

## Chapter 8

### Pre's Rock: Pilgrimage, Ritual, and Runners' Traditions at the Roadside Shrine for Steve Prefontaine<sup>1</sup>

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Located on a dangerous curved road in the east hills of Eugene, Oregon, is the roadside memorial for the long distance runner Steve Prefontaine. This site, named Pre's Rock, has attracted athletes, fans, and pilgrims for more than thirty years. Prefontaine was tragically killed at this spot in an automobile accident on May 30, 1975, at the age of twenty-four. At the time of his death, he was the most famous runner in the United States and held every American track record from the 2,000 meters to 10,000 meters. Track fans continue to debate whether or not Prefontaine was the greatest American distance runner ever, but he is undoubtedly the most popular distance runner in American history. Prefontaine has inspired generations of distance runners, and his cult of personality endures to the present.

Pre's Rock has been visited by runners and fans from all over the world, where they often place personal objects and things symbolically connected to Prefontaine and the broader subcultures of distance running and track and field. Running shoes are carefully arranged around the rock, or occasionally balanced on top of it, and jerseys and race numbers are placed at its base, or tucked into its crevices, or pinned to the ivy and other plants that grow nearby. Race medals, ribbons, trophies, track spikes, and wrist-bands are scattered about, while running caps and T-shirts drape the memorial marker on some days, and food (such as energy bars) and bottles of sports drinks or beer are occasionally left here as well. People also leave photos of Prefontaine and photos of themselves, as well as hand-written notes, poems, prayers, letters, flowers, candles, coins, identification cards, and other personal objects, similar to the offerings placed at roadside memorials throughout the United States.

In this essay, I examine the traditions and rituals of commemoration as-



*Fans at Pre's Rock and the assortment of objects placed there, May 2004.*

*Photo: D. Wojcik.*

sociated with Pre's Rock, and the personal meanings of these practices for the people who travel to the site. For some individuals, Pre's Rock is considered hallowed ground, and it functions as a shrine, a place where they make offerings, seek inspiration and intercession, and communicate with the memory or spirit of Steve Prefontaine. I explore the ways that the site is sacralized by fans, how their ritual actions are expressions of vernacular spirituality, and the degree to which journeys to Pre's Rock may be considered pilgrimages.

As a folklorist and long distance runner, I have been interested in the traditions associated with Steve Prefontaine for many years. As a runner in high school and college, I was familiar with Prefontaine's accomplishments, and like nearly every American distance runner at the time, I admired his gutsy running style and enthusiastic approach to running and to life. I vividly remember the one time I ran with Prefontaine, with some other high school runners—September 8, 1973. We ran five miles alongside and behind Prefontaine, in almost complete silence, in awe and veneration of the supreme being of American distance running. I also remember the morning that I learned of Prefontaine's death; I was stunned and devastated by the news, like so many other people.

I have visited Pre's Rock during training runs over the past fifteen years, as a place to stop and reflect, or sometimes out of curiosity to observe the objects that have been left there. Since 2003, I have been present at the site after major track meets, cross-country meets, road races, and on specific ritual days relating to Prefontaine's life and death, such as his birthday, death day, and Memorial Day.<sup>2</sup> After interviewing many of the visitors at the site, it became apparent that Pre's Rock is not only characterized by traditions of memorialization, but that for some individuals it is a place of pilgrimage, reverence, and spirituality. A number of people regard the site as a 'sacred place' for runners, or as one person stated it, 'The Church of Pre,' and they had made special journeys to the spot and brought special objects to be left here. Some of them say that they can feel Prefontaine's 'presence' or his 'spirit' here, and they seek to interact with his life and legacy. The practices and personalized spirituality expressed at Pre's Rock blur the boundaries between the sacred and the secular, pilgrimage and tourism, shrine and memorial, inspiration and supernatural intercession.

Steve Roland Prefontaine was born on January 25, 1951, in Coos Bay, Oregon. He initially had minimal success in sports as a youth, and was a small and skinny child, born with one leg shorter than the other. According to local lore and oral history, he was an outsider as a child, in part because he did not speak English until learning it in school (his mother Elfriede was a war bride from Germany, and Prefontaine spoke German at home). During his freshman year in high school, he had some success in cross-country running, and he began a rigorous plan of training, and by his junior and senior years in high school, he won every race and set an American national high school record of 8:41.5 in the two-mile race. In his lifetime, Prefontaine set fourteen American records, and on the American running scene he appeared to be almost unbeatable and super-human in the eyes of his fans. His current admirers continue to idolize him as a fearless front-runner, who punished his opponents with a brutal pace, and who often ran alone, against the clock and himself, to the point of complete exhaustion. As he put it: 'Most people run a race to see who is fastest. I run a race to see who has the most guts.' In the 1972 Olympics in

the 5000 meters, at the age of twenty-one, Prefontaine ran a characteristically gutsy race, having taken over the lead and pushing the pace during the last mile, only to be out-kicked in the last 200 meters by three other runners, and finishing out of medal contention.

Although Prefontaine quickly became legendary for his aggressive running style, he also was embraced for his view that he had less natural talent than other runners, but that hard work and devotion to a goal led to his success, and that anyone could become successful through effort and dedication (Moore 2006: 323). He was known for never missing a workout or track meet despite injury and illness, as well as for his toughness and ability to endure pain, like the time he tore open his foot in a grisly accident, and then two days later, he ran on the severely injured and bleeding foot, and won a national championship in the three-mile race (Dellinger quoted in McChesney 1981: 38-39). Prefontaine had a charismatic style, and he developed a strong rapport with his fans, who called themselves 'Pre's People'; he said that he considered running to be an art form and a performance, and his zealous fans entered into the performance with him, chanting his name, stomping their feet, and screaming for him with a deafening roar when he raced.<sup>3</sup> Having witnessed the relationship between Prefontaine and his devoted fans, Oregon writer and counterculture icon Ken Kesey stated that 'Pre was more than a name – it was a condition' (Hollister and Lyttle 1996). Journalists have described the enthusiasm of Pre's fans as bordering on fanaticism (Newnham 1975: B1), with one writer stating, 'there is probably nothing in sports to compare with the love affair between Pre and his people' (Davis 1975: C1). His teammate Steve Bence recalled Prefontaine's charisma and crowd appeal: 'Perhaps the most poignant memory is the energy that Pre brought to the track. I compared it to bullfights that I went to while a high school student in Spain. Pre entering the track was like the bull entering the ring. He would burst on to the track, it seemed that all heads would turn and the excitement and anticipation in the place would take off. He helped create a very special environment.'<sup>4</sup> One of Prefontaine's roommates, Pat Tyson, had a similar recollection: 'When he stepped out on the track, he was like a rock star (...) He made running cool' (Anderson 2005: B5). Prefontaine was also known to be generous to the mobs of children who wan-

ted his autograph after each race, and he was equally friendly to his fans, often hanging out at local taverns, drinking beer and happily socializing with 'his people' (McChesney 1981: 3-4, 22). Many of his female admirers found him physically and sexually attractive, adding further to his cult of charisma and personal magnetism. Some of Prefontaine's fans actually attributed uncanny and supernatural powers to his presence, and in the local folklore of Eugene, Oregon, it is often recounted that the sun would shine through the cloudy and rainy weather whenever he stepped onto the track to run (McChesney 1981: 13,16; Jordan 1997: 3-4).

In addition to his charisma, Prefontaine cultivated a rebel persona and was frequently referred to by his fans as the 'James Dean of track and field.'<sup>5</sup> Prefontaine's appeal is also related to his small-town roots, working-class masculinity, and his rise from hometown hero to national fame, and his involvement and contributions to the local community.<sup>6</sup> Some of his fans view him as a vocal opponent of perceived injustices, a 'champion of the underdog' who fought 'the establishment,' such as the bureaucracy of the American Amateur Union, the governing body of track and field in the United States, which exploited amateur athletes at the time.<sup>7</sup> Finally, Prefontaine is venerated for not being driven by greed and staying true to his personal goals and ideals. For example, when he was struggling to pay his bills, subsisting on food stamps, and living in a trailer, he was offered more than \$100,000 to run professionally, but he refused the money, because taking it would have cost him his amateur status and prevented him from competing in the 1976 Olympics.

Prefontaine's story has the elements that appeal to American audiences, as he seemed to embrace and epitomize attitudes of independence, dedication, courage, and success—a runner's version of the 'work hard and you shall be rewarded' narrative and the related rags-to-riches story, although he died before he became rich. As a folk hero and icon of American sports, Prefontaine has been celebrated in two feature films, *Prefontaine* (1997) and *Without Limits* (1998) as well as in the documentary film, *Fire on the Track: The Life Story of Steve Prefontaine* (1996). These films have brought his life story to a much wider audience beyond the local community and track and field enthusiasts and contributed further to the cult of personality surrounding Prefontaine and

have definitely inspired an increase in the number of people visiting Pre's Rock in recent years. In interviews with fans at the site, I discovered that many of them had learned about Prefontaine through these films and that the films were the motivating factor for their journeys to the site, or their 'Pre pilgrimage,' as some of them called it.<sup>8</sup> Not all of these 'pilgrims' were runners, but athletes in other sports (swimming, wrestling, cycling, football, basketball), and many of them were in high school or college. A number of them told me they watched the films about Prefontaine before athletic competitions, sometimes as a ritual, alone or in groups, to get inspired. Others said that they watched the films for inspiration in general or to get 'psyched up' for whatever reason. Some of the young people who visit Pre's Rock are not athletes at all. In June 2005, several hours after the annual Prefontaine Classic track meet, a young man at the site said he liked Prefontaine because he was gutsy, and that 'Pre was like punk rock before punk rock, [but] he was not just about running, but doing whatever you loved with passion, going all out, balls to the wall, trying your hardest at what you did.' He then quoted verbatim various lines from the films on Prefontaine, as if he were quoting scripture, while others at the site nodded knowingly and in approval at his words.

Prefontaine's legacy also endures because of his connection to the Nike company. Prefontaine's legendary coach at Oregon, Bill Bowerman, was the co-founder of Nike along with Phil Knight, and the company was established in Eugene, Oregon. In the early 1970s, when the company was just beginning, Prefontaine wore the various shoes that Bowerman designed, such as the Nike waffle-soled shoe that Bowerman created using an old waffle iron. Since Prefontaine's death, the Nike company has embraced Prefontaine as someone who helped define the ethos of the corporation and during the past decade has increasingly promoted his image and legend, through various products, advertisements, and media productions.<sup>9</sup> Nike's reverence for and promotion of Prefontaine have had a significant influence in the renewed interest in Prefontaine among young people, and the resulting increase of visitors at Pre's Rock.

During the course of my research, I documented dozens of stories told by people about how Prefontaine had inspired them or had influenced their lives

in a positive way. Mark Lansing (aged 47), whom I met at Pre's Rock in the summer of 2004, provided a representative narrative. Formerly a competitive runner and now a lawyer in Portland, Lansing was visiting the site with his niece and his nine-year-old daughter, a runner. He told me that he had been to the rock dozens of times, first beginning in the late 1970s when he attended the University of Oregon and was a runner, and he said that Prefontaine had been a major inspiration throughout his life:

You could probably make the argument that Pre has influenced my life more than anyone (with the exception of my parents). In 1970 I was 13 years old and I wanted to be a runner. Pre was certainly the role model for that particular aspiration. I always enjoyed the way running made me feel, and Pre was the guy who made running cool. It was sort of a James Dean thing. Pre wasn't just good, he was the best, and the *way* he did it was equally impressive: lots of style and grit (...) I think that Pre's fingerprints are all over the things I did and do. More than anyone else, he lit that path for me, and the things that are good in my life have come from following it. Thank you, Mr. Prefontaine.<sup>10</sup>

Paul McMullen (aged 32), an American national champion 1,500-meter runner who ran in the 1996 Olympic Games, also visited Pre's Rock in 2004 because of the influence Prefontaine had on his approach to running and recalled his experience there: 'I vividly remember walking up to the rock and the hair stood up on the back of my neck. It was as though I was visiting the gravesite of a close friend that understood what drove me to attempt what others thought to be impossible. Fate is a peculiar thing and so is fame. The main reason Prefontaine has risen to folk hero status is because his death kept maturity's shades of gray from blurring his uncompromising nature.'<sup>11</sup> Prefontaine's death at the age of twenty-four was devastating to people locally and nationally: 'It was as if God had died ... he was the best person we had, a local hero. He was thought of as God-like,' recalled Shannon Rettig (aged 51), who was an Oregon college student in the 1970s when she learned of Prefontaine's death (Andujar 2007: 1).

Immortalized through legend and memory, Prefontaine's life has many of the common elements associated with other American folk heroes: he rose from the ranks of the common man; he was endowed with seemingly super-human powers of physical strength and endurance; he had personal magnetism, exceptional vitality, and lived life with gusto; he was a rugged individualist and confronted the elite establishment; he boasted and performed feats of audacity and daring, yet was good-natured and kind-hearted (Dorson 1977: 199-243). For his fans, Prefontaine was the embodiment of courage, rebellion, and the pursuit of one's dreams with complete abandon; and in his races he exhibited an almost martyr-like willingness to suffer for his goals and for 'his people,' running through the pain barriers to the point of near oblivion as thousands cheered him on. As an athlete dying young, the tragic ending of Prefontaine's life also has two important features of the classic 'hero of tradition' pattern identified by Lord Ragland: the hero meets with a mysterious death, and he has one or more holy sepulchers (Ragland 1956).

As I discovered during the time spent at Pre's Rock, the circumstances surrounding Prefontaine's death were a common topic of conversation, as his admirers speculated about how he died and the 'mysterious' events associated with his death. According to the official report, Prefontaine was returning home after a party and was drunk when his MGB sports car veered across the dividing line in the center of the road and then crashed into the wall of rock alongside the roadway. His car flipped over on top of him, trapping him underneath, and he apparently suffocated from the weight of the car on his chest, with no broken bones and only a few scratches on his body, although his cause of death is still debated (2006: 326).<sup>12</sup> He was not wearing a seat belt, and his blood alcohol level was at 0.16, significantly above the legal limit of 0.10 (Jordan 1997: 154). However, for many, including Prefontaine's family and close friends, controversy still surrounds the events of that night, and this was reflected in the various narratives expressed by Prefontaine's fans at the memorial, many of whom believe he crashed his car attempting to avoid an oncoming vehicle in his lane.<sup>13</sup> Some of the narratives also assert that Prefontaine was not intoxicated, citing evidence that the procedure for testing his blood alcohol level was done improperly (Jordan 1997: 154).<sup>14</sup> I even heard



conspiracy theories that Prefontaine may have been killed by his 'enemies,' whether members of the AAU track and field federation that Prefontaine had challenged and embarrassed (such rumors also exist on a few websites and blogs) or foreign espionage agents from the countries of his competitors, perhaps the KGB.

Regardless of the narrative told at the site, the majority of stories assert that the accident was not Prefontaine's fault and dispute the official account of his death—an unacceptable and senseless death for his fans, and an unfitting ending for a young athlete and local hero so full of life and at the pinnacle of his career. The narratives that people tell not only challenge the official version of Prefontaine's death, but construct new meanings from the death event, just as the activities at Pre's Rock create a meaningful narrative from his death and reaffirm his life. Individuals at informal memorials and sites of tragedy do more than commemorate or grieve, they attempt to understand what happened, to make sense of the disaster, or to seek action against those responsible (Margry and Sánchez-Carretero 2007: 2).

## Pre's Rock

Like other spontaneous memorials, the place of Steve Prefontaine's death immediately became a commemorative site. Friends, neighbors, fans, and others in the local community spontaneously visited the place of the automobile accident and left flowers or objects that were somehow connected to Prefontaine, his accomplishments, and their memories of him. Soon after the accident, the following inscription was painted in white on the slab of rock where the car crashed by Arne Alvarado, a teenager who lived in the neighborhood:

PRE  
5-30-75  
R.I.P

Later, a small bronze casting of Prefontaine running was fastened to the rock. Initially, the wall of rock was the place of commemoration, with people

placing objects at its base and in its crevices. Kenny Moore, who lived near Pre's Rock, observed over time the ways that people sought to remember Prefontaine: 'After Pre died, I did live here for years and years and I watched the shrine grow up almost immediately. People wanted to connect with him in a way that was powerful, and so, consistently for thirty years there hasn't been a time when there hasn't been some little memorial left here, because Pre affected people so profoundly.'<sup>15</sup> Similar to other roadside memorials, Pre's Rock offers a tangible place in the landscape to commune with the deceased and commemorate individually and as a community. Because informal memorials are regularly visited and attended to, they may become places of endearment, forming the basis for continued interaction with the dead as well as interactions with others.

After two decades as an informal roadside memorial, Pre's Rock was somewhat formalized in 1997 with the placement of a black granite marker at the base of the rock where Prefontaine died. The idea for this tribute to Prefontaine came from prison inmates at the penitentiary in Salem, Oregon, where Prefontaine had volunteered and had helped establish a running program that is still in existence today. In consultation with members of the Oregon Track Club and with help from a local rock and quarry company, the granite marker containing the following inscription about Prefontaine written by a prison inmate was installed:

'PRE'  
For your dedication and loyalty  
To your principles and beliefs...  
For your love, warmth, and friendship  
For your family and friends...  
You are missed by so many.  
And you will never be forgotten...

The memorial stone also contains a photograph of Prefontaine's face, apparently one of the last photos taken of him before he died, and individuals who visit the site often are especially moved by the photograph, with some of

them commenting that it is soulful, haunting, and 'intense.' Most people have responded favorably to the installation of this official marker, although a few people, especially longtime visitors to the site, are ambivalent about the granite marker, stating that it alters the ambiance at Pre's Rock that has existed for decades and that it appears imposed, or that it looks like a gravestone.<sup>16</sup> But the vast majority of Prefontaine's fans seem appreciative of the ongoing development of the site, and most of the new visitors assume the marker has always been there, and many people kneel next to the marker and have photographs taken of themselves beside the image of Prefontaine. As one high school runner remarked: 'This is my picture of me with Pre. This is as close I can get to him.'

Prefontaine is buried in Sunset Memorial Cemetery just south of his hometown of Coos Bay, Oregon. Although a few individuals I spoke with had made the journey to Prefontaine's gravesite, most had not, stating emphatically that Pre's Rock is the place to visit, the spot where 'Pre lives,' where his memory and 'spirit' survive. This crash site where Prefontaine died has replaced his grave as the primary place of remembrance, and it has become the cultic and iconic focus for most of his fans. Leah Worthen (aged 20), a student and runner at the University of Oregon, grew up in Coos Bay and visits Prefontaine's grave every Memorial Day with her family, and they leave flowers there. But she says there are relatively few offerings at his grave, and not nearly as many visitors there throughout the year compared with Pre's Rock; the rock, she says, 'is a testament to the "idea" of Steve, that he's somehow part of the "spirit" of Eugene and runners worldwide. His grave site, however, simply marks the place of his dead body.'<sup>17</sup>

Although Prefontaine's fans journey to Pre's Rock to commemorate and celebrate his legacy, the site also continues to be a place of sadness and loss. Prefontaine's sisters Linda and Neta have stated that they appreciate objects left at the site, but they rarely visit it because it is too emotionally painful. When I spoke with Prefontaine's parents Elfriede and Ray as they visited Pre's Rock after the Prefontaine Classic track meet on June 19, 2004, they also said they had not been to the roadside shrine for their son for many years because it brought back such painful memories. The Prefontaines were visibly moved

by the objects left at the site, and after they placed flowers at the base of the marker, Mrs. Prefontaine kissed her hand and touched the image of her son's face, as the crowd of forty to fifty people at Pre's Rock gathered around her in hushed silence.

After Prefontaine's parents left, the activity at the site returned to normal, with dozens of people crowding around the rock and standing in the street in front of it. People walked about, touched the rock, stood or knelt beside it, took photos, kissed their hands and touched the rock, and left things. Some were silent or spoke quietly among themselves, others were animated, talking excitedly about Prefontaine or the performances at the recent track meet at Hayward Field, or the 'mystery car' and various theories about what really caused his death. Many people examined the assemblage of objects that had been left at the site—medals, ribbons, shoes, Mardi Gras beads, race numbers, bracelets, photos, notes, flowers in a Powerade sports drink container. One young woman gently placed a pair of worn-out shoes at its base, and a few minutes later another teenager pressed his crumpled race bib number into one of the crevices in the rock. Cars regularly pulled up to the site, with passengers paying respects as they drove by, or the cars sometimes stopping in the middle of street, creating a dangerous and somewhat carnivalesque scene. A man in a convertible drove up to the site, stopped in the middle of the road, jumped out of his car, put flowers in a plastic container, and then drove away. Moments later, a large middle-aged man suddenly appeared out of nowhere, and quickly approached the rock. Striding up to it, and smoking a big cigar, he kissed his hand and then gently touched the rock, all in one motion, and then continued walking down the road.

The sorts of things that people do at the site vary considerably, and there are no set rituals, although one common practice involves running to the site, either alone or as a group, and touching or kissing the rock, and leaving an object. One tradition that occurs after the Oregon state track and field championship races involves runners placing their recently-won and highly-prized award medals at the site. As runner and graduate student Cody Loy (aged 24) observed:



*A runner bends down to kiss the image of Prefontaine at his memorial marker, 2006. Photo: D. Wojcik.*

As I marveled at these few medals that the greatest runners of the year had left for Pre, I found one such medallion that had a note taped to its backside. On the note read: 'A piece of greatness can never compare to the greatness you have given to us. Rest in peace, Pre.' I remember the writing to this day because the idea stood out to me while also giving me a new insight: so many of the great athletes and runners produced in the state of Oregon today attain their level of ability and athleticism only because they strive to be what Pre has been to so many like myself: an indicator of what can be achieved by the human will when one sacrifices everything for the sport and its legacy. And as Pre once said: 'To give anything less than your best is to sacrifice the gift' (Heinz 2007: 1).

## Roadside Memorials and Spontaneous Shrines

As a vernacular place of commemoration and veneration since 1975, Pre's Rock has been actively maintained longer than most American roadside memorials, spontaneous shrines, and gravesite shrines, including Graceland. Although the current practices associated with Pre's Rock are similar to those at more recent informal memorials, they also have antecedents in previous and longstanding folk traditions. The practice of marking the place of death has existed for hundreds of years in the United States, with the origins of such traditions often located in indigenous practices, folk Catholicism, and Spanish and Mexican cultures, such as the practice of creating roadside crosses or *descansos* (places of rest) to indicate the place of death. Similar memorial practices, including the tradition of creating wayside shrines, have a long legacy in many cultures throughout the world. In more recent decades in the United States, large spontaneous shrines occasionally have emerged as expressions of collective sorrow, such as the memorial created in Dealey Plaza in Dallas after the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, or that for John Lennon in New York City after his death in 1980. During the past twenty years in the USA, traditions of spontaneous memorialization have proliferated (Santino 2006a), attributed in part to the influence of the media coverage of the mourning rituals associated with the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (dedicated in 1982). After the outpouring of offerings left at its base, it became much more acceptable to express personal grief in public spaces (Hass 1998).

The increasing presence of spontaneous shrines and roadside memorials is also related to public awareness of the informal memorials that were created after the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City (1995), the death of Princess Diana (1997), the shooting at Columbine High School in Colorado (1999), and the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City (2001) and the trains in Madrid (2004), and other tragic events. Vernacular memorialization now has become a pervasive, accepted, and almost obligatory way to express grief and remembrance in the event of tragic and violent death in American culture and throughout the world.<sup>18</sup>

As various writers have asserted, in the modern era the mourning rituals provided by dominant institutions in society, whether by religious organiza-

tions or the funerary industry, often seem inadequate and may not fulfill the emotional needs of those concerned (Aries 1974; Haney, Leimer, and Lowery 1997: 167-170; Huntington and Metcalf 1979: 187-211; Santino 2006b). The rituals that occur at spontaneous memorial sites provide alternative and personally meaningful ways of expressing sorrow and remembrance, in response to the depersonalization of death and the inadequacy of institutional and traditional mourning rituals. Unlike the memorialization of death that occurs in cemeteries or religious institutions, which tend to be private and restricted to family and friends, spontaneous memorials also provide places to mourn for people normally not included in traditional rites. Like other roadside memorials, Pre's Rock is interwoven into the landscape of everyday life and continues to be a vibrant site of folk expression, and it differs from most cemeteries which are generally hidden from public view and which usually restrict tangible outpourings of emotion, the leaving of objects, and the gathering of crowds.

These popular sites of commemoration have been called both shrines and memorials, and there is no universal agreement about the exact meanings of the terms. Both of these concepts reflect the notion of symbolic and ritual space invested with significance. Memorials are usually regarded as places of commemoration of an individual or a group of people, while shrines are frequently defined as sites of ritual, prayer, contemplation, and sometimes pilgrimage. However, in the realm of popular expression, these categories may blur and overlap, as people's behavior at such sites is variable. For example, while the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is an official memorial and place of commemoration, for some people it is also a place of pilgrimage and functions as a shrine, and it is considered a sacred site, where people leave symbolic objects, engage in ritual behavior, and communicate with the dead (Hass 1998: 87-102; Dubisch *infra*, *drafters*).

In 1992, folklorist Jack Santino proposed the term 'spontaneous shrine' to refer to sites that are created by people in response to instances of sudden and tragic death. As Santino notes, 'spontaneous' indicates the unofficial and 'folk' nature of these sites, that they are 'of the people'; and term 'shrine' indicates those sites that are more than memorials and that have become places of

pilgrimage and communion between the living and the dead (Santino 2006b: 12). Folklorist Sylvia Grider shares Santino's view that these places are more than secular memorials because they become sites of ritual offering, pilgrimage, and sacred meaning (Grider 2001: 2-4). In a discussion of the various types of official and informal shrines, folklorist Jeannie Thomas describes the folk religiosity associated with such sites: 'Shrines mark hallowed spots; they are composed of culturally or personally significant relics. We travel to shrines to express our devotion and pain, to ask for help, to reach toward other worlds, to remember, and to heal' (Thomas 1996: 17). Although the media has sometimes referred to sites such as Pre's Rock as 'make-shift memorials,' these places are not haphazard displays, but are heartfelt, popular constructions usually characterized by certain underlying principles and common themes shared with other informal environments that have been created through the processes of assemblage and bricolage (Grider 2001; Santino 2001, 2006b; Margry and Sánchez-Carretero 2007; Wojcik 2008). As Grider notes: 'These spontaneous shrines are among the deepest expressions of our shared humanity, combining ritual, pilgrimage, performance art, popular culture, and traditional material culture' (Grider 2001: 2). Such sites also have been referred to as 'performative commemoratives' (Santino 2006b) or 'performative memorials' (Margry 2007) because they are publicly created and enacted for others, inviting participation, presenting significant personal and cultural issues, and frequently communicating political concerns (Santino 2006b: 10-14; Margry and Sánchez-Carretero 2007).<sup>19</sup>

Like other spontaneous memorials, the place where Steve Prefontaine died immediately became a bounded ritual space where people attempted to emotionally grasp and manage the trauma of sudden death. The accident site, a place of tragedy, was symbolically 'cleansed' by the actions of people and transformed into a consecrated place of remembrance, love, and communion. Pre's Rock is participatory and 'open' to all, friends and strangers alike, and it emerged from the public need to mourn and remember. Like other folkloric forms of expression, the varied traditions and personal practices at the site exist without official guidelines and are not controlled by official institutions and authorities.



## Shrine, Pilgrimage Site, Spirituality, and Inspiration

Although Pre's Rock emerged as a spontaneous roadside memorial in 1975 as a site for people to mourn, it soon became a place for admirers to pay tribute to the accomplishments and life of Steve Prefontaine. Today, for many who come here, especially young athletes in high school and college, Pre's Rock is a source of inspiration, a place for devotees to experience the cult of personality and legendary status that Prefontaine has attained, comparable to fans visiting the graves of Jim Morrison or Elvis Presley, or the crash sites of Princess Diana's or James Dean's death<sup>20</sup>

The terms 'shrine' and 'pilgrimage,' when used to describe Pre's Rock, evoke ideas about religious devotion, sacred space, and communication with intercessory beings that may seem inappropriate and that probably would disturb Steve Prefontaine himself. Certainly, some of the people who visit the site are tourists, and many others come to remember and commemorate Prefontaine's life. Yet for a number of individuals that I spoke with, Pre's Rock fulfilled the functions of a shrine, as a ritualized space, where they gave thanks, made offerings, asked for help and intercession, and attempted to interact with the 'spirit' of Prefontaine, as a venerated person and object of devotion. Furthermore, some of these individuals referred to their journey to Pre's Rock as a 'pilgrimage.' But can this place of remembrance on the side of the road actually be considered a pilgrimage site? The attributes and parameters of pilgrimage continue to be debated and contested by scholars (Badone and Roseman 2004, Cohen 1992, Eade and Sallnow 1991/2000, Morinis 1992, Reader and Walter 1993), but for the purposes of this essay, I utilize the definitions of pilgrimage proposed by Emily Socolov (1997), Alan Morinis (1992), and Peter Jan Margry (see chapter 1). Pilgrimage is defined by Socolov as 'the journey of individuals in homage to highly esteemed places, individuals, or artifacts with the aim of deriving some benefit therefrom' (Socolov 1997: 647). According to Morinis, 'the pilgrimage is a journey undertaken by a person in quest of a place or a state that he or she believes to embody a valued ideal' (Morinis 1992: 4). Margry gives us a thorough characterization of pilgrimage, as follows: 'A journey that individuals or groups undertake based on a religious or spiritual inspiration, to a place that is regarded as more sacred or salutary

than the environment of everyday life, to seek a transcendental encounter with a specific cult object, for the purpose of acquiring spiritual, emotional, or physical healing or benefit' (see: chapter 1).

These definitions suggest that Pre's Rock is both a shrine and a pilgrimage site for some individuals, a ritually demarcated cultic space, believed to be sacred, where one honors a being or force that may function as an intercessor, and where one offers petitions, prayers, and votive objects. People travel to the site not only for reasons of commemoration or curiosity but to receive personal benefits in the form of inspiration, aid, or blessings, and they speak of feeling renewed or transformed as the result of their visit. Some of the people who journey to Pre's Rock say that the place provides an encounter with the 'true spirit' of Prefontaine and the 'essence' of the culture of running. In this regard, Pre's Rock, like other folk shrines, represents an embodiment and enshrinement of the valued ideals and the ethos of running that are central to people's lifestyle and belief system: 'All runners know this is the sacred spot for runners. Eugene is the Mecca for running and Pre's Rock is the shrine to guts and courage,' said Ben Ackerly, a high-school track coach, who said he had 'made a pilgrimage to the rock' from Virginia.<sup>21</sup>

Journeys to Pre's Rock are often referred to as pilgrimages in various online postings, with the following comment by a high school runner being fairly representative: 'I really want to go to Oregon this summer (...). Visit the memorial to the Pre, and maybe run a workout on the infamous Hayward Field. It would be somewhat like a pilgrimage, a deeply religious experience.'<sup>22</sup> This idea of Pre's Rock as a source of inspiration that embodies valued ideals and existential meaning was expressed by Prefontaine's sister, Linda, who considers the rock to be 'a symbol for all runners. It's a place they can go for a purpose for running, for goals in life, to have inner peace.'<sup>23</sup> Similar ideas were stated by many runners at the site, who frequently told me that they visit Pre's Rock to get inspiration or give thanks for the inspiration they received. Matt Gray, who had driven from northern California to attend the Prefontaine Classic track meet in June 2007, said that he visits the site every time he is in Eugene. After the track meet he was at the site with friends and discussed their visit to Pre's Rock: 'It's the pilgrimage. If you're a runner, it's what you

do. If you're in Eugene, and you don't go to Pre's Rock, you're not a runner' (Christie 2007: A1, A9). Gray left one track shoe next to the rock, as an offering of thanks to Prefontaine for helping him set some high-school records, and he kept the other shoe for himself.

Many athletes have a tradition of journeying to Pre's Rock on significant dates or in relation to important events, whether one's birthday or before or after championship competitions. For example, after the conclusion of the Oregon state track and field championship meet, the coaches at Crescent Valley High School in Corvallis, Oregon, Ted Pawlak and Pat Wilson, ritually run with their athletes from Hayward Field to Pre's Rock, a distance of several miles, with the last part up a steep hill. As Pawlak stated, 'This is the special place if you are a runner, and we always run here, we have done it for years now. It gives these kids a sense of Pre's legend, as one of the greatest runners of all time. When they visit, they feel connected to him, and he becomes a part of them.'<sup>24</sup> At the beginning of the cross-country season, the team also drives to Eugene from the town of Corvallis and gathers together at Pre's Rock, where they make a vow to do the best they possibly can during the season.

Such traditions and the other forms of ritual behavior expressed by people who come to Pre's Rock resemble the actions traditionally associated with pilgrimages to shrines for superhuman beings or culture heroes: the journey to the cultic site requires a physical hardship or sacrifice; the experience at the site removes the individual from the ordinary world and everyday life, and involves an encounter at a unique and revered place that is believed to embody the history and heritage of the culture of running; individuals engage in rituals and sometimes spiritually-inspired actions, whether participating in a communal vow, leaving personal gifts of gratitude, or asking for help or intercession (see Margry: chapter I; Morinis 1992; Reader and Walter 1993). Although journeys to Pre's Rock initially may not appear to be as explicitly spiritual as the religiously-motivated pilgrimages to established holy places, in some cases people's experiences at the site reflect personal forms of spirituality, and the journeys exhibit the structure of the rites of passage model proposed by Arnold van Gennep (1960) and developed by Victor Turner and Edith Turner in their characterization of pilgrimages: a separation from society and one's

previous self as one journeys to the site; the liminoid and reflexive experience at the shrine itself, as a place of power and the embodiment of highly-valued ideals; then the return home and a reincorporation into the ordinary world (Turner and Turner 1978).<sup>25</sup> Like most contemporary pilgrimage experiences, special journeys to Pre's Rock are generally not as dramatically transformative as traditional rites of passage that provide an entirely new social identity or status.<sup>26</sup> Yet people may be changed by the journey and their experiences at the site, may feel more connected to significant values and beliefs, and renewed in some way.<sup>27</sup>

Pilgrimage sites, as 'energized' and extraordinary places, are points of convergence for communication between humans and deities or supernormal forces, sites where the supernatural is manifested and where divine favors may be attained. The actions and statements of some of those at Pre's Rock reveal the belief that Prefontaine's life-force, essence, or power is present at this place and that it can be experienced here: 'Pre had a tremendous strength and will-power in his life, and great determination, and this is the last place



*An individual poses for a photo next to the memorial marker at Pre's Rock, as others wait to do the same, 2005. Photo: D. Wojcik.*

where he was in this world. I think there is some kind a power here, I don't know what exactly, it is like the last part of him, his life, the last place he was alive, and he still lives on here, somehow ... some kind of energy.<sup>28</sup> Such ideas and related folk beliefs are widely accepted in vernacular culture, with the site of death considered to be a liminal space, a threshold where the sacred and secular intersect. In popular belief and vernacular imagination, the exact spot of death, as the place where the soul leaves the body, is often believed to be infused with the spirit of the deceased and remains a permanent place of contact between this world and the afterlife.

For some individuals, Pre's Rock is experienced as a sacred place of contemplation and spirituality. Kate McInerny, who attended the University of Oregon from 1971-1975 and knew Prefontaine, said she returned to Eugene for the first time in twenty years to attend the Prefontaine Classic in 2004, and at the track meet she learned about people visiting Pre's Rock: 'I was interested to hear about the "pilgrimage" to Pre's memorial site the day of the meet (...). My visit the next morning to Pre's Rock was very quiet. The image of Pre set in the rock is timeless – I felt haunted because I sensed "life" in his eyes – he had very intense eyes! I felt that it was as important and vital to visit the site as it was to attend the meet. Visiting the site is a very powerful spiritual experience.'<sup>29</sup>

Like other sites of popular spirituality, the beliefs and spiritual meanings associated with Pre's Rock are largely personal, private, and experiential, and exist at an informal level among people apart from formal religious institutions and authorities (Luckmann 1967, Yoder 1974, Primiano 1995, Wojcik 1996, 1997). One example of the individualized spirituality connected to Pre's Rock was expressed by Michael Regan, a senior Deputy District Attorney in Oregon City, who drove up to the site with his sons after the Oregon high-school championship track meet because they wanted to see the site. Regan said when he went to school at the University of Oregon between 1975-1982, he would stop for reflection at the rock during his training runs, and he continues to visit the site for the same reasons today:

That spot to me represents a simple tangible place to pause and reflect ... not only on Steve Prefontaine but about the spiritual side of running. All of us who run persistently through life, whether as seriously as Pre or just for fitness, come to recognize the role running plays in clearing our mind and soul. Throughout life, when you come up against stress, pain, heartache, depression, challenges, decision-making moments, or even joyful occasions, that time simply putting one foot in front of the other, alone, hearing nothing but your breathing and your mind's random meandering, is a spiritual and therapeutic activity, which over the years has saved me a lot of money on therapists. Coming to the Rock, and recognizing how amazing a runner Pre was, and how his life ended in such tragedy, makes you feel connected to him at some amorphous spiritual level which I can't really explain.<sup>30</sup>

Although sometimes difficult to describe in words, runners and non-runners alike stated that they considered Pre's Rock to be a place of spirituality, contemplation, or 'presence.' Kenny Moore and Steve Bence, former friends of Prefontaine who have visited Pre's Rock many times, said that the site is a place where people attempt to make a 'connection' to the spirit of Prefontaine, whether regarded as inspirational or spiritual.<sup>31</sup> Graduate student Thomas Pelling, from the University of Oregon, stated that he regularly runs up to Pre's Rock on training runs, where he stops to see what people have left, to reflect on Prefontaine as a runner, and 'ask for Pre's energy.'<sup>32</sup> Susan Stater (aged 59), a retired high school teacher who visited the site, said she 'felt a sense of being surrounded by an almost mystical energy, a quiet sense of reverence' (Stater 2007: 2). Stater's friend (aged 50) who often visits the site stated: 'I go there when I am so fed up with the junk in my life that I feel like giving up. Somehow, there is a presence at his memorial that touches me deeply, and I get courage to go on (...) when I go there I feel a sense of connection with Steve as well as a connection with other people who have stood there to honor the memory of a great person' (Stater 2007: 2).

## The Spirit of Steve Prefontaine: Intercession, Prayers, and Blessings

While many people referred to Pre's Rock as a place to connect with Prefontaine's presence, whether in terms of spirituality, inspiration, or commemoration, there were a few individuals who believe that Prefontaine's soul or ghost, as a disembodied spirit, is present at the site on some occasions, and that his spirit continues to interact with the living. Such ideas are common at other roadside memorials, reflecting widespread and traditional beliefs about the spiritual state of people who died 'unnatural deaths,' whether unexpectedly or in a manner that is considered unusual or 'bad' within a particular culture (murder, suicide, tragic accident, etc.). A recurring belief cross-culturally and within Christian folk tradition is that the souls of individuals who die in an unusual or violent manner continue to haunt the place of death and are 'trapped' between worlds. Such souls, it is widely believed, are unprepared for death or, in some cases, are unwilling to make the transition to the afterlife and remain attached to this world (Bennett 1987: 36-49). In vernacular traditions, these 'troubled souls' require the prayers and actions of the living to help them successfully enter the other world.

Concerning Pre's Rock, people have occasionally expressed beliefs about Prefontaine's ghost appearing at the site, and one of Prefontaine's girlfriends, Mary Marckx, claims that his ghost has been haunting her for years, and she has written a manuscript about the experiences in the hope of liberating his spirit (Hauser 1997: A21). In 2004 when I was at the site, a neighbor who was at the crash scene the night Prefontaine died invited me into his home and showed me a photograph that he took of Pre's Rock, exactly ten years after Pre's death. On the photo, there was a blurry, smoke-like image that he said might be Pre's spirit. Like other spirit and miracle photographs, photos of 'Pre's ghost' reflect broader ideas about the ability of photography to 'capture' and reveal souls and spiritual beings on film, an enduring aspect of American vernacular belief (Wojcik 1996).

Yet unlike beliefs about spirit hauntings at the place of tragic death, ideas about Prefontaine's soul or presence were almost universally positive, with some people referring to him as an angel or existing in heaven (sometimes

in 'Runners' Heaven' or 'running in Heaven, with God,' or running with other deceased Olympians and legendary athletes in the afterlife). Such ideas are similar to beliefs expressed at other informal roadside shrines, in which the death site is considered sacred and heaven is the new home for the deceased (Jorgensen-Earp and Lanzilotti 1998). Neta Prefontaine, in an interview about her brother, stated that she considers him one of her 'guardian angels' (Miller 2006), and the letters and notes left by people at Pre's Rock occasionally express similar sentiments:

Dear Pre,  
You have helped me  
You have guided me  
You are an angel to me,  
Thank you  
Sara B.

In popular belief and tradition, those who are admired and loved in life are often regarded as angelic beings who intercede and help the living, despite the fact that such ideas are doctrinally unacceptable in institutionalized forms of Christianity (Godwin 1990). But folk eschatology, fueled by the affection, devotion, and yearning for loved ones, creates its own alternative afterlife, a personally meaningful realm where the deceased are transformed into angels who now run interval workouts and tempo runs in heaven.

Whether people literally consider Prefontaine to be an angel or not, he often seems to have a similar symbolic function and is believed to be an intercessor and mediating force in some people's lives. Like other intermediary deities, spirits, and folk saints, Prefontaine is often regarded as an inspiring and benevolent presence that helps people in various ways. Some runners I spoke with referred to being influenced or 'possessed' by Pre's spirit or ghost, especially after they ran a particularly good race, asserting that they ran faster, farther, harder, and with more 'heart' and 'soul' because of Prefontaine's influence. One runner from Seattle (aged 20) stated: 'Pre's helps me in races, oh yeah. I focus on how ballsy he was, and I get a surge, some kind of strength. Some people run with Jesus, I run with Pre.'<sup>33</sup>



In some cases individuals may have been speaking metaphorically about Prefontaine's assistance in races, although often it was difficult to tell. However, a few individuals clearly spoke of Prefontaine as an intercessor who had a spiritual or supernatural influence on their lives. For instance, Jay Kimiecik, a professor at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, says he had several encounters with Prefontaine's spirit, who offered words of inspiration, with the first experience occurring in a hospital emergency room (Kimiecik 2006). As a result, he was inspired to make a trip to Pre's Rock and to Hayward Field, where Prefontaine raced, to run in a national championship competition for runners over the age of forty, and he says that Prefontaine's spirit actually intervened in the last part of his painful 1,500 meter race: 'This hurts so much, I want to quit (...) My lungs are going to burst (...) Help me, Pre. Help me, God (...) A heaviness came over me on the backstretch unlike any I have ever known. I felt as if death was near. And then I was on the home stretch-the final 100 meters-and



*Images of Prefontaine running with his friend and 1972 Olympic teammate, Jeff Galloway, being placed at Pre's Rock by Joe Henderson at Galloway's request, July 2007. Photo: D. Wojcik.*

I felt lighter as if someone was carrying me along' (Kimiecik 2006). After the race, Kimiecik realizes Pre's spirit supported him physically and spiritually, and as a final expression of gratitude, he completes his spiritual journey by going to Pre's Rock, where he thanks Prefontaine for helping him transform his life: 'Pre's ghost had been calling me out to Eugene-to help me kill off the part of me that I didn't need anymore (...) bringing me back to life (...) I am forever changed, forever transformed' (Kimiecik 2006).

Kimiecik's narrative resembles other memorates involving numinous, first-hand encounters with benevolent otherworldly beings, such as angels, saints, or the 'good dead,' who intervene in human affairs and may spiritually transform the lives of people (Bennett 1987: 50-81; Brown 1981; Godwin 1990). Such intermediary beings are seen as accessible, and they respond to the prayers and petitions of individuals, helping people with their problems. Although Kimiecik's narrative is more elaborate than most of the stories associated with Prefontaine and Pre's Rock, there were other runners who expressed gratitude about being transformed or helped in a positive way because of Prefontaine's influence or inspiration. John, in his mid-40s, was at Pre's Rock after the Prefontaine Classic track meet on June 4, 2005. He lives in Portland, and he told me that he tries to visit the rock whenever he is in Eugene: 'I'm a track nut, and the Pre meet is the best meet in the US. I used to be a pretty serious runner, and I was a big Pre fan. He was my idol. So now I come here to pay my respects (...). I also get strength from this spot. Pre was strong. He was determined, he never gave up. I need that kind of strength in my life. I have a drinking problem, but I'm dealing with it. And coming here helps me deal with it. Pre liked to drink too, you know.'<sup>34</sup>

Younger runners attempt to communicate with Prefontaine for other reasons, seeking his support, guidance, and supernatural influence on their lives. For example, various websites, blogs, and Myspace pages include accounts of Prefontaine sending signs and blessings, and runners requesting help from him before races: 'hey Pre can you through [sic] down a blessing for tomorrows meet (...) Thanx, Javi'; 'I have a race tomorrow, so can you throw down a blessing or somethin? Thanks, Pre'; 'hey man can u help my friend do good in his DMR 2morrow? its his first big race.'<sup>35</sup> The following personal petition

to Prefontaine, written on stationery, was tucked into a crevice in the wall of Pre's rock:

Dearest Pre,

I've come from Bakersfield, CA to see Eugene, Oregon (...) I've come here to your place of passing for your blessing for myself and for the one I love dearly (...) He wants to be great, Pre (...) Give him your strength: to overpower his competition. Give him your speed: to keep all other runners to his back & give him your infamous ability to endure stress and pain; so he can fight himself to the dying end & become forever immortal in the sport he loves so much (...) I ask you to grace him when it is necessary to do so (...)

An eternal fan, Erica

B.C. C X C & Track.

While some individuals leave notes and request blessings and help, others who visit Pre's Rock take things from the site, such as stones or dirt, or even the objects left by others. They often take photos, which similarly function as tangible mementos of their experiences and presence at the site, and documentation of the hierophanous power of the place. As mentioned, some runners kiss the rock or memorial marker, while others touch the rock or marker, sometimes with shoes or an article of clothing. For example, one local high school runner disclosed the following ritual: 'Oh yeah, I don't tell too many people about this, though, they think it's dumb, but I got my little good luck thing I do. Before a big race, I come here, touch the rock, touch my race shoes to rock to get the 'Pre power'-you know what I mean? [he laughs] Yeah, I ask Pre to help me run fast, to give me his strength. And I run with Pre in my mind. It helps, it can't hurt. And I didn't just make this up, I know other runners who have done this too.'<sup>36</sup> Touching racing shoes and other items to Pre's Rock to absorb Prefontaine's power or energy resembles magico-religious ideas about the spiritual force or sacred power associated with saints' relics and other objects of supernatural power, which are believed to help, heal, and protect people in various ways (Brown 1981, Wilson 1983). The practices

of Prefontaine's devotees who touch things to the rock or memorial marker for good luck or to obtain 'Pre's power' also suggest the underlying concept of contagious magic. This seemingly universal belief holds that objects once in contact with each other continue to influence each other at a distance through a secret sympathy (Frazer 1979). At Pre's Rock, this concept is reflected in the practices and beliefs centered around the idea that Prefontaine's life power and aura infuses his place of death, and that his beneficial energy, spirit, or magic emanates from the rock and is available to those who seek it.

### Gifts and Votive Offerings

Yet another practice, by far the most common at the site, involves leaving a personal object, often related to one's recent racing history, such as a jersey, a shoe, spikes, a race number, a hat, or some other piece of clothing. Visiting Pre's Rock with his team for the first time as a freshman runner, Cody Loy says he was 'compelled to leave something of myself (...). I laid my lucky pair of socks across a small piece of granite near the base of the Pre's rock. These socks had been worn for every race I had completed that year, and had sentimental value to me. Maybe leaving something as simple as socks seems trivial, but from one runner to another, the idea of parting with something that you feel gives you strength equates to what Oregon lost on May 31st, 1975' (Heinz 2007: 1). George Forte, from Massachusetts, made a special journey to the rock with his daughter in July 2004, the day before her race in the National Junior Olympics. At the site, she placed a gold medal she had previously won on the memorial, just above the image of Prefontaine's face. The next day she ran a personal best to finish eighth in the country and was named an 'All American.' Her success was attributed in part to the 'good karma' she received from Pre's Rock, and as she received her medal on the podium, she thought of Prefontaine and his influence.<sup>37</sup>

While the objects left at Pre's Rock express a personal connection to Prefontaine, many of the offerings have been worn in races or in training, as things that have been in direct contact with the exertion, the sweat, the blood, the pain, and the accomplishment of the athlete. These gifts are not just ob-

jects that one has touched, but personal and symbolic pieces of oneself, imbued with one's effort, energy, or being, whether the shoes worn in training runs day in and day out for months, or a jersey saturated with sweat, or the racing spikes from a major competition. One representative offering, with the following note, was openly displayed at the site:

Dear Steve,

I have travelled across the country to see the place where you breathed your last breath. Your impact on my life has been of gigantic proportions. My life is dedicated to run with the same ardor that you did. I am leaving you my first singlet which I won my first USA Track and Field title with. You will always be with me in my runs and journeys. Best wishes, Stephen D.

In addition to articles of clothing, shoes, and race-related offerings, other common items left at the site include gifts of food and drink, particularly sports drinks such as Gatorade or Powerade, and energy bars and energy gels, as well as candy, including on one occasion an unopened box of chocolate-covered Macadamia nuts from Hawaii. People also occasionally leave bottles of beer (unopened as well as empty containers), and one afternoon at the site there was a small handwritten note next to a sealed can of Pabst Blue Ribbon beer that read: 'Pre, Thank you for the inspiration. I wish I could have known you and run with you. This one is on me. Cheers, W.D.'

During the cold and rainy months in Eugene, people have draped sweat tops, windbreakers, jackets, and even a leather coat over the memorial marker, as if to keep Prefontaine protected and warm, while the offerings of food, sports drinks, and beer appear regularly, seemingly to satisfy his appetite and quench his thirst all year round. The gifts left at the site express affection and mediate between the living and the holy dead, and resemble the widespread practice in varying cultures of leaving the favorite foods, beverages, and objects for the recently deceased and for ancestors, such as the *ofrendas* placed at Mexican Day of the Dead altars.

Many individuals also leave things at Pre's Rock that identify and represent themselves in some way, such as business cards, identification cards, personal



*The memorial marker at Pre's Rock and various objects placed at the site, 2005. Photo: D. Wojcik.*

portraits, race photos, or team pictures. At Pre's Rock on June 19, 2004, I spoke with Paul McMullen, who had just run a sub-4:00 minute mile at the Prefontaine Classic track meet. After the race he visited Pre's Rock and left a photo of himself running at the 1996 Olympic Games, with the note, 'Today I gave all I had, what I've kept is lost forever. Thank you Pre. #18, 19 June 2004.' He said he placed the photo on the rock 'as a token of my reverence to what Pre inspired me to do. Of course he is dead, but those that visit his shrine might say that those who run today run with Pre's spirit in their hearts (...) Thank you Pre for setting an example of how to piss off those people who have no passion, and inspire those who have it.'<sup>38</sup>

The letters and objects left at Pre's Rock express thanks for benefits received, help, and inspiration. In the instances in which medals, trophies, ribbons, or other awards are left at the site, the objects may represent proof of the 'success' of Prefontaine's influence and are presented as a public gesture of gratitude, much in the same manner as the votive offerings left at shrines for folk saints. Whether such objects and hand-written notes express appreciation for inspiration or for actual supernatural 'power' believed to be provided by Prefontaine, the continual presence and magnitude of the offerings reflect



*Pre's Rock and the photo of Sam Haughian that was left by his friend James Thie, June 2004. Photo: D. Wojcik.*

the ongoing relationship with him either as memory or as an intermediary force, with his spiritual magnetism located at the site. The presence of visitors and the images of themselves or personal objects that they place at Pre's Rock express a desire to be near and to interact with the deceased, a juxtaposition of the living and dead that symbolically connects them.<sup>39</sup>

The idea of Pre's Rock as a liminal site that allows communication between realms is expressed repeatedly by the individuals who leave notes, objects, and images there. Few objects were as poignant as the framed photo of Sam Haughian at the site, which contained the following hand-written message:

RIP Sam Haughian 24, UK, 5KM 13:19 (aged 22)

Dear Steve, Please look up Sam for us he would love to get some 5KM [5 kilometer] sessions in with you. He was a big fan of yours, he loves to run hard, and enjoys a nice beer or two. Look after him for us. Best wishes, James Thie and Friends.

Like Prefontaine, Haughian was a world-class runner killed in his prime, dying tragically in an automobile accident at the age of twenty-four, the same age that Prefontaine died. Haughian's friend, James Thie (aged 25) from Wales, who was running in the Prefontaine Classic track meet in 2004, made a special trip to Pre's Rock to place the photo at the base of the memorial for the following reasons:

The similarities between Prefontaine and Sam are scary, they were both amazing 5km runners that loved to run hard and enjoy life (...) Their times were almost the same and I found out at Sam's funeral that he had cried when he finally ran a few seconds faster than Pre's best 5000m, he was Sam's hero as well. I took over with me a picture of Sam, and decided to place it with a message at Pre's rock. I thought that Sam would have liked this and asked Pre whether they could hook up for some training and some beers in the magic training centre in the Sky! This experience of losing Sam as a friend, but also the not knowing how good he could have been left me understanding more about the void left by Pre.<sup>40</sup>

Various photos and letters commemorating the life of someone who has died have been left at Pre's Rock on other occasions, as well as commemorative objects, such a piece of driftwood, one meter long, that contained the following inscription: 'I Love U 4 the memories dad. I hope you are in heaven running with your heroes Steve Prefontaine, Jim Fixx, Roger Bannister, and all the rest (...) that made running their life.' Such personalized and creative forms of memorialization often would not be permitted at cemeteries or more formalized memorials, yet for some people, such expressions are the meaningful equivalent of lighting a votive candle or saying a prayer in a formal religious setting.

Secular objects placed at the site, like running shoes and lucky socks and bottles of beer and Gatorade, are personal offerings of remembrance, as well as a way for some people who are not particularly religious to express feelings of communion and appreciation for the deceased. Steve Prefontaine, because of his accomplishments and the aura of his personality conveyed through oral traditions and the mass media, seems to have inspired forms of veneration



that resemble the devotion to extraordinary individuals who have been deified at the vernacular level in other cultures and contexts (cf. Griffith 2003, Wilson 1983). His fans feel that they can communicate and talk to him, because he was a man of the people and a folk hero, and they reach out to him in death to keep his spirit alive.

## Conclusion

In February 1999, the formalizing of Pre's Rock proceeded further after it was rumored that the site and surrounding acreage might be sold for private development. Friends of Prefontaine, including Phil Knight who knew Prefontaine in college, contributed money to preserve the site, so that it could be donated to the city of Eugene, with plans to eventually create a one-and-a-half acre memorial park in the hilly area surrounding the site. The city of Eugene widened the road and added parking places for four cars near the site in 2003, and also placed street signs at various locations pointing the way to Pre's Rock (although the signs are regularly stolen as souvenirs). Efforts by the Oregon Track Club, Lane County Tourism members, and other groups dedicated to promoting Eugene, Oregon, as 'Track Town, USA' and a 'runner's paradise' have resulted in a runner's map for the area that gives directions to the site, which is no longer referred to as Pre's Rock but as the 'Steve Prefontaine Memorial.' There are rumors that the future memorial park at the site will include benches and trails to honor Prefontaine and possibly a life-sized statue of him. How will the site be transformed as it becomes increasingly formalized, and to what extent will the practices and desires of Prefontaine's fans be acknowledged, ignored, or restricted in the years ahead?

With the United States Olympic Trials scheduled to be held in Eugene, Oregon, in the summer of 2008, the popularity of Steve Prefontaine will no doubt increase, and his image and legacy will be highlighted and promoted through film, media, and commercial products. An entire clothing line of Prefontaine-branded apparel is already for sale, as are posters, coffee mugs, and other paraphernalia. Some individuals have been critical of the commercialization of Prefontaine and the corporate use of his image (see Walton 2004).

Nonetheless, most of those who visit Pre's Rock seem to embrace and enjoy the various Prefontaine products now available, and some of them wear their Pre T-shirts to the site, and occasionally leave a Prefontaine-themed object at place where he died.<sup>41</sup>

Regardless of the commodification of Prefontaine, for many of his devotees, the power of the legendary runner's aura resides at Pre's Rock. Inspired by the legends, lore, and media portrayals of Prefontaine, his fans come here seeking a tangible connection, an 'authentic' encounter with their hero that is not commercialized or mass-mediated. At this peaceful place on the side of the road, nestled in the verdant overgrowth and beneath a canopy of trees, the memory of Prefontaine is revived and nurtured through the desires of those who admire him. His fans have transformed his place of death into a vibrant ritual space that is constantly in the process of creation. Here, Prefontaine's life-force infuses the landscape, and his spirit is present and accessible to those who kneel beside his image for a photo, kiss the rock or the memorial marker, and offer hand-written notes and objects to him. For more than thirty years, Pre's Rock has been sustained by the folk traditions and vernacular spirituality of Prefontaine's admirers, and this pilgrimage site and roadside shrine for a fallen runner will continue to attract Pre's people in the future, as a grassroots expression of their love, yearning, and reverence for Steve Prefontaine.

## Notes

1 I would like to thank Arne Alvarado, Tom Atkins, Steve Bence, Beatrice Caponecchia, Larry Norris, Jack Santino Kelley Totten, Konrad Wojcik, and the students in my classes for their interest and help with this project; special thanks also to the individuals who have allowed me to quote them in this essay. I am especially grateful to Peter Jan Margry for his patience and encouragement.

2 When I began my research at Pre's Rock, I was initially somewhat uncomfortable asking people about their reasons for visiting the site, but I soon discovered that most individuals willingly and often enthusiastically talked about their presence at the site and Prefontaine's importance to them. Unless otherwise noted, all the quotes included in this essay come from author interviews at the site or correspondences by telephone and email.

3 Fans frequently cite the following quote by Prefontaine when referring to his 'artistic' style of running: 'Some people create with words, or with music or with a brush and paints. I like to make something beautiful when I run. I like to make people stop and say "I've never seen anyone run like that before." It's more than just a race, it's a style. It's doing something better than anyone else. It's being creative' (Jordan 1997: 161). Oregon runner and author Kenny Moore compa-

red Prefontaine's charisma to that of a seasoned performer, always aware and responding to his audience: 'He did it the way a great actor does in a theater, who draws the crowd into a performance, who senses what the crowd wants that night, who changes things and conspires to do things by the throng' (Anderson 2005: B5).

4 Steve Bence (Beaverton, Oregon), 12 July 2007, personal communication.

5 Alberto Salazar, former American record holder in the 5,000 meters, 10,000 meters, and marathon, said that Prefontaine was the primary reason he came to the University of Oregon, and characterizes his lasting impact: 'Pre inspired a whole generation of American distance runners to excel. He made distance running cool. He created the whole idea of training really hard and going for it. Runners setting goals for themselves, wanting to go all out and be really tough. That was his example' (Jordan 1997: back page).

6 Prefontaine is remembered for counseling at-risk youth and volunteering at the Oregon State Prison, where he organized a running club. He also testified before the Oregon State Senate against the practice of field burning in the region (which produces toxic smoke and extreme air pollution), and he lobbied locally for bark running trials after learning about them when competing in Europe.

7 As an outspoken critic of the Amateur Athletic Union and the injustices of the American sports system at the time, some of Prefontaine's statements were considered not only rebellious but unpatriotic: 'People say I should be running for a gold medal for the old red, white, and blue and all that bull, but it's not gonna be that way. I'm the one who had made the sacrifices. Those are my American records, not the country's. I compete for myself. To hell with love of country...' (Amdur 1975: B1).

8 Individuals from varied racial and ethnic backgrounds visit the site, although the majority of visitors are white, and range in age from children and young runners to older fans, with a significant number of visitors, both male and female, in high school and college.

9 Nike provided the financial backing for the documentary about Prefontaine, *Fire on the Track*, and former friends of Prefontaine now affiliated with Nike have been involved in the production of the feature films about Prefontaine. Nike co-founder Phil Knight has stated that Prefontaine 'not only set a tone for his sport, for me at least, he set a tone for this whole company' (Anderson 2005: B5). At the Nike headquarters in Beaverton, Oregon, the Prefontaine Hall is where the company showcases its achievements and products, and where new employees go through orientation; and when employees are given a tour of Eugene, to see where Nike originated, they end the tour with a stop at Pre's Rock (Christie 2007: A1; Steve Bence [Beaverton, Oregon], 12 and 13 July 2007, personal communication).

10 Mark Lansing (Portland, Oregon), 6 August, 22 August 2004, personal communication.

11 Paul McMullen (Grand Haven, Michigan), 6 July 2007, personal communication.

12 Arne Alvarado (Eugene, Oregon), 18 May, 29 May 2004, personal communication; Kenny Moore (Eugene, Oregon), 13 July 2007, personal communication.

13 While a few people believed that Prefontaine may have swerved on the curved and narrow road to avoid hitting an animal, or that he lost control of the car as he changed a John Denver cassette tape, the most frequent narratives dealt with speculations about a 'mystery car' associated with the accident. According to the police report, there was a second car that arrived at the scene immediately after the accident, the driver of which then sped off to notify his father, a doctor. Neither the father nor the driver returned to the scene of the accident to aid the victim, although they did call the police. As a result, the police initially suspected a potential hit-and-run case, but there were no scratches on the second car and the driver was later given a lie-detector test, which he passed, and the case was closed (Jordan 1997: 152-154; Moore 2006: 331-334).

14 Unlike other roadside memorials that have been used to convey a message about the dangers of driving while intoxicated, such as the roadside crosses at the sites of fatal accidents construc-

ted by Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), Pre's Rock has never been a roadside warning against the dangers of drunk driving, in part because of the controversies associated with the accident, and the power of Prefontaine's legend. A few of the narratives told at the site did emphasize drunk driving, but the driver of the mystery car was the one said to be intoxicated. In some versions the driver was a prominent citizen who lived in the neighborhood and who allegedly drove home drunk on numerous occasions, and his connections in the community helped cover-up his involvement in the accident.

15 Kenny Moore (Eugene, Oregon), 13 July 2007, personal communication.

16 The formalization of spontaneous memorials – whether at Columbine, the Oklahoma City site, the World Trade Center, or certain roadside memorials – is often characterized by controversy and debate. These sites of death and disaster evoke a range of emotions and meanings, and people differ greatly in their ideas about how to memorialize death and tragedy. In some cases, the institutionalized creation of memorial spaces is regarded as an imposition and not expressive of the range of personal emotions and community concerns. Those involved in the memorialization of Steve Prefontaine to date seem sensitive to the feelings of the people who visit the site. Yet the very existence of such roadside memorials is offensive to some people, and in the case of Pre's Rock, a few individuals expressed displeasure with the cluttered nature of site, stating it was messy, 'an eyesore,' or that it was 'disrespectful' to Prefontaine. A few people in the neighborhood feel that the constant flow of traffic and continual visitors who flock to the site is a nuisance, if not outright dangerous, while a couple of individuals said that there was something maudlin or even macabre about the creation of the site and the non-stop visits there, as if it were some sort of morbid tourism.

17 Leah Worthen (Eugene, Oregon), 28 June 2007, personal communication.

18 The increase in the prevalence of roadside memorials in the United States also may be a response to the realization that roadways are extremely dangerous places. Approximately 42,000 people are killed on the roads each year in the United States, with more than one million people having died on the roads in the USA from 1975-2000; the vernacular practices of spontaneous memorialization have changed the landscape of American roadways, now marking them as 'deathscapes,' places of mementos and mourning (Clark and Cheshire 2003-2004: 205).

19 For instance, spontaneous shrines in Northern Ireland critique paramilitary violence (Santino 2001), and roadside crosses in Texas offer commentary on issues of public safety and drunk driving (Everett 2004: 114-116). In some cases, these improvised memorials are publicly performed events that may trigger social and political action, such as the memorials established after the Madrid train attacks which criticized the government distortion of the truth about the disaster (Sánchez-Carretero 2006), and the memorials and ensuing events related to the murdered Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn, which ultimately presented a challenge to the entire Dutch political system (Margry 2007).

20 Tom Jordan, who has written a biography of Prefontaine's life and is the director of the Prefontaine Classic track meet, says that he receives hundreds of letters and emails every year from people who say they are inspired by Prefontaine (Anderson 2005: B5). Similarly, Cliff Shirley, who collects the things left at Pre's Rock, states that people who visit the site commonly express the idea of inspiration (personal communication, 4 June 2005).

21 Ben Ackerly (Richmond, Virginia), 31 July 2004, personal communication.

22 <http://j-therman-bro.livejournal.com/4712.html>; posted October 15, 2005, 18:17.

23 Prefontaine's Friends Preserve His Shrine (no author), Portland Oregonian, 1 March 1999.

24 Ted Pawlak (Corvallis, Oregon), 29 May 2004, personal communication.

25 The experience of *communitas* proposed by the Turners (1978) as a key feature of pilgrimages, as an anti-structural and completely egalitarian state, does not seem to apply to Pre's Rock,

although a sense of bonding and community may be experienced by individuals at the site. As other researchers have noted, *communitas* as described or imagined by the Turners does not necessarily occur at some pilgrimage sites and is an idealized concept (Eade and Sallnow 1991/2000).

26 According to Margry, to be labelled as a pilgrimage, the journey should be transitional and religiously inspired (Margry: *infra*).

27 The 'sacra' at Pre's Rock, defined as those sacred objects, narratives, and performances at the site, perhaps would be the shared ideals and legendary stories associated with Prefontaine's life, the ritual actions and meaningful objects left at the site, and the rock itself as a life-source, a place of contemplation and meaning.

28 Kyle L. (Eugene, Oregon), 4 June 2005, personal communication.

29 Kate McNerny (Marin County, California), 21 June, 25 June 2004, personal communication.

30 Michael Regan (Oregon City, Oregon), 26 August, 30 August 2004, personal communication. Mr. Regan is not alone in his thoughts about the spiritual and therapeutic aspects of running. As various writers have observed, distance running may evoke religious feelings for some people, who say that the solitude, concentration, and physical challenges of running provide experiences of inner peace, meditation, deep meaning, euphoric states, and spiritual renewal (see Sheehan 1978; Higdon 1992).

31 Steve Bence (Beaverton, Oregon), 12 July 2007, personal communication.

32 Thomas Pellingier (Eugene, Oregon), 24 June 2004, personal communication.

33 Thomas A. (Seattle, Washington), 28 May 2006, personal communication.

34 John W. (Portland, Oregon), 4 June 2005, personal communication. Prefontaine's legendary drinking exploits are well known in local runner's lore and have been recounted by those who knew him (cf. McChesney 1981) but have been largely de-emphasized in the media accounts and films about him.

35 <http://profile.myspace.com/indexcfm?fusaction=user.viewprofile&friendid=9098819>.

36 Ryan C. (Eugene, Oregon), 20 May 2005, personal communication.

37 George Forte (Rehoboth, Massachusetts), 12 August 2004, personal communication.

38 Paul McMullen (Grand Haven, Michigan), 6 July 2007, personal communication.

39 In particular, the photographic images left at Pre's Rock, as extensions of oneself, invite the spirit of the deceased to be part of this world and to join a community of other images--family, friends, admirers-carefully arranged with the array of colorful objects and flowers left at the site, bringing life to the place of death.

40 James Thie (Cardiff, Wales), 7 July 2007, personal communication. Thie, a self-proclaimed 'Pre nut' who named his springer spaniel puppy 'Prefontaine,' says he had made a previous pilgrimage to Pre's Rock in 2002 after running his first sub-4:00 minute mile in San Francisco: 'Even being a British kid a few thousand miles away we grew up hearing the Pre stories and knew what happened to this amazing young runner. For that reason visiting Eugene and Pre's rock became something that I always wanted to do' (Thie, 7 July 2007, personal communication).

41 There are even runners who exhibit a Prefontaine-inspired style, what several people at the site knowingly referred to as 'the Pre look'-shaggy '70s hair groomed like Prefontaine's; some version of the 'Pre mustache' or the 'Pre sideburns'; and an overall physical presence bearing a resemblance to Prefontaine. But these 'Pre impersonators,' unlike Elvis impersonators, are relatively rare.