"Our mascot and our friend" Rocky Taconite statue is a unique tribute to iron mining



A variety of Rocky Taconite memorabilia, including newspaper clippings, buttons, and figurines, is on display at the Silver Bay tourist center. Visitors can also purchase Rocky Taconite clothing, mugs, and bobbleheads. Photos by Tucker Nelson.



By Tucker Nelson Editor

SILVER BAY — In a state

with plentiful Paul Bunyans, Snoopy sculptures, and giant fish, a bulbous oddity near Lake Superior has been uniquely embraced by locals and visitors alike. Since 1964, Rocky Taconite has symbolized Silver Bay, a community that owes its existence to the mining industry.

Ruth Koepke has lived in Silver Bay since the town was first built—her husband worked for Reserve Mining Company and helped cut the first trees at the new townsite in 1952. Ruth said she was "born curious," and as a member of the Bay Area Historical Society, she sought to compile as much information as she could about her town's beloved mascot.

Silver Bay was incorporated in 1956, the same year Reserve Mining Company's first shipment of taconite was loaded onto an ore boat. Ore was transported from the company's mine in Babbitt, and the two cities grew together. Silver Bay quickly resembled a 1950s suburb and had its own shopping center, churches, and a high school.

Rocky's story began, Ruth explained, when a young dentist moved to Silver Bay in 1959. Otto F. Ringle, DDS, told Ruth in a letter that he dreamed of a statue for Silver Bay that would have a similar impact as Paul Bunyan and Babe in Bemidji, not far from Dr. Ringle's previous practice in Walker.

Dr. Ringle and his wife, Joyce, were very active in civic affairs during their 14 years in Silver Bay. During a 1960 community get-together, real estate developer John Galbreath announced, "If there is anything I can do to make Silver Bay a better place to live, please let me know!"

As the new president of the Silver Bay Jaycees, Dr. Ringle proposed at that meeting three things that could enhance the community: a larger dental office for him, a laundromat for Joyce Ringle's parents, and a large statue for residents and tourists. Although some audience members were skeptical of the statue suggestion, the idea quickly gained traction. Reserve Mining Company engineers refined Dr. Ringle's first sketch of a man whose body represented two taconite pellets. Reserve agreed to pay for the statue and donated a taconite pedestal. The metal man, who was yet to be named, was constructed primarily by Neil Forsberg of the Star Ornamental Company in Minneapolis.

The statue was unveiled during the Silver Bay Chamber of Commerce's annual banquet on February 24, 1964, held at the Reserve Mining Company Auditorium. The banquet's program said dinner music was furnished by Dr. Ringle's father-in-law, Ted Benson. The Silver Tones Quartette sang, and Ruth Koepke added that the Babbitt High School band performed. Reserve Mining Company President J. William Bryant unveiled "Mr. Taconite," who was subsequently displayed near the Silver Bay post office. The monument's makeshift moniker didn't last long. In May 1964, the chamber of commerce sponsored a public contest to name the new statue. According to current Silver Bay Mayor Wade LeBlanc, Louis Stefanich won the contest and soon gained the nickname "Rocky" after his winning entry. "Petey Pellet" was a close second; however, I was unable to determine if that nomination inspired the name of Pellet Pete's Mini Golf Course at the Museum Formerly Known as Ironworld Discovery Center.

Otto Ringle's other two wishes were also fulfilled—the Silver Bay shopping center soon had a six-room dental office and a laundromat. Dr. Ringle utilized his knowledge of dental impressions when his mother-in-law created Rocky Taconite bobbleheads for a Jaycees fundraiser. In her kitchen on Banks Boulevard, Marie Benson carved a miniature Rocky out of soap, then Dr. Ringle made a mold from the carving, and Marie

CONTINUED ON | 9

CONTINUED FROM | 8

Benson filled the mold with a mixture of resin and taconite tailings. Ruth Koepke added that alphabet soup noodles spelled out "ROCKY TACONITE" on the little man's helmet.

Dr. Ringle said the exact resin recipe has been lost to time, but "Marie put them in her oven, and when they were hard, she attached the spring, connecting the head to the body, and [the Ringles'] kids went to work painting."

Mrs. Benson's kitchen-based bobblehead factory closed long ago, but new versions carried on her legacy. Ruth Koepke said, "We have had trouble getting anybody in our country to make them, and she made them in her kitchen." The originals are now quite valuable—when you can find them.

At all-class reunions during the annual Bay Days festival, students of all ages want Rocky statues. Bobbleheads have traveled the world, ridden on a camel (on one of Ruth's vacations), and attended the first event at US Bank Stadium in Minneapolis.

Bobbleheads are not the only place you'll see Rocky's face, though. Blue banners around Silver Bay say "Rocky Welcomes You" above a depiction of the smiling statue. Rocky has also appeared on pins, buttons, bumper stickers, plates, bookmarks, and spoons, Inside the Silver Bay tourist center, which also serves as the Bay Area Historical Society's museum, coffee mugs, hats, sweatshirts, and baby onesies are for sale. Rocky also lends his name to baseball and hockey tournaments and snowmobiles rides.

"Dr. Ringle was so thankful that we carried out the theme with T-shirts, mugs, and other souvenirs," Ruth said. Otto Ringle currently lives in Walker, where he has designed even more statues

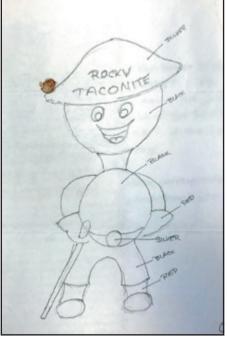
Shannon Krohn, who works at the tourist center, calls Rocky "The original man of steel." Her husband, Randy, turned an old ping-pong table into a cutout of Rocky that greets tourist center guests.

Rocky Taconite has a social media presence, although he seems to be on hiatus. His Facebook posts were often written in verse, and the educated edifice offered commentary on the weather and Rocky memorabilia.

Mayor Wade LeBlanc is proud to have Rocky greet visitors to the community.

"It's a great part of the history of Silver Bay," he stated. "It used to be up in the shopping center, then it got moved down by the clinic. I think that's a better spot for it. He's a lot more visible. There are always people taking pictures by him."

When the federal government sued Reserve Mining in the 1970s after the



Dr. Otto F. Ringle, a dentist and new resident of Silver Bay, made this sketch in 1960 of what became Rocky Taconite. The statue was funded by Reserve Mining Company, which is now Cleveland-Cliffs' Northshore Mining.

company's taconite tailings had polluted Lake Superior and North Shore drinking water, Rocky's popularity waned. The company later changed how it deposited tailings, and despite idles and changes in mine ownership, Rocky is still a celebrated citizen.

"He's gaining in popularity the older he gets." LeBlanc added.

The mayor said Rocky wears a Silver Bay Mariners jersey during Homecoming every fall, and he dons a scarf and hat in winter. After all, a hardhat offers little protection from harsh Lake Superior winds.

Rocky is cared for by the City of Silver Bay and received a fresh coat of paint a few years ago.

As the tourism and recreation industries have grown along the North Shore and as the mining industry continues evolving, Rocky Taconite keeps smiling. He serves as a tribute to the innovation that saved mining in Minnesota, and even voung children who don't fully understand Rocky's significance love posing with Rocky and often mimic his outstretched arms.

"You wouldn't believe how many people you see standing there taking pictures by him," Ruth Koepke said. "Rocky is our mascot and our friend."

Tucker Nelson lives in Virginia with his wife, stepson, and cats. When he isn't visiting statues of anthropomorphic taconite pellets, he can be reached at . tucker@htfnews.us.



The Lincoln Parent Teacher Organization (LPTO) in Hibbing recently gifted Lincoln Elementary with \$5,000 towards a social-emotional learning curriculum to support youth mental health. LPTO president Alex Stene said, "Is student mental health something you or your organization feel passionate about? We invite you to take part in a community challenge to match our donation! Contact us at lincolnptohibbing@gmail.com if you are interested in participating!" Pictured (I. to r.) are LPTO co-treasurer Erin Shay, LPTO president Alex Stene, and Lincoln Elementary principal Bob Bestul. Submitted photo.

Handgun training offered August 21

AURORA — On The Range Handgun Training will be holding a Minnesota Permit to Carry class Sunday, August 21, at 9 a.m. at the East Range Sportsmen's and Conservation Club (ERSCC) clubhouse, 5610 Forestry Rd. in Aurora.

The class, led by ERSCC treasurer and

membership coordinator Gyle Swentik, will last three to four hours, and the cost is \$50. To learn more about this training or the East Range Sportsmen's and Conservation Club. contact Swentik at 218-780-8993 or email gomer8993@gmail.com.

Trinity Lutheran to offer free meal

COOK — Trinity Lutheran Church in Cook will host a drive-through meal Thursday. August 25 from 4 – 6 p.m. The meal will be

Zup's brats, beans, chips, and dessert. Trinity offers free, public meals once a month. The church is located at 231 2nd St. E.



AUGUST 19. 2022 | HOMETOWNFOCUS.US 9