

[Old Timer]

Roaldus Richmond [Men Against Granite?]

Recorded in

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The grassgrown road wound upgrade between heaps of waste granite and past abandoned quarryholes filled with dark green water. The vicious chatter of jack-hammers sounded on the sunlit air ahead. A turn brought the quarry yard into sight. Sun-blackened men stood with bodies braced to bear the vibration of the pneumatic hammers as they chewed into the gray stone. The owner, a young man with a pleasant brown face, was at work with the others. They were cutting the blocks to size for trucking down to the sheds. Beyond the great boom and mast of the derrick was the quarry.

It was only a small quarry, dropping to the edge of an older hole full of clean water. The sun beat harshly down into it. Under the dust the workers were burned darkly. Each man went about his task with a calm assurance. They were stolid under the heat and racket, quietly efficient, each one doing his own job. In the granite business there is very little bossing and no slave-driving tactics. This is true in the sheds as well as the quarries.

A short stocky old man went by carrying two long heavy iron bars on one shoulder. He was dust-covered with a face like wrinkled leather and red-rimmed eyes. The deep creases in the back of his neck were dust-lined. With amazing balance and surety the little old man started the descent into the pit, walking down 2 the steep wall of jumbled blocks as if he were walking down a flight of stairs, the long bars on his shoulder.

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He was drilling out a block, throwing one leg over the powerfully vibrating drill which shook his whole body. The dust clouded thickly about him, at times nearly shutting him from sight. In the same corner a husky young man was methodically driving a line of plugs into their holes, one stroke to each plug as he moved along the row. Slowly the line of cleavage appeared, barely discernible at first, then widening.

The old man paused after a time, cleaned the rock and his clothing with blasts from the air-hose, and turned to talk with us.

“The compressor? It cost \$1,900 they say. It helps out a lot too. Once they had to do everything by hand. Yes, I been here on the Hill quite awhile, he said, smiling and spitting to clear the dust. “I came here in 1892 when I was thirteen years old. We came from Quebec. I've worked the quarries ever since except for six years in the Ely Copper Mine. I was there from 1900 to 1906 — six years. That was after the Ely War - the big strike they had down there. Then I came back to the Hill again.

“It's not so good any more, though. I didn't work from December fifth to February first. Some of the quarries are only working three days now, just three days a week. After that big strike in 1922 I didn't work for two years, two years without working a day. That's no good. 3 I'm sixty-five now. That's pretty old... I raised a family here, but there's only one girl home now. She keeps house for me. The others have all gone away. None of my boys are in the granite business. They didn't want to get in it — and I didn't want them to. I didn't want them in it. It's no place for a young fellow, the quarries.

“It was bad in 1922 all right. We had some fun with those new fellows though... We had quite a lot of fun with them just the same. We made it some uncomfortable for some of those new fellows. They didn't know what they were coming to. They didn't know the business. They were farmers mostly. They worked cheap. We call them Scabs, we still don't like them on the Hill. Who I blame though was the Union men that helped those new fellows, showed them what to do. Yes, we're all Union men here. Supposed to be anyway.

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I hope it don't happen again, a strike like that. There was a little trouble last week but it didn't amount to much. We only stayed out about a week. But it hurts to lose time, any time. Well, I'm getting old now, it don't matter much to me any more.

"Don't worry about the boss being mad for talking to me. He ain't looking anyway..." The old man laughed.

The derrick boom was swinging now as the derrickman cleaned up the yard. The block that had been split by sledge on plug-and-feathers was ready to be lifted from the quarry. The brawny young man climbed out carrying his tools, stopping a moment to question the sixty-five year old veteran. Together they inspected the loosened block, bending to peer and point, shake 4 their heads, then finally nodding in agreement. The derrickman appeared on the rim above, a bulky figure, red of face and arms. "Don't fall off there," he called down to the two. "Yeah, that's okay. I can hook onto that all right. But I got to finish cleaning the yard first."

"We only been here about a year, our informant went on. We opened this up just about a year ago. We've gone down this far. Quite a lot of stone we've taken out of here. We sell anywhere we can, anywhere they'll buy it. Some of it goes to Pennsylvania. It's pretty good stone, but there's a lot of waste. It'll be better as we go down. There's plenty good stone down in back there. That old quarry there was a big one. It was Jones Brothers and they got some real good stone out of it. It's probably three hundred feet deep in there. It was a good one.

"I've done about everything in quarry work. A small quarry like this, everybody has to do everything. You have to figure the cleavage, drill, plug-and-feather, chain the blocks, sharpen tool, run a jack-hammer, a channeling machine, the whole business. Sometimes you have to use dynamite. In the big ones each man has his own special work, he don't do nothing else. But here we do everything that has to be done, you know. Only six-seven of us working. I like it better than in a big quarry though.

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I'm still strong. I'll work some more years probably. Maybe I'll last as long as the work lasts. I like it all right living on the Hill. I got a nice little house in Upper Graniteville. 5 In the summer the boys come home with their families. Yes, I'm a grandfather now... Graniteville is a quiet place to live. It didn't used to be so quiet but now it is. You see families sitting on their porches. It's nice in the long summer evenings, cool after getting this sun all day in the quarry.

"Well, I better get back to work, I guess. I been on that stone all day. I'll have it ready to come out by four-thirty when we quit. I think so anyway. It's slow work. It takes a full day here to got a stone ready for the derrick. Probably in the big quarries they go faster. They got more men and more equipment. But it's slow work no matter where. It's quite a sight to watch then work a big quarry, down about three hundred feet probably. More dangerous there, more chance of accidents. Too many men handle the stones. Sometimes somebody gets careless. You ought to go ride down that railroad they got up at Websterville. Steep and crooked where they carry the stones down from the quarries. Now they use trucks more, but they still use the railroad some. In the big quarries they get a lot of noise. Just as bad as in the sheds. I'd rather be here.

"In the quarry we don't think much about the finished pieces. They don't have anything to do with us. Our job is just getting the stone out to ship to the sheds. We don't have to worry after the blocks go out of here. That's up to the stonecutters down in the City. I wouldn't be in a shed. I like it better out in the open air. Of course it's hard work, harder when a man gets older. But I'm used to it. I can still do a good day's work. When I can't I won't care about living much more. I'll be ready to go then. 6 "We look for three kinds of grains in the reek. When it goes up and down we call it 'rift'. Crossways, like that, we call it 'drift'. 'Hardway' is a grain running at right angles to the other two, a bad one to work. A light streak in the rock is 'white horse' or salt horse'. A dark streak we call 'black horse'... Hell, I've talked long enough. I got to get my stone out now.

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“Don't worry, I'll take it easy, all right. I'm old enough to know how to do that.”