

PULLING

# VERMONT GREEN

New Ways and Beautiful Marble Keep Rochester's Old Quarry Busy

*WANTED, SEASONAL HELP: April to early December. Good pay and benefits. Must enjoy outdoors. Some rain and snow. Will train, but mechanical and spatial sense helpful. Time off for deer season. Don't apply if fearful of heights, depths or stairs.*

**I**F THE VERMONT Verde Antique International Quarry in Rochester were to advertise for help, the ad might run like that. But the quarry doesn't advertise and has very little turnover. The Shaw broth-

ers, Steve and Joe, qualify for 20-year pins as did Fabian Reed, longtime foreman, who left this past fall. Scott Twitchell and Ron LaPointe have been on the job for 10 years. General manager Mike Solari started only a

half dozen years ago, but his family's marble roots go back three generations.

The quarry that provides such dependable employment is two miles north of Rochester, where Quarry Hill Road branches from Route 100 and heads east, following Marsh Brook as it tumbles out of North Hollow. A mile and a half into the hollow, the grade flattens and the road crests, cutting between the abandoned Goodno and Darrah hill farms.

Just shy of the crest, a five-foot-high chain-link fence parallels the road for 200 feet. At its eastern end, there is a grassy viewing area big enough for a small pickup truck.

Several times a week during the summer, quarry workers can look up at the fence and see sport-shirted visitors and their children, noses against the chain mesh. If the workers could

hear the thoughts of the onlookers, they guess they'd be saying, "Wow, that's a big hole!" (about an acre's surface area) or perhaps from the adventurous, "Awesome, what a bungee jump!" (about 300 feet from the top of the crane to the quarry floor).

But unless a block is being pulled — and 20-ton blocks are inched so cautiously upward as to seem frozen against the sky — most visitors leave stumped by what is going on 100 feet beneath them. And they most likely leave not realizing that the Vermont Verde Antique quarry is known worldwide for its distinctive dark green serpentine marble.



Written and Photographed by  
GEORGE BELLEROSE





Where are the teeth-chattering, deafening hydraulic air drills, dust clouds so thick you can't see your feet, and the nonstop John Henry-hammering of wedges to split and lift blocks off the floor for the crane's cables?

Gone. And none of the men below miss them much.

Technology has come to the quarry in the past decade. The hiss of water-cooled, diamond-embedded belt and wire saws is easy on the ears. A morning's hammering of wedges has been replaced by pillow-sized hydrobags that split and lift blocks in minutes with 30 pounds of water pressure. Workers now control the crane's movement on the quarry floor with radio signals to a topside computer, a system far less nerve-wrack-

ing than the old seven-beep signaling code to an out-of-sight crane operator. Today's six-man crew can pull as many blocks as the quarry's 90-person work force did in the days early in the century when six-horse sled and wagon teams pulled the big stones the half-dozen miles to the Rochester railroad station.

The routine today: Determine the cutting pattern for the floor; set up the saws;



"I've been a drill operator since I started in the early 1970s.... If there was a spot with a bad core or anything, I could get it out.... It was a competition back then.... There's really no competition today with the diamond saw."

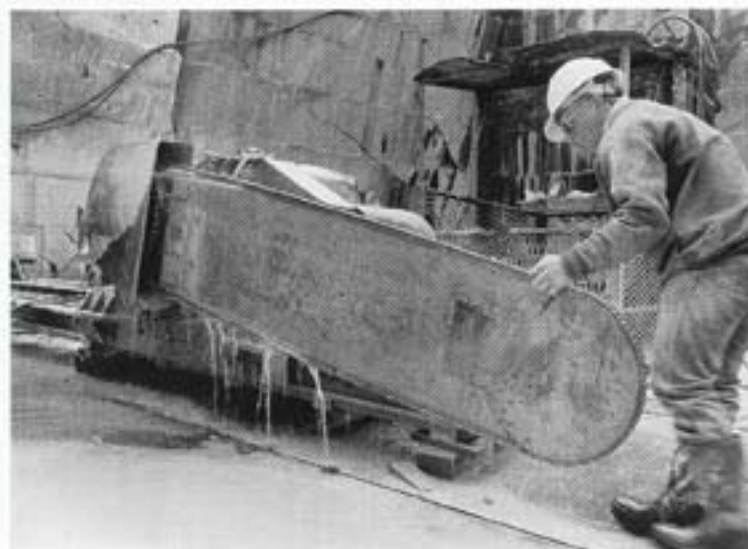
— Joe Shaw, diamond saw operator

watch their amperage so they don't burn up; sharpen them twice a day.

Stone, machine and weather willing, there is a 20-foot-long, 5-foot-deep cut at the end of the day.

In six weeks, a 50-by-100-foot floor can be diced into 5-by-5-by-10-foot blocks. In a good season, 250-plus 20-ton blocks, the start of a small pyramid, are sent skyward.

Technology helps, but \$150,000 diamond-embedded belt saws are not enough to keep a quarry afloat in today's global marketplace. Vermont's marble industry has shrunk to a fraction of its turn-of-the-century world dominance; the Rochester operation has survived for 80 years, in part, because of the luck of the mountain-building forces that created its stone.

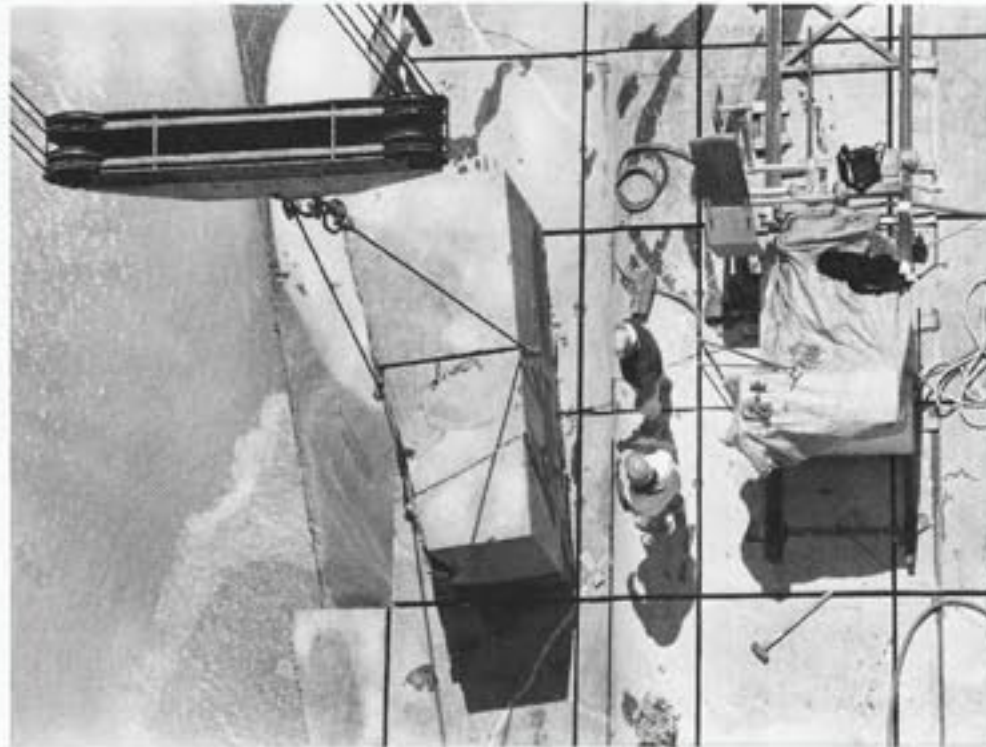


Above, foreman Fabian Reed tests the crane as the quarry opens in the spring. Many of the 20-ton blocks are trucked north to the St. Lawrence Seaway and shipped to Italy for cutting and finishing.



Previous page: A block of marble completes the half-hour ascent from the quarry floor, and Scott Twitchell prepares a scrap block to be hauled up. "You know you've got a good hitch when you raise the block and it's level on all four sides," he says.

Above, foreman Reed. Right, lifting a block from the cutting floor. Opposite page: top, crew enters the 180-foot-deep quarry; middle, water is used to sluice marble muck from the floor, cool saws and fill hydrobags to lift blocks; bottom, Joe Shaw checks the diamond saw for sharpness.





"Winter? I hate it. It just makes everything nasty. You're stomping around in your snowsuit, slipping in the mud, slipping on the ice. You go to eat your sandwich, and it's frozen. By the time we get out of here [close the quarry, in early December] I'm ready."  
— Ron LaPointe

Along the length of the Green Mountains there are more than 200 mapped sites of serpentine, but only a handful — in Roxbury, Windham, Cavendish and Rochester — have the soundness, ability to hold a polish, durability and easy access to be economically viable.

But Rochester's quarry goes a step beyond that and has bragging rights, say marble men, as the world's premier site of verde antique serpentine. It is the Rolls-Royce of green marble, in demand for uses ranging from elegant building facades to fine interior floor tiles and high-end kitchen countertops.

"This is an excellent time for Vermont verde antique. A lot of the foreign verde antique serpentine is not good. The Italian greens don't hold up as well. Guatemalan greens don't have a good bond," says Duncan Ogden, a geologist and former superintendent of quarries for Vermont Marble Company. "As far as I'm concerned, only Taiwan has

verde antique that is at all comparable to Vermont's."

There is stiff competition in the stone industry, says Solari, general manager for the New York-based family firm that owns the quarry.

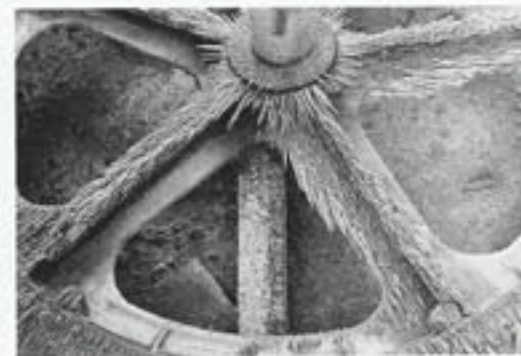
"If this were just a green stone, we'd be out of business to cheaper stones, but our verde antique serpentine is harder than marble. It can be used indoors and out, and it can hold a polish. We have trouble keeping it in stock."

And there's no need to worry about the stock running out anytime soon: There is at least another 20 years of stone in the present quarry and in a southeast extension not yet developed.

*George Bellerose photographed Starksboro stone-wall builder Stoney Mason for our Summer 1999 issue. He spent many days in Rochester during two years of photographing the Vermont Verde Antique quarry and the men who make it run.*



Above, Steve Shaw pulls the stairs at the end of the quarrying season in late fall. "Taking out stairs you have to take your time and know what you're doing," he says. Right, Shaw rides in the work bucket as stair platforms are hauled up out of the hole.



Top, crew members move a fuel tank during closing. Above, ice-encrusted wheel of a diamond-wire saw. Left, the quarry, shut down and in the grip of winter. Opening time doesn't roll around until early April.