



Photos by Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Graniterock President Steve Woolpert and longtime employee Albert Snyder record some of the changes at the quarry.

# Graniterock built on stone

After 89 years of changes, some things stay the same

By JAMIE MARKS

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**I**T WAS THE beginning of a new century when Arthur Wilson decided to relinquish his job as city manager of Oakland and devote his efforts full-time to the business of mining.

On Feb. 14, 1900, Wilson bought the large granite quarry in Aromas, at the junction of San Benito, Santa Cruz and Monterey counties, from Southern Pacific Railroad Co. and founded Graniterock Corp. with William Porter. The quarry has since been named the Arthur Wilson Quarry.

In the old days, the granite that was hammered out of the Aromas quarry was carried by donkey cart and hauled by Southern Pacific Railroad to points north, south, east and west.

**T**IMES HAVE changed. Now the operation relies on computers and giant mechanized rock crushers. The rail cars are still used, but now they carry four 18-wheel trucks to construction sites in the San Francisco and Monterey Bay areas.

One thing hasn't changed, however — the ownership of Graniterock Co. Although most of its competitors are under foreign control, dominated by large British conglomerates, Graniterock is still owned and operated by the Woolpert family, direct descendants of Arthur Wilson.

In fact, it's been the women in the family who've served as its leaders for most of the company's 89-year existence.

"This company has been run longer by women than by men, which is unusual, given what people think of the construction business," said Steve Woolpert, president of Graniterock.

Anna Wilson, Arthur's wife, took over the company after his death in 1929 and was "chief cook and bottle washer" until 1952, when her daughter, Betsy Woolpert, assumed control, said Steve Woolpert.

Betsy Woolpert stayed on for six years, then took a hiatus until 1980. Her husband, Bruce G. Woolpert, took over until she came back as chief operating officer. Now the company is run by Betsy's sons, Steve and Bruce Woolpert, who share duties at the top.

**B**EING A medium-sized construction materials and mining operation isn't a piece of cake these days, according to Woolpert. "The dominance of the construction-material industry by offshore companies does indeed present new problems and opportunities for the smaller, family-owned businesses.

"Our corporate goal is to keep it a family operation," he said. "We like the corporate culture that Graniterock is built upon. Selling to an offshore company would undoubtedly have a severe impact on that culture and would be felt by all Graniterock employees."

Graniterock's success lies in the bedrock belief that quality of materials, good service and fair prices come first. Although it isn't the biggest mining company in Santa Cruz County, Graniterock enjoys a special niche in the market because of the superior quality of its "Aromas fractured" granite, which has been used on airport runways and the Monterey Bay Aquarium.

**T**HE COMPANY at one time owned Granite Construction Co., which split off in 1922. Granite Construction has gone on to great success, becoming one of the top 10 construction companies in the country.

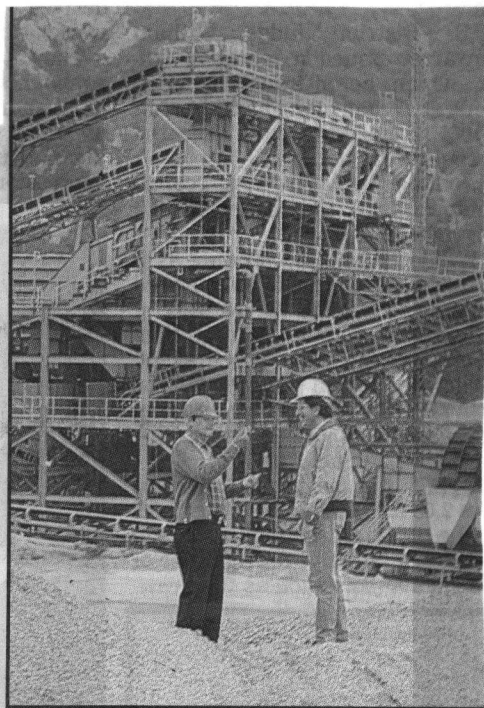
Woolpert said he doesn't have any regrets over his grandmother's decision to sell the construction firm. "Splitting off probably helped both companies," he said.

Graniterock employs just less than 500 workers in the Central Coast region. Its major mining source is the quarry in Aromas, which contains the highest grade granite in the West, Woolpert says.

The company also has property and mining rights to a section of Big Sur, above the Little Sur River. That area contains a rich lode of "chemical grade" limestone, which is used in the manufacture of aspirin and toothpaste.

Graniterock has tangled with environmentalists over the future of the land, but won a landmark decision from the U.S. Supreme Court, which said the state Coastal Commission had only limited jurisdiction over the federal lands on which the company has staked a mining claim.

It was an uncomfortable fight for Woolpert, who considers himself a longtime supporter



President Steve Woolpert and worker Albert Snyder reminisce.

of the environment. As he leads Graniterock into new mining endeavors, Woolpert said he is trying to balance the company's needs with the desires of the community.

"It's important to look at the environmental appropriateness of our plans," he said. "We view quarrying as a temporary disruption. When we close a quarry, the state requires it be reclaimed, or returned to the environment in a safe and sound condition. It's something we do and we encourage other companies to do."

Still, mining operations do run into conflicts with neighbors. Graniterock plans to enlarge its quarry in Aromas, and some area residents are protesting the expansion. Woolpert says the firm is working with the community to resolve the dispute.

"We want to hear from people and know what they want of an area (we're developing). We don't want to have a negative impact on people," Woolpert said.

It's that kind of corporate philosophy that recently earned the company a proclamation from Mayor Betty Murphy, in recognition of its many contributions to the community.