

Rock quarry goes high tech

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Granite Rock Co. has replaced its old "low-tech" rock-processing plant in Aromas with a \$16.5 million operation in which a computer controls such things as sorting rocks by size and automatically weighing and dispensing outgoing loads.

The company showed off the new plant at an open house for 700 people yesterday and will formally dedicate it today at a party for employees.

The plant and adjacent quarry, which had been known as the Logan Quarry since its opening in 1900, is being renamed for company founder Arthur R. Wilson, whose grandsons, Steve and Bruce W. Woolpert, are now co-presidents of the Watsonville-based firm.

The new plant replaces one that was built in 1910, when mules were used to haul rock at the quarry. (See picture on page 32.) The plant was

upgraded over the years, of course, but was still "low-tech," said Mannie Shaffer, Granite's land manager. "It was all mechanical," he said.

A portion of the old plant and its gray metal building are visible from Highway 129.

The new plant, which has been used since September, will improve efficiency, but Granite isn't planning on boosting production in Aromas.

"We're not in an expansion mode," said Steve Woolpert.

The plant produces more than two million tons of rock a year, used to make concrete and other construction products. Among Granite's projects was supplying cement for the Monterey Bay Aquarium.

From a two-story building overlooking the processing plant, a computer can control "just about everything," down to the speed of conveyor belts, said Ray Morgan, who was giving a demonstration

yesterday.

Before the new plant was completed, outgoing trucks were filled from a loading truck, and getting the correct weight depended on the skill of the driver. The drivers were fairly adept at measuring the right amount, but it was still an inexact science, said Bruce Woolpert. "They guessed" at the amount, he said.

If the load measured heavier than allowed at the check-out scale, the driver would have to return to the loading site to have some rock taken out.

With the new plant, guesswork — and a lot of time and cost — have been eliminated. Trucks drive through the automated load-out ramp, which has 10 overhead storage bins for dispensing measured amounts of rock.

Steve Woolpert said the area the company already has permission to mine should last 20 to 40 years; it's believed to be the largest

crushed granite deposit in the U.S.

The San Andreas fault runs through part of the quarry area (but not the plant). That's an advantage, said Steve Woolpert, because some of the granite is "pre-fractured" and easier to mine. The plant has been built to withstand an earthquake far above the magnitude of the 1906 San Francisco quake, he said.

The new quarry includes a number of conservation measures, including planting of a grove of 54 redwood trees near the entrance. Those trees were to be planted today as part of the dedication event.

The plant and quarry sit on 500 acres; there's another 1,500 acres that Granite Rock is holding as open space, Steve Woolpert said.

Granite Rock has 450 employees, including 100 in Aromas, the largest of its five quarries. The company has 17 production plants, all in Northern California.