

A Look Back: Granite has a long history in Temecula area

Vanessa Ebbeling, Riverside Press-Enterprise, 3-20-10

The discovery of high-quality granite in the Temecula area in the late 19th century was a boon for the region's economy as local quarrymen worked to feed building booms throughout the state.

Proprietors in the early 1880s noted the quality of the Temecula area's granite and the ease at which it could be harvested. Because the granite rested on top of the ground instead of in quarries, no digging was necessary to harvest the stone.

Workers didn't have to remove a lot of worthless material to get to the "good stuff," said Darell Farnbach, a local historian and president of the Vail Ranch Restoration Association. Crews drilled a series of ¾-inch holes into the granite and inserted a wedge to split the rock. Skilled quarrymen could predict which way the rock would split. Pieces were hauled to a processing site where rocks were divided into sizes dictated by a construction manager.

For a few years, horse and wagon teams hauled the stones away to their final destination. But in 1883, a railroad was constructed in the region.

"That opened up the industry," Farnbach said. "Then, all they had to do was haul it down to the train station."

Cities including Los Angeles and San Francisco were in the midst of a building boom and Temecula-area granite fed construction of buildings, roads and curbs. Granite also provided headstones foundations and hitching and fence posts locally.

By the early part of the 20th century, some seven to 10 separate operations were harvesting granite. Men from Maine, Massachusetts and Europe traveled to the Temecula area to launch granite businesses. Local stones helped to build the Orange County courthouse, residences and hotels in Los Angeles and roads in San Francisco.

Quarrymen were one of few workers in the region drawing paychecks. Most residents lived off farm land.

"It created a second or third cash crop for the area," Farnbach said. "Back then so many people lived on acreage and they grew their own food so they didn't need cash."

Quarrying drove growth in other businesses as well, creating jobs for cooks and blacksmiths, among others.

But by the end of World War I, the use of concrete and cement had largely replaced granite. When the railroad was removed in the 1930s, whatever was left of the once-booming granite business dried up.

Recent attempts to reignite mining in the area have been met with staunch opposition from residents who worry about pollution, traffic and disrupting the natural setting. Granite Construction wants to dig a large quarry on county land near Temecula.