

# EXPLORATIONS

DECEMBER 1993



David Swart, left, who traced the Stevenson Rock to Joseph Howse of the Hudson's Bay Company, explains the significance of the inscription to Tony Feldhausen, Skamania County school superintendent, and Gloria Howell, school board member.

## HISTORY SLEUTH TREADS ROCKY TRAIL TO DISCOVER SIGNIFICANT ARTIFACT

When is a rock not just a rock?  
When it bears an inscription.  
When is an inscription not just an inscription?  
When the incised initials are *HBCo(y) 1811*.

And its recent identification by a retired Portlander promises to change recorded history

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**“. . . an intriguing discovery  
which appears authentic.”**

**Chet Orloff**  
Director, Oregon Historical Society

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in the Columbia Gorge.

The Mystery Rock was found 60 years ago west of Stevenson. According to Skamania County Historical Society records, a steam shovel unearthed it at the Government Slide area in 1923 when workers removed planking of a “wood-road surface.”

For some time it stood at the front entrance to the wood-frame Stevenson High School and was moved only when a new building was underway. School officials presented it to the Historical Society after it was identified this year. They only asked for a replacement rock in exchange. Agreed!

Like others, Sharon Tiffany, the society’s director, believed the initials represented those of the Hudson’s Bay Company. This led her to write David Swart, a Portland attorney and history buff.

Because of his research on the migration of Canadians from the Red River region to the Tualatin, Oregon plains (a move encouraged by Hudson’s Bay), Swart was considered an authority on the Canadian firm — an opinion he vehemently denies.

But Swart’s retirement and subsequent illnesses intervened, and he set aside Tiffany’s 1983 letter. Only in spring this year did it resurface in his correspondence file.

With his life now moving at a more leisurely pace, Swart traveled to Stevenson to view the Mystery Rock. Then, armed with his field notes, Swart within an hour located revealing information at the Oregon Historical Society, and the Mystery Rock took on new historic significance.

In Swart’s opinion, the stone may be the most valuable artifact found in the Columbia Gorge in the last 50 years or so. It was left behind most probably by Joseph Howse (1774-1852), first officer of Hudson’s Bay to cross the Rocky Mountains and enter the region, to mark his physical presence.”

Swart has established that the proper abbreviation for Hudson’s Bay Company in this early period was *HBCoy*. “The partial ‘o’ after the letters HBC,” Swart deduced, “precedes this as the initials of any individual or a possible grave marker. The initials,” he concluded, “speak for themselves and can be authenticated provided the date is significant — which it is.”

Chet Orloff, director of the Oregon Historical Society, adds to Swart’s declaration regarding the rock’s significance. “This is an intriguing



**Portrait of the rock that will change history books. Its vital statistics are 16” high, 22” wide, and 24” deep.**

discovery, which appears authentic,” he says. “We all look forward to further documenting the history of this find.”

The stone has suffered considerable damage over the last 182 years. It had developed a large diagonal crack running through the date. The upper right side of the face has been chipped away, taking the remaining portion of the letter “o” and all the letter “y” with it.

Referring to a biography published in the *Hudson’s Bay Record Society* (1955), Swart found the key to unlock the puzzle in Joseph Howse, a native of England, who entered service as a writer with the Hudson’s Bay Company in 1795 when he was 21. Eventually the firm sent him to Canada, and, after he successfully filled various posts, his superiors assigned him to make an important journey from Edmonton House, where he had been staying.

“At this time,” Swart explains, “the North West Company, and David Thompson in particular, were exploring the matter of fur trading in what is now the Pacific Northwest. Keenly aware of this possibility and not wanting to be cut out of a lucrative source of potential trade, Hudson’s Bay decided to dispatch Howse to this territory (southern territory), subsequently referred to as the Columbia District. In course of time, two trading districts were organized in this area, new Caledonia in the north, and Columbia in the south.”

Swart points to a paragraph in volume two of the 33-volume set of the *Hudson's Bay Record Society*. "The Columbia (district)," it notes, "was already known to the North West Company, but Joseph Howse was the first officer of the Hudson's Bay Company to cross the Rocky Mountain and penetrate into the region to the westward."

Howse reached the mouth of the Columbia River during the winter of 1810-11. Thompson did not arrive until July 15, 1822. This means that Howse, **not Thompson as it is commonly thought**, was the second person to follow Meriwether Lewis and William Clark down the Columbia River. And the Mystery Rock corroborates Howse's presence by the incised date, probably engraved in January 1811.

Alexander Henry (the younger) of the competing North West Company recorded that "Howse left Terre Blanche (Canada) . . . on June 20, 1810, and that the Columbia expedition consisted of seventeen men, including four Indians."

Had it not been for Swart, Howse might have lost his important place in history. The accurate and lively notes surviving in the Lewis and Clark journals and in the diaries of David Thompson make fascinating reading even today. But neither Howse's journals or letters survived in Hudson's Bay's archives and exact

details of his route do not exist.

"This is why," says Swart, "the Stevenson Rock is so incredibly important historically."

We know that Howse returned to Edmonton House by July 30, 1811, with 36 bundles of good furs, "convinced that the trade could be driven at a good profit but also convinced that it would be folly to repeat the venture in the winter of 1811-12."

Because the route went through the lands of the Piegan (Blackfeet) Indians who were engaged in a fierce war with the Flatheads, "any white man who tried to converse the country did so at his peril." The Flathead tribe had been armed by North West Company trade goods, and the Piegans, who were losing the war, threatened to kill any white man caught in the area.

Swart's research found that "the North West Company continued to trade in Columbia . . . in spite of trouble with the Piegans. But the Hudson's Bay Company," according to the *HB Record Society*, "did not venture into the Columbia again until after their coalition with the North West Company in 1821."

Today the Skamania County Historical Society stores the Hudson's Bay Rock behind a locked door in its temporary quarters, awaiting a place of honor in the new Columbia Gorge Interpretive Center.

"It is among our most important acquisitions," says Sharon Tiffany, executive director of the facility, "and we are indebted to David Swart whose keen 'historian's nose' guided us to solve the conundrum of the Mystery Rock."



**This is the original Gouache painting by Barrie Linklater.**

**French traders could not believe their eyes when they saw company explorer Anthony Henday. He had travelled inland so swiftly that he had passed the Frenchmen on the way to the Rockies and met them face to face as he returned.**