

RIGHT: Granite Rock Co. was founded in 1900 when Arthur R. Wilson discovered a high-quality granite deposit on the banks of the Pajaro River.



BELOW: Truck driver Ricki Mancebo received encouragement as one of the company's first women drivers, illustrating a long-held policy to treat its workers with respect.

Rock solid

Acclaimed Watsonville firm marks 100 years of success



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos

Bus-6

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WATSONVILLE

WITH HER TWO-tone cowboy boots, ringing gold and silver bracelets and country musician good looks, Granite Rock Co. truck driver Ricki Mancebo might seem like a break with tradition at the venerable company, which marks its 100th anniversary today.

But Mancebo, a second-generation Graniterock driver, personifies the corporate ethos of the Watsonville-based company that has made it one of the top construction firms in the country.

She and others say Graniterock's success is a testament as much to the strength of its namesake rock as the way it treats its employees.

"If I couldn't drive for Graniterock anymore, I'd push a broom for them," she said. "They give me the freedom to be the person I need to be."

As one of the first female drivers for the company, Mancebo received nothing but support and encouragement, she said. But that support did not come because she was a woman doing what was traditionally a man's job. She said it came because she was a Graniterock employee.

With that kind of support "you lose the fear of failing," she said.

She now has 30 years of experience behind the wheel of a big rig and trains other drivers.

Fortune magazine twice named Graniterock one of the top 100 places to work in the U.S.. It is currently ranked 19.

Bruce Woolpert, Graniterock president and CEO, said offering employees respect and support is a tradition started by his grandfather, company founder, Arthur R. Wilson.

Wilson, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology-educated engineer born in San Francisco in 1866, be-



- Watsonville-based material supplier and engineering contractor
- Won the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award for management excellence in 1992
- Ranked 19th on the Fortune magazine list of 100 best places to work

Graniterock

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lieved in treating his employees like a family but not in a paternalistic way, said Woolpert. He said his grandfather offered people the opportunity to rise to their abilities.

"He always treated everyone like an adult, like they had self-determination," Woolpert said. "I think we're still that same company today."

After working as Oakland's civil city engineer, Wilson set off to build his own construction business. After finding a high-quality granite deposit on the banks on the Pajaro River in Aromas, he borrowed money from his cousin with his insurance policy as collateral and bought the property with \$10,000 in gold coin.

His first customer was the Southern Pacific Railroad, which needed ballast for rail beds. As the Bay Area grew, so did the company. Steam-powered equipment soon replaced sledge hammers and picks.

Rock from Wilson's steam-powered crusher won a gold medal at the San Francisco International Exposition in 1915. The framed award now hangs in Woolpert's office.

Wilson's first wife died but he remarried and had children, among them Woolpert's mother Betty Woolpert. Bruce Woolpert said Wilson's decision to remarry was out of step with society at the time but in accordance with his own beliefs. These beliefs of making the most of life rubbed off on his business.

"I think that had a message that life was important," Woolpert said.

After recovering from the damage the 1906 earthquake wreaked on the quarry, Graniterock built a Wells Fargo building in San Francisco and Gilroy's City Hall, both of which stand today.

As automobiles began to replace cars, Graniterock paved the way. In 1918, the company began to build a road between Castroville and Moss Landing, a road known as "Cauliflower Boulevard."

One of the employees on the road gang was 16-year-old John Steinbeck. In the days before environmental impact reports, Steinbeck worked for \$2.75 a day as an oiler on a dredge that drained sloughs to make way for the road.

Before Wilson died in 1929, he founded Granite Construction Co. in 1922 but financial troubles during the Great Depression forced his

wife Anna to sell the company in 1936. Graniterock and Granite Construction remain separate companies. In the late 1980s, Graniterock formed Pavex, the construction arm of Graniterock.

Today Graniterock has about 700 employees and locations in Watsonville, Santa Cruz, Aromas, Seaside, Salinas, South San Francisco, Gilroy, Felton, and Hollister.

Some of Graniterock's more notable jobs include the Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium, UC Santa Cruz, the Stanford Linear Accelerator, a Boeing 747 runway at San Francisco International Airport, the Monterey Bay Aquarium, and repair of Highway 1 at Devil's Slide.

In the 1980s and 1990s the company added innovations such as the first giant mobile rock crusher and a computerized truck loading system open 24 hours a day that allows drivers to load their trucks from overhead bins with the swipe of a debit card.

But employees are as important as products and services, Woolpert said.

The company's management practices won it the Baldrige

Award in 1992. Named after a former U.S. Secretary of Commerce, the award recognizes innovative management. Former President George Bush presented Woolpert with the award.

Bush is scheduled to speak at Graniterock's 100 year celebration party at San Francisco's Moscone Center today.

The turnover rate at Graniterock is 3 percent, and 87 percent of the employees say they will stay at the company until they retire.

"You couldn't ask for a better company to work for," said Bill Van Sandt, who just retired from Graniterock as manager of the Santa Cruz and Watsonville operations after 50 years on the job. "I loved to get up in the morning and go to work."

He said it was the management that made Graniterock a good place to work.

"As long as you did your job they left you alone," he said.

Bob Dwyer, executive director of the Pajaro Valley Chamber of Commerce, said Graniterock's treatment of its employees is a family tradition.

"It seems to be passed down from one generation the next," he said.

Woolpert eschews the traditional, military style chain of command that pervades many corporations.

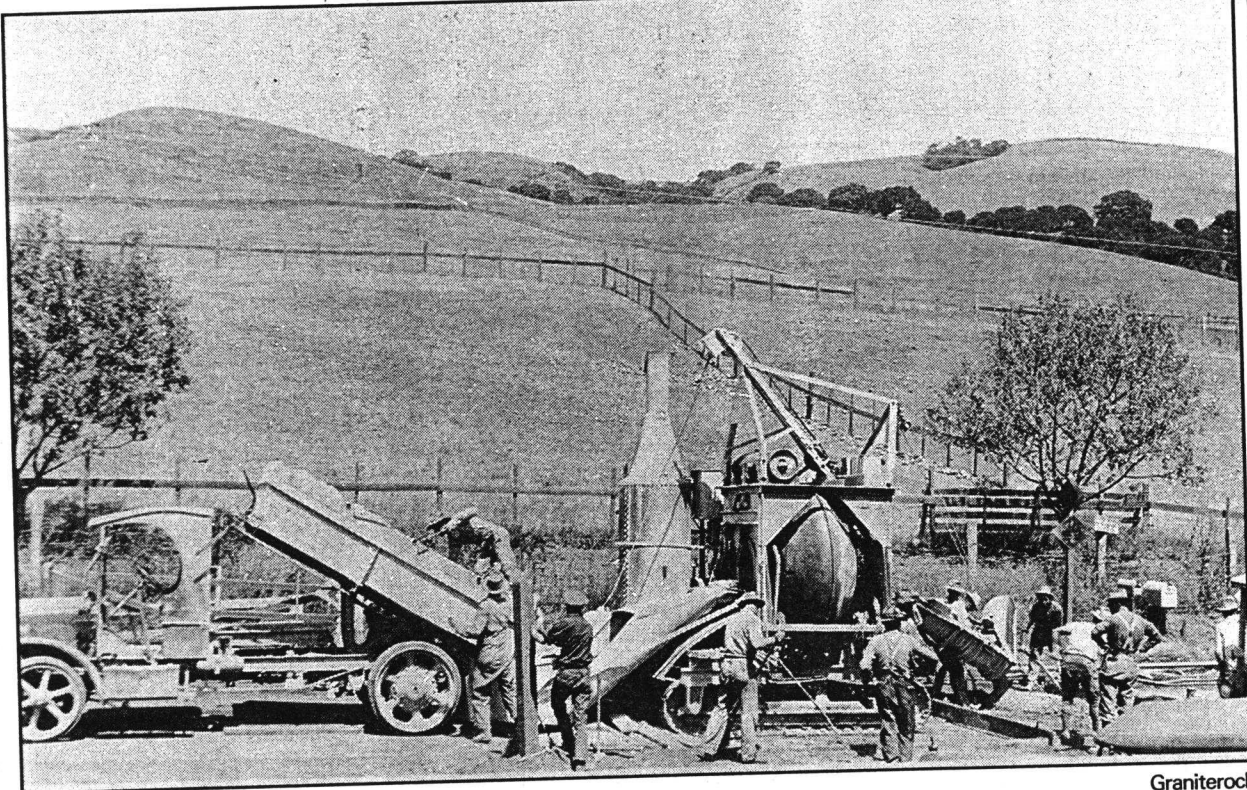
For example, callers who wish to speak with Woolpert are not met with a phalanx of secretaries who say he is in a meeting. They are put right through.

Anyone is free to pop into his office, he said. One employee walked in and said he was tiring of truck driving. Woolpert asked him to help organize a program to expose employees to other jobs in the company. The "try-a-job" program now allows workers to shop around for different occupations.

Graniterock pays for its employees to go to school, full time. If after graduation they chose not to work at Graniterock, the tuition is treated as a loan.

The company also offers employees reading and math tutoring classes.

"Graniterock hasn't grown beyond the point of being able to give attention to all its people," said Mancebo. "I certainly wouldn't be where I am without them."



A Graniterock crew works on a road in the early part of last century. A young John Steinbeck was once part of such a crew.

Graniterock