The Old Stone Cutter

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In the northwest part of Gloucester near Rockport on Ipswich Bay, you’ll find a small harbor called Lane’s Cove. It’s a sheltered harbor behind a wall of Rockport granite. Each block is 15 tons or more; the wall is double-faced and hand-fitted, looming 15 feet above the low tide. The wall had stood for a hundred years before it fell in the Blizzard of ’78. It was rebuilt, but not so well, and another, lesser storm had breached it since.

But the broken wall still serves to keep out the fury of Ipswich Bay and to shelter the boats of the lobstermen and eelers who harbor there. They keep their traps and shacks there, clinging to the granite shore.

I went there in the cold springtime twilight. I stood on the old pier and watched the sun set across Ipswich Bay. The pier juts out from the land, making an arrowhead pointing to the fallen wall. It, too, is made of hand-fit granite blocks, each the size of an office desk, each carefully carved and trimmed and bound with rusting and rotting iron bands to the one adjacent. On the edges, you can see the marks made by the cutters as they pried the stone from the earth—a series of finger-length half-cylinders marking the edge of the stone. These are the places where the drills were driven to make the cut.

The harbor once served larger craft, lighters, barges, and granite schooners from Boston that came to fetch the fine Cape Ann granite to make the cobblestones of Charles Street. On this pier had stood the groaning, puffing steam cranes and derricks of the Industrial Revolution and the straining, grunting men who served them. The men had Finnish and Italian names—those who guided the stone bared by the glaciers into the schooners’ holds and those who wrested the stone from the earth.

The quarries—“motions” the locals called them—are closed now, swimming holes for the local kids who choose not to share the ocean with the tourists.

The stone cutters are dying off, but a few remain.
I met one once in an old pit in Dogtown. He was there with his hammer and drills, unwilling or unable to put aside his life’s work.

He wanted to talk, and I, to listen. He took me down the wall of the pit and showed me how the stonecutters read the rock face and found the grain in the granite. How the good, gray granite was cut and the rest left as grout or slag. Until that is, someone built a building of the tanned stone, and the quarries had a brief revival.

And then he showed me how they pried it from the earth.

He drew a line. With his sledge, he drove the drill a finger’s length into the rock. Then five inches down the line, another. Then five inches further on another. This he repeated four or five times, each drill taking 10 or 20 heavy blows from the sledge. He was 75, he told me, but he swung the five-pound hammer easily, rhythmically.

He moved his hand to the point where he knew the stone would give up its grip. He started the last drill.

I asked a question.

“Be quiet,” he said. “Listen.”

As he drove the drill, the stone began to sing, a high-pitched whine like an insect or as railroad tracks do when a distant train approaches. With each blow of his hammer the stone keened softly, yet plaintively, like a mother calling to the ghost of her child.

Then with a crack like a rifle shot, the stone parted from the wall and fell.

And fell silent again.

The stone cutter picked up his drills, leaving the square stone where it lay. He tugged on his workman’s cap and moved on. We walked together through the woods of Dogtown until our paths diverted. He never did say his name.

Overhead, the wind rustled through the budding trees and began to sing—like good Cape Ann granite.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul McGeary is a retired journalist, technologist, city official and most of all a father and grandfather (known to his grandsons as “Pop - Pop”). He lived in Gloucester for 40 years and now resides in Clovis, California.