

## A Town Built on Granite

Gary Day



A frieze from Rocklin's Pernu Quarry for the Bank of Italy building in San Francisco (1919-20)

Downtown Rocklin is astride a 100 square mile belt of high quality and easily accessible granite that extends from Folsom to Lincoln. Assisted by easy access to rail shipping, granite mining and creation of finished granite products formed the backbone of Rocklin's economy from the mid 1860's until the early 1920's. The industry's heyday began during construction of the transcontinental railroad.

The Central Pacific Railroad started laying rails eastward from Sacramento in early 1863. By early 1864 they had crossed the valley floor and were preparing to ascend the western Sierra. On March 21 that year, the Sacramento Union reported that more than half of the members of the State Legislature and many of their friends "traveled by train 22 miles to the new granite quarry at the end of the tracks". They detrained there and children gathered wild flowers while "grave legislators and solid men" gathered at the quarry rim "conversing learnedly and geologically" while "matrons and maidens wandered off among trees and rocky knolls according to their own sweet will."

The name "Rocklin" didn't first appear in print until about 3 months later when it was listed as a passenger stop in a railroad timetable. But, according to former quarry operator and Rocklin mayor Roy Ruhkala, the un-named and idyllic spot in the Union article was probably Rocklin and the quarry was probably the, now trash-filled, pit near Pacific Street and Farron. That pit abuts the railroad's main line and, according to state records, is Rocklin's oldest quarry.

According to the Sacramento Union of March 28, 1864 the Central Pacific's first paid freight was three carloads of granite bound for a building project in San Francisco.

Ruhkala thinks that it was probably granite from the same quarry.

The account of the legislators' train trip appears to be the earliest documented evidence of Rocklin's granite industry, although old timers in the 1920's talked of quarry activities as early as 1855. Also, the native Nisenan might have quarried small amounts of granite for their food processing implements, arrowheads, and tobacco pipes for 2000 years prior to that time.

In his book *Rocklin*, Leonard Davis' says that Rocklin's quarries of the 1860's supplied granite blocks for railroad tunnels and culverts. A biographical sketch from the 1860's tells of Michael Kelly and his 9-year-old son Maurice who delivered Rocklin granite blocks by oxcart for culverts all along the line as far as Auburn. Rocklin quarries also supplied riprap, chunks of waste granite, for hillside rail beds that allowed water to pass easily under the tracks.

Rocklin's 1870 census shows that Rocklin's quarrymen of the 1860's and 1870's were predominantly Irishmen, possibly from families escaping the Irish potato famines of the 1840's.

By 1880, at least 6 Rocklin quarries had shipped granite blocks for dozens of imposing granite structures, including the California State Capital building (1861-1874) and San Francisco's Palace Hotel (1874). The industry shrunk to one quarry in the early 1880's as public projects dried up but a better economy and machine-powered quarrying technology brought the quarries to their peak of activity by 1895 when at least 12 quarries operated.

By 1910 Rocklin quarries had supplied granite for several major projects in Nevada and Northern California, including the courthouses in Auburn, Reno, and Sacramento. Today, some San Francisco streets are still lined with Rocklin granite curbing used to repair roads damaged in the 1906 earthquake.

But by 1915 cement-based concrete had begun to nudge granite from builders' plans and a stonemasons strike that year closed more than half of Rocklin operations permanently. In the early 1920s, San Francisco's Bank of Italy building consumed Rocklin's last significant shipment of building stone.

Some quarries operated for just a few months, others for several decades. According to Rocklin Historian Uno Hebuck, 62 quarry pits were eventually opened and abandoned. Rocklin's largest 19<sup>th</sup> century quarry was Ira Delano's Rocklin Granite Company quarry near the corner of today's Granite Street and Rocklin Road. It was Rocklin's garbage dump during the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century and now it underpins a building and parking lot there.

Many quarries are filled with runoff rainwater and debris and lie hidden by weeds in empty fields. At least one abandoned quarry lies under the westbound lanes of highway 80. Another decorates the building across Rocklin road from the Delano Quarry site.

Another beautifies a mobile home park's landscape.

Although one or two quarries continued to ship building stone, monuments and other specialty products until near the end of the last century, the industry had ceased to be important to Rocklin's economy by the early 1930's. The Big Gun Quarry near Pacific Street and Rocklin Road was Rocklin's last active quarry. It produced small amounts of specialty granite products as recently as 2002. That Quarry closed permanently in 2005.