

Chan researcher trying to uncover mystery surrounding Kensington Rune Stone



PHOTO BY CHRIS OWENS

Minnesota pioneers

Rewrite of state's history?



KENSINGTON RUNE STONE
QUEST FOR TRUTH

The Wolters at home, at the entrance of the whimsically named Agatorium, also known as the garage. From left, Grant, Amanda, Janet and Scott Wolter.

By Chris Owens

Last December, I wrote a Villager column about Scott Wolter. I told him that I later wanted to write an article about him and his work on the Kensington Rune Stone (KRS). The KRS is a stone tablet inscribed with runes and the date, 1362.

It was found outside of Kensington, Minn., in 1898 by Olof Ohman when he and two of his sons were clearing a field. If the KRS's inscription were authentically medieval, the historical implications would be enough to shift the paradigm of North American history, which currently gives Christopher Columbus credit for being the first European to explore America with a caveat referencing Leif Erickson's exploration of Newfoundland in the year 1000.



Chris Owens

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Editor's note: *This is the first of a three-part series by Chris Owens, a columnist for the Chanhassen Villager. Owens is a Chanhassen resident who has a double major in global studies and Spanish from Montana State University. Owens is a bookkeeper at Airovation in Eden Prairie. Last year, Owens interviewed Scott Wolter for a Villager column, and intrigued by Wolter and his work on the Kensington Rune Stone, has spent time since then learning about Wolter and his fascination with rune stones and history.*

Part 1 is an account of the day Owens accompanied Wolter to La Crosse, Wis., where he gave a presentation on the relic's history. Owens also offers a glimpse into Wolter's background, which fires his passion for family and life.

When I expressed my interest to Wolter about writing another article on him and his research, his question to me was, "Which story do you want to tell?"

His geological study of the stone has enlivened the debate, as has the linguistic and historical research that Wolter and Nielsen present in their book. Wolter and Nielsen — both hard scientists — have found the answers to questions that have puzzled experts in the fields of history and linguistics for more than 100 years. The research he and his colleague have done has also

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revealed connections between the KRS and medieval secret societies of Europe, an element of history popularized by Dan Brown's novel, "The Da Vinci Code."

Combine the groundbreaking discoveries of these two outsiders with an unblinking presentation of a controversial interpretation of history and you end up with an agitated academic establishment. One Swedish historian told Wolter over cocktails, "We're not going to let some big-mouth American geologist come here and tell us to rewrite our history."

Wolter has many stories about confrontations with skeptics. (He loves to debate.) But there are many more stories about the friends he has made while studying and traveling, stories about being received by strangers at their kitchen tables where they have discussed the KRS and its significance as a window into an unfamiliar piece of their history.

Investigation begins

Wolter was hired to examine the KRS in July 2000. The study that followed was honored with the 2007 American Council of Engineering Companies Grand Award for Innovation (the third such award for APS). Wolter and his team concluded that the inscriptions on the stone were at least 200 years old. In other words, the KRS could not have been a 19th century hoax as is a widely held belief. (When I first told Villager staff writer Unsie Zuege that I wanted to write about Scott Wolter and the KRS, she said, "Really? Huh. Isn't that thing a big fake?")

The geology proved to Wolter that the inscription on the KRS was authentic and could only be judged to be as old as it reads: "1362." But due to an ingrained public opinion that the stone was a hoax, the geology wasn't good enough for many people that Wolter talked to. Skeptics objected to the supposedly modern runes, the popularity of Norse history during the time of the discovery in 1898, which would have made the hoax more likely, and the rumors that Olof Ohman was a practical joker.

Wolter, in conjunction with Dr. Richard Nielsen, an engineer and self-educated expert on runes, began to investigate every objection to the stone's authenticity, one by one. They scoured the archives of the Minnesota Historical Society. They made numerous trips to Scandinavia. They pored over hundreds of letters, including 40 written by



Who is Scott Wolter?

Home: Chanhassen

Family: Wife, Janet, children Grant and Amanda.

Occupation: Professional geologist, founder and president of American Petrographic Services (APS) in St. Paul. The company specializes in forensic analysis of concrete and rock.

Awards: APS has won American Engineering Companies Grand Award for Innovation three times, once for its age-dating work on the Kensington Rune Stone. APS was hired in July of 2000 to study the stone. Since then, Wolter has worked on all things related to rune stone geology, linguistics, archaeology, and history, co-authoring "The Kensington Rune Stone: Compelling New Evidence."

Key to success: How he runs his company, reads and writes about rune stones, and plays and coaches sports all at the same time. "If I was a kid today, I would be diagnosed with AD Triple H DI!"

"The Kensington Rune Stone: Compelling New Evidence"

By Richard Nielsen and Scott F. Wolter

575 pages, \$29.95

Lake Superior Agate

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www.lakesuperioragate.com



PHOTO CLIPPING COURTESY OF THE WOLTER FAMILY

Scott Wolter's father, Fred Addison Wolter, was a pilot for Northwest. In 1971, he captured the first-ever domestic flight to be hijacked by talking the hatchet-wielding hijacker into landing in Cuba instead of Algiers and was declared a hero. Earlier, he had been a bomber pilot for the C.I.A. This photo of 11-year-old Scott and Fred was taken at the press conference after the hijacking.

Wolter handed me a three-ring binder full of images in plastic sleeves. There were images of artifacts: the Spirit Pond Rune Stones, a medieval astrolabe, the Narragansett Rune Stones. Places: the Newport Tower, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, Rosslyn Chapel. People: Prince Henry Sinclair, the Count de



In the fall of 1898, Olof Ohman and his sons Olof Jr. and Edward found the Kensington Rune Stone on

Olof and Karin Ohman to family in Sweden that had never been studied before. They amassed small libraries of pertinent text and had countless kitchen table conversations. They investigated whatever they could, whenever they could.

During one of our phone conversations, Wolter told me, "Most researchers go in with preconceived notions. We just spent two years digging." They never found any evidence that disproved the authenticity of the stone, and in the process, a marginalized history was revealed. Wolter and Nielsen published their findings in a long, but accessible, book full of photographs called "The Kensington Rune Stone: Compelling New Evidence."

Energy multi-tasker

On Jan. 4, around noon, I arrived at American Petrographic Services (APS) in St. Paul and walked into the lobby. I was sent up to Wolter's office, where he talked on his headset, organized his materials and discussed an invoice discrepancy with his office manager. We made a stop at the lab to check on his crew and then we shuffled downstairs to the parking lot. On the way out, Wolter hassled a co-worker, "Your boy Matt Birk (Minnesota Vikings center) went to Cretin. Betcha didn't know that."

Wolter is tall with wavy but well-groomed graying hair and has maintained a lean linebacker's build into his late 40s. He is a sports fanatic with three championship football rings—two from his years at UMD and one from his minor league play with the Minneapolis Lumberjacks, where he was the oldest player by five years. His wife, Janet, told me, "Some guys buy a convertible or grow a goatee when they have their midlife crisis. Scott played minor league football." When asked to give three words that describe him, Janet chose gregarious, competitive and tenacious. He exhibits these traits in nearly every interaction, whether it is a football argument or a technical explanation of a geological test.

Around noon we jumped into Wolter's pickup, a Toyota Tacoma with thousands of scratches in its bed. I asked him what type of cargo had done this damage. "Agates, landscape boulders, flagstone, Native American artifacts, samples from the 9/11 Pentagon rubble," he said. The truck had also held a concrete sarcophagus from a Las Vegas murder case that his work helped solve.

Once we were on the freeway,

Maurepas, the skull of King Robert the Bruce, Pharaoh Tutankhamen. As he explained the connections between these seemingly unrelated photos, he fielded calls on scanning electron microscope analysis of gypsum, a parking lot collapse out East, a residential foundation that had been hydraulically lifted and an inquiry on a certain agate. He dug through his briefcase for notes, steering with his knee. "You want me to take the wheel?" I asked. "Nah. I got it," he said.

The next time he reached behind him, I insisted on steering while he multitasked. When I asked about his unusual energy levels, he said, "If I was a kid today, I would be diagnosed with AD triple H D! Luckily, I've found ways to occupy myself." Fortunately, he let me hold the steering wheel during the rest of his multitasking.

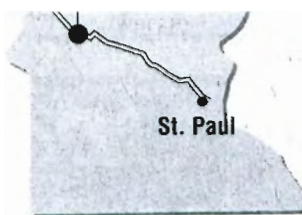
*About halfway to La Crosse, we pulled over to look at a map. Wolter pointed to St. Charles, a small town where his father was buried and said, "Let's go say hi to Dad."

Life-altering experience

His father, Fred Addison Wolter, was a pilot for Northwest for 25 years. In January 1971, he captained the first domestic airline flight to be hijacked. The hijacker broke into the cockpit, brandished a hatchet and told Fred he had a bomb in his briefcase that he would detonate if the plane didn't go to Algiers. Fred talked the hijacker into letting them land in Cuba. The hijacker was apprehended and investigators found that he did indeed have a bomb in his briefcase. All the passengers on the flight were safe. Fred returned a hero, and gave a press conference holding his 11-year-old son, Scott, in his arms. He was also a bomber pilot for the C.I.A., Wolter said.

As a college graduation present, Fred gave Scott a scuba diving trip to anywhere in the world and said he could take whoever he wanted. He chose to go to the Great Barrier Reef with his dad. Both were experienced scuba divers and had previously shared other adventures such as free-climbing the cliffs of Palisade Head on Lake Superior.

A week into their trip, after having hiked and bodysurfed in Hawaii and spent a couple days in Tokyo and Hong Kong, they were finally in Australia, sitting by a campfire, having a couple beers. They were excited to be



their farm in Kensington, about 15 miles southwest of Alexandria. The Kensington Rune Stone is currently housed in the Runestone Museum in Alexandria, Minn.

Graphics by JONI BERG

What is the Kensington Rune Stone?

■ Olof Ohman and his two sons, Olof Jr. and Edward, discovered the Kensington Rune Stone (KRS) on a fall day in 1898. They were winching an aspen tree out of the ground to clear a field when they noticed that the tree's roots had wrapped around a stone slab. At first, Ohman's sons thought the stone was a Native American almanac, but they later found out that the characters on the stone were runes, symbols of the Old Norse language.

■ The KRS controversy centers around the date at the end of the inscription: 1362. Until the 20th century, there had been little evidence of a Norse presence in North America at such an early date, and the Kensington Rune Stone still stands mostly on its own.

■ In 1910, Newton Winchell, who could be called "Mr. Minnesota Geology" (The geology building at the U of M campus is named after him) also concluded that the KRS

was authentic. Minnesota Historical Society archaeologist/geologist/librarian Warren Upham and Wisconsin state geologist William Hotchkiss also supported Winchell's conclusion.

■ The KRS was displayed as an historical artifact at the Oscar Lake Rally in 1927 and at the Smithsonian in 1949. There was a scholarly uproar after its presence at the Smithsonian, and the stone took a drubbing during the past 50 years of the 20th century. It currently resides in the Runestone Museum in Alexandria.

■ The linguistic/archaeological/historical opinion on the stone has shifted back and forth since the early 1900s. But since Winchell's investigation, the geological evidence was never thoroughly examined again until Wolter's lab was hired in 2001.

■ No geologist has formally challenged Wolter's conclusion. www.kensingtonrunestone.com

only hours away from their first dive, and an elated Scott told his dad how much he appreciated his upbringing. "Things couldn't have been any better," he told me. The next day, after having boarded a boat with a crew mostly consisting of spear fishing competitors, the two jumped into the strong current of a narrow channel that led to the ocean. Scott looked back at Fred, who signaled for him to lead. The next time he turned around, his dad was gone. He searched for 20 minutes before returning to the boat to find his dad on deck, drowned. Fred had gotten caught in the current, disoriented and could not resurface.

Wolter told me, "It was devastating. One minute I'm having the time of my life. The next I'm on a dock, and my dad's in a body bag. I was numb. On the flight home, I decided this experience could ruin my life or I could do what I could and be positive. I decided I had to be a glass-half-full kind of guy."

He also began to pick and collect agates. When he became depressed thinking about his dad, he would jump

on his motorcycle and head for a gravel pit to "pick." The task of searching for the colorful stones provided temporary clarity and peace. He also began to buy and sell agates and detailed his accounts of tracking down legendary agates and the people who owned them in "The Lake Superior Agate: One Man's Journey." In "The Lake Superior Agate" he wrote, "Anyone who picks agates knows that a little success can lead to compulsion. I quickly became consumed with picking because it always made me feel better." Although he is still an agate "addict," he sold \$40,000 worth of agates to publish the first run of "The Kensington Rune Stone: Compelling New Evidence." In the research relating to the KRS, he seems to have found another addiction.

Andrew Owens contributed to this story.

Next week, Owens describes a visit with Ron and Frieda Nowland of La Crosse whose interest in the rune stone stems from their love of history, religion, and everything Norwegian. And, Frieda's uncle Ole Landsverk, a physicist who also studied runes.