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—Contributor.....Bill Holiday

—Contributor email.....billholiday92@gmail.com

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A granite legacy

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George Kohout describes the quarries of Black Mountain and Dummerston's lost mining industry

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Standing on the banks of the West River and looking up at Black Mountain, it's hard today to imagine the industrial landscape that once dominated this quiet corner of Dummerston.

Where forest now covers the slopes, there were once derricks, donkey engines, boarding houses, slag piles, and teams of men cutting some of the hardest granite in New England.

George Kohout brings this lost world vividly back to life through stories, photos, and firsthand recollections.

Kohout's talk, "Quarries of Black Mountain," began almost by accident. He describes how a casual visit with neighbor Jean Momaney and a chat about an older neighbor, quarry worker Harry Fitz, turned into a conversation about the quarry itself, "which is right at Jean's backyard."

Curious about the story behind this overgrown industrial landscape, he contacted the Dummerston Historical Society — only to find they were hoping he would help tell that very story.

"So I fell into that trap," he says.

His personal connection ran deep. His parents had moved into an old quarry boarding house near the "Iron Bridge" in the late 1960s.

"My folks moved up here in about '68 or '69. It was a quarry building built by the Presbrey-Leland, or the [George E. Lyon Granite] Company, to house workers," he says.

"As I was a youngster with my brother Mike and others, we spent a lot of time wandering around Black Mountain, and I never really appreciated all the quarrying that had been done there," Kohout continued.

Among New England's many granite sources, Dummerston stone stood out.

"The Dummerston granite is very, very special," Kohout says. "There are all kinds of quarries around New England [...] but the Dummerston granite, for some geological reason, is much harder, and it makes it especially well suited for monuments and for building."

That hardness made it ideal for carving and for structures that needed to last.

"It doesn't crack well, and you're able to carve the inscriptions into the monument," Kohout says.

There were actually two types of granite on the mountain: the blue or black granite, which "tends to be a little bit

higher on the mountain," and the white granite, which is "a little bit lower," he says.

A whole industrial zone

Locals often think of "the quarry" as a single scar on the mountain face that is "so visible from Dummerston Center," Kohout says. But there have been more than six or seven quarries along Black Mountain.

Key operations included:

• Clark Quarry, up the hill near Quarry Road.

• The big pit, which most people now recognize as the main quarry.

• Lyon's Quarry, a long-running, highly industrial site stretching along the face of the mountain.

• The Bailey Quarry, on the Lester Dunklee property across the river.

• A small early quarry "up in the shoe," near what the Kohout calls the "beaver pond quarry."

One modern-day puzzle is a set of finished granite blocks.

"Look at these great blocks stacked up ready to be moved, but they're just left there," Kohout says, pointing to a photo. "For some reason they didn't get them down off the mountain."

Ownership, companies, and the rise of a giant

The quarrying story on Black Mountain begins around 1860, when one David Chamberlain purchased some land and in turn, very quickly, sold it to Joseph R. Bodwell of Vinalhaven, Maine, who was already quarrying there and in other parts of that state.

Although Bodwell never seems to have worked the Dummerston stone himself — he later became governor of Maine

— the land changed hands and eventually major local players took over.

The Lyon quarry emerged as “the largest, longest, and the most productive quarries. At one point in time, they had 13 derricks, about five big steam engines. It was a huge production plant,” Kohout says.

Later, Presbrey-Leland Quarries bought the Lyons property, brought more documentation and a massive finishing plant in Brattleboro, and became closely associated with the Black Mountain granite trade.

The people who worked the stone

Census records from 1880 to 1930 paint a picture of a local workforce with specialized trades.

“The engineer that runs the hoist at the quarry. The derrick man is not at the derrick itself, but is in the pit and talks to the engineer,” Kohout says.

He also lists the rigger, who sets up, inspects, and operates the lifting equipment.

“Then there are stone cutters on site or in the finishing house,” he says. “They needed a blacksmith; they needed carpenters and a bunch of laborers.”

Photographs show dozens of men at the Presbrey-Leland pit, members of families such as the Clarks, Baileys, Willards, Fitches, Littles. They appear repeatedly in both photos and census pages, reflecting a strong multigenerational local labor tradition.

Immigration played a role, but a smaller one than in some other granite centers.

“It was mostly local men who worked there,” Kohout says.

Some immigrants worked there, but “not until about 1930 do we see people coming [...] from Ireland, England, Scotland, and some from Scandinavia,” he says.

Hard work, simple tools, and real danger

Early quarrying was intensely physical. The basic approach to splitting granite relied on chisels, hammers, and the plug-and-feather method:

"You hit that chisel, you twist it a little bit," Kohout says. "You hit it again [...] until you start making this hole."

Once the hole is large enough, "then you can insert what they call the 'plug and feather,'" he says. That device spreads the rock, eventually cracking it "as we would splitting a log with a wedge."

Kohout notes that this ancient technique is still in use.

"I don't know when it started," he says. "May have started with the Romans, for all I know, but that technique is very common and very effective. A little time consuming, but effective."

Sometimes the mountain fought back.

"For some reason, the rock closed up on them as they were splitting it, and they couldn't get it out," he says. "The crew said, 'OK, let's get out of here. Let's go to the next spot.'"

With the arrival of steam-powered equipment and pneumatic drills, productivity increased. But so did the scale of the machinery and risks.

One photograph shows three men drilling a huge block with no visible protective equipment — "no safety glasses, no ear protection, probably no gloves," Kohout observes.

Injuries were real and sometimes severe. One document describes Howard Clark, a quarry worker who lost four fingers in 1922. "His pay at that point was $33 a week," Kohout says. "For the first 11 weeks they gave him $15 and then for the next 70 weeks [...] he got $7.50 a week."

Kohout wonders aloud whether Clark returned to quarry work or moved on, and whether this was a typical settlement for the time.

Lifting stone and wiring the mountain

Moving huge blocks required ingenuity. On the mountain, massive derricks — some permanent, some more like tripods — lifted and swung stone using cables powered by steam.

A large derrick would rotate back and forth, “picking up rock and dropping it somewhere else,” he says. A fire compartment drove kind of a turbine engine — the donkey engine — that then “moved these capstans or winches that pulled or released the cable,” he says, pointing to photos,

All of this required a reliable water supply. One surviving cistern behind the old Lyon boarding house hints at the system, pumping water from Furnace Brook across the West River and then from the cistern. Other pumps sent it up the mountain to the burner, he says.

“They couldn’t just use the river [...] because it had too much acidity, which then would have damaged the internal workings of that donkey engine,” Kohout says.

Rusting U-bolts and anchor rods drilled and pinned into the ledges can still be seen today, the skeletal remains of a once-dense web of wire rope and guy lines anchoring derricks and structures.

“They could have been used to hold a structure like the sill of a small outbuilding, or perhaps the base of a derrick,” Kohout says.

Stone travels from mountain to world

Once blocks were cut, they were moved via small internal rail lines to larger tracks along the mountain face, then down to the West River Railroad and onward to Brattleboro and beyond.

"Before the railroad came, they put it on the carts [...] and they had to just walk it all the way down Route 30, down to Brattleboro to the train station, because the river certainly wasn't deep enough to float anything," Kohout says.

Even in the railroad era, road hauling could be epic. Kohout relates the story of the Civil War soldier monument in downtown Brattleboro.

It started with a 24-ton block of stone, which workers loaded on a cart, he says.

"They got 12 horses on it, and the horses couldn't budge it," Kohout says. "Somebody brought down 12 oxen."

The load kept getting stuck on Main Street.

"It took them four days to get from the train station up to the monument," he says.

The next time they needed to move such a load, they did so during the winter, "and then they could do it in just a day, slide it up there," Kohout says.

Black Mountain granite traveled far. It went into foundations, street curbing, dams, monuments, and major buildings.

"[It] was used specifically for some specific things, for foundations, curbing for streets," he says. "It also went to a lot of big building, you know, in New York City... granite blocks from Dummerston being in Reykjavik, Iceland, so you can go around the world and be proud of your Black Mountain quarry."

One notable block, 12 feet square by 5 feet thick, went to Scranton, Pennsylvania, for a labor leader's monument. Another contribution was stone for the Holyoke Dam in Massachusetts.

What remains

Several forces led to the decline and eventual closure of the Black Mountain quarries.

The end of the West River Railroad, abandoned in 1936, "was a big part of it," Kohout says. "It didn't make it economically feasible to move it anymore."

Meanwhile, "larger quarries came online up in Barre [...] and then less expensive building materials came along, too, especially poured concrete," he says.

In some pits, water also became an issue — either because workers would hit a spring while mining or because the quarries would accumulate rainwater.

Today, the scars have softened under forest, and much of the land is protected via the Nature Conservancy.

Yet signs of the old industry are everywhere for those who know how to look: grout piles, drill holes, anchor irons, and reused stone structures like the small pump house on the riverbank.

"This is a pump house that once was used to get water up from the West River," Kohout says. "Some of that is poured concrete, perhaps, but it was an easy building material that could be scavenged from the Lyon site."

Even more recently, stone from Black Mountain has found new life in local projects, such as seating walls at Memorial Park built by dry-stone waller Dan Snow with remnants that the landowner gave to him.

Remembering the quarries

Kohout expressed gratitude to the many people and families who preserved photos, artifacts, and stories.

He gave appreciation to the Dummerston Historical Society; to Momaney, who shared her collection of photos; the Clark family; Lester Dunklee and his aunt, Dorothy Gavin; his brother and nephew, Mike Kohout and Owen Kohout; Snow; and Town Clerk Laurie Frechette, who helped him navigate the paper trail of deeds and other land records.

Taken together, their contributions — and Kohout's narrative — turn a quiet, wooded mountain back into a vivid

industrial landscape: one of hard granite, harder work, and a lasting legacy that traveled from Dummerston to cities and monuments around the world.

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