native Americans experienced. Their name is perpetrated in the great state of Illinois as the legend is apart of their history. Also, whether legends are true or not, they do play important roles in providing intriguing tales of the past that people of the future can reflect on. The legend of Starved Rock adds excitement to a seemingly beautiful landscape. This is the gift legends have for people; they keep people interested in the events of the past and help explain the present. They provide intrigue and stimulate one’s curiosity to discover history.

Because of these historical roots, the Starved Rock myth is a tradition passed down from generation that gives respect to the Illinois Native Americans and provides an intriguing look of the past with its mysterious story. Sometimes heroic tales lead people to believe history as entertaining and even beautiful. The legend itself is a time machine to the past that people can keep hold of once they climb the rock, look over the vast Illinois River, and envision that they stood on the very spot where the last of the Illinois may have perished.

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