

LABOR AND LIFE

at the

BARRE GRANITE QUARRIES.

A Brief Survey of Social Conditions on
Millstone Hill, Barre, Vermont,
in the autumn of 1895.

by

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Millstone Hill? What is it?

Earlier in the century, superior grinding stones were cut from the exposed granite ledges. Hence its name. To the ordinary inhabitant of the dependent and newly incorporated city of Barre, it is, under its more familiar title of "the hill", or "the quarries", a place from which has come already an industrial development so considerable as to have transformed a quiet Vermont village into the third largest city in the State. To the social inquirer, on the other hand, "the hill" is primarily the workshop of 600 men, and the abode, isolated and crude, of about 2,000 people.

Only the business interpretation, however, of the quarry district, has thus far really touched the popular imagination. Length of obelisk, clarity of stock, volume of shipments, capital extension, land values, scales of wages, have been gravely discussed or enthusiastically heralded. Boarding house life, however, obstacles in the way of acquiring homes, dispersion of the inhabitants owing to land speculation, abuses of renting, lack of sanitary, intellectual, recreative institutions, have had no critic and no serious recognition.

The advent of the railroad into Barre two decades ago, marks the beginning of a steady and rapid development, both in its quarrying branch on "the hill" and in its finishing branch at Barre village, of what had before been a straggling industry employing only ten or twenty men. A dozen years later the "sky route" was carried from the village to the very top of "the hill", nearly five miles distant, and local transportation thus became largely a matter of the loco-

One often gets all these "ways" clearly marked in a slab of birch wood. The niceties of quarrying consist in judging the direction of these natural planes of cleavage. The quarrymen is expected to work to the lines of these invisible grains, failing which he risks a "bad break". As regards the three methods of separating a block from the ledge, blasting requires a single hole, from six inches to several feet in depth; hedge holes are small and shallow and are sunk from six to twenty inches apart in a straight line; while in channelling a steam drill cuts a clean path around the block.

Of the two kinds of quarries, viz., Boulder and Sheet Quarries, the former are made up of thicker, less regular and less clearly bedded masses. Bolder stock, though more difficult to work, is of greater value. It supplies the dark Barre Granite, which, on account of color and hardness, is preferred for the polished and more elaborate portions of monuments. The sheet quarries resemble a series of irregular steps. The stone lies in layers of varying thickness, splits with wonderful precision, is lighter in shade and slightly softer than the ^ubolder stock. It is used for bases, and, owing to the facility in marking it, considerable quantities are made into paving stones.

In the lines of mechanical processes, it would be difficult to find one more interesting to watch than that of cutting granite paving stones. After the block has been reduced by the ordinary methods to blocks of small dimensions, say from one to three feet, the paving cutter takes his heavy hammer, and, using the sharp edge checks a line across one face of such a block, then turning it over and striking with the face of the sledge on the opposite side, as a result of which the stone cracks open with as clean faces as one would get in splitting pine. Having thus reduced his material to small oblong blocks, he seats himself and taking one of these in his

tive instead of the ox teams, and trains of 20 to 30 horses of preceding days.

The output of the forty quarries now operated in the district goes chiefly for monumental purposes, and has extended its market to the pacific slopes. Its distinctive feature is evenness of texture. Shafts forty or fifty feet long are absolutely free, over their entire length, from spot or cloud. In color it is light gray, and dark or blue gray, takes a high polish and is wrought into all monumental effects as well as into statues.

Quarrying is an interesting art. "There's fascination about it," said the superintendent of one of the largest quarries, "and no one who has got thoroughly into it ever leaves it willingly". He was speaking, however, of oversight rather than of the work of the ordinary man with the drill or the chain.

As a preliminary to "opening up" a quarry two or three blasts are set off at different points to disclose the quality of the rock. This being satisfactory, the ledge is then "stripped", the soil carted away, and a derrick erected. The power for operating the derrick was at first generated by a crank, turned by one or two men. Then came the horse attached to a long "sweep" and traveling in a circle. In the larger quarries, however, steam engines now do this work. The engineer stands at his levers in the power house and operates the derrick with perfect precision, receiving signals from a middle man if the load is beyond his sight.

Granite cleaves regularly in three directions. First and most readily the way of the "rift," usually an approach to a vertical plane. Secondly and less easily the way of the "drift", as approach to a horizontal plane. Thirdly and with most difficulty, "the hardway", the plane of division being at right angles to the other two, and the process resembling the breaking of a stick of wood across the grain.

left hand and his long, six pound concaved hammer in his right he rapidly cleaves off the bulges and evens up the edges of each face until the block is symmetrical and correct in dimensions.

Quarrymen's tools are constantly losing their edges and corners; hence the blacksmith's anvil is close by and is kept ringing. One blacksmith will "sharpen" for a gang of from ten to twenty men.

Since granite cleaves less readily when frosty, "shedding in" used to be practised to some degree in winter to protect the temperature of the ledge. The practise, however, has become obsolete and the only effect of winter now is to reduce business somewhat in volume,

Of the six hundred men employed in the busy half of the year, a number, varying from twenty five to one hundred, are paving cutters, about seventy are blacksmiths, steam drill men, engineers and foremen, and the balance are quarrymen. The last get \$1.75 to \$2.25 per day, perhaps an average of \$1.85. Steam drill operators get \$2.50, blacksmiths \$2.75, paving cutters, by the piece from \$2.50 to \$5.00 per day. Engineers receive \$50.00 to \$60.00 per month and foremen from \$90.00 to \$150.00 per month. Lack of employment is not a serious problem in the district, neither are low wages. Quarrying, however, is a specially hazardous employment, not only from the use of explosives, but even more because of the heavy material dealt with and the tremendous strain upon machinery. An obelisk lately quarried weighed 100 tons in the rough and 60 tons when dressed for shipment. Seven or eight fatal accidents and many more serious ones have occurred in recent years. One superintendent explained that he avoided accidents by refusing to employ careless men. "If I saw a man go under that stone", he said, pointing to one suspended at the moment by the derrick, "I would discharge him". No special employer's liability legislation exists in Vermont, and if an employee is injured through

the negligence of a fellow workman he has no redress. In any case his only recourse is a suit for damages, which is somewhat dubious expedient; for, not only are eye witnesses tempted to favor their employer in order to hold down their jobs, but the costs and delays of litigation are such that the plaintiff, to quote a local engineer, "unless he's a stayer and got money, might jest as well git out".

Labor at the Barre quarries proceeds at a comparatively high tension. Men from quarrying districts in Maine contrast the easy pace there with uninterrupted and rapid movement here: and when compared to the old country the contrast is still sharper. Were he to count, the observer would be surprised at the rapidity with which blows rain down upon the drills. The heavy, eight-pound sledge, swung with both hands while the drill is held by a third man, falls about 40 times per minute, and the $3\frac{1}{2}$ pound hammer, swung with one hand while the drill is held by the other, averages double that rate. Shifting drills, driving wedges, hitching chains, vary the exercise, but the physical expenditure of energy in the 9 hour day is heavy. No Saturday half-holiday obtains, as in the old country throughout the year and as in the finishing trade at Barre during the summer. Many Scotchmen have come here from the granite industry in Aberdeen, Scotland. Some of these express the opinion that as compared with the old country the men here work harder, receive higher wages, spend more money and are no happier. A man, however, is alleged to have "more freedom with his employers" here, and can, if a complaint arises against him, be "heard" to state his case", whereas there he would more likely receive a peremptory "go".

A preference exists among the men for having the day's leisure massed at its close. Accordingly work begins early. Not only is "hill" time one half hour ahead of standard time, but even then some quarriers commence in summer at 6:30 a.m.

The noon whistle precipitates a lively scene. Clicking hammer and creaking derrick cease on the instant, and before the whistle's note is finished some of the men are half way across the quarry. An hour is too short a period in the case of many for them to reach their regular tables, eat in comfort and return on time. Hence the frequent "dinner pail gang". A typical dinner pail contains, two large, thick slices of bread buttered, a slice of cold meat or of cheese, one doughnut, one slice of cake, two cookies, two pieces of pie, and two cups of tea or coffee.

In the social development of the district the chief difficulties in the way have been (1) Mixture and transiency of population, and (2) Real estate speculation.

Compounded as local society mainly is of four nationalities, Scotch, French Canadians, Irish and Americans, associated effort is much hindered by this racial diversity. Religious separation is the most vital. No local A.P.A. lodge exists, but the feeling has run high, that a society of Orangemen is being organized. The Roman Catholic contingent comprises from one-third to one-half of the entire population. Association of work, at table, in Unions, and especially at school, tends, however, to mollify religious suspicion.

Furthermore, the population is constantly shifting. Apart from ordinary coming and going there is the annual migration to the lumbering camps as winter, with its contraction of work, approaches. paving cutters too are an especially unstable class. They must go where contracts go. If these are short, moves must be frequent and perhaps from Maine to Georgia and then back again. Their high wages are sometimes entirely consumed thus. This explains the remark of one cutter on receiving \$100.00 for his work last July, that he could "not afford to marry".

A salient feature of the workers as a whole is their youthfulness. probably they would not average above 28 years of age. They are, to a large extent, a body upon whom the cares of life sit lightly. Their conscious wants are not numerous and their wages are amply sufficient for these. Thrift is quite apt to characterize the head of a family, especially if he has a prudent wife. But in a great number of cases, when the month's pay comes to a single man, he settles his board bill, squares up at the store and the livery stable, and then as for the balance, "rolls it lively". It may go for a suit of clothes, or to cover poker chips, or to be stolen from him in a spree. He is often "strapped" within a few days, whereupon he goes stolidly on in his strapped condition until the next pay day. His code of honor on the subject of debt paying, however, is, as a rule, high. "There are few succors or skins in the hill", said a local livery stable keeper, "and very few who can't get credit".

Nearly all trade is done on a credit basis. "Gut 'ny 5 cent tablets?" inquired a tiny pink clad school girl of the general store clerk. "Yes", he replied, and handed her one. "Put't on'e book", she called out as she disappeared through the door.

"Is that the way most of your business is done?" asked a bystander. "Yes, most of it", answered the clerk: "Settle once a month".

Concerning the personal characteristics of the people, many outsiders conceive "the hill" to be "a terrible place". Distance, however, lends much of this terror. True, many of the refinements of life are absent. Men go to their table in their shirt sleeves. They disfigure a hall floor pretty badly at an entertainment. They swear in a most senseless manner. They rarely quarrel, sometimes gamble, and oftentimes get drunk. On the other hand, it is, as elsewhere, the minority who thus greatly discredit local life and defy the better judgment of

the community. With a large section of the population historical training even more than appetite stands opposed to the prohibitory legislation of the state. Evasion, therefore, is far from unusual, and is enhanced by that dangerous few whose greed for the enormous profits of illegal selling leads them more or less openly to press their trade. The "boys" call it "going after the sewing machine" when they drive to parre to fetch a consignment of whiskey from outside the state. This is then quickly peddled out at a profit of from 150% to 300%. "Salting the colt" is going back into the country of a Sunday and celebrating with a jug of cider procured from some farmer.

Boarding is the lot of more than half the men. The two largest boarding houses can accomodate 60 to 70 each, but are rarely full. Numerous smaller houses have from 5 to 20 boarders. A boarder's room is ordinarily about 9 feet square, having a shade at the window, a double bed, a chair or two, a little stand in one corner embellished with a line of pipes, an assortment of tobacco, a few writing materials, perhaps a handful of books and may be a Bible. On the opposite wall hangs a motley display of coats, hats and trousers, while underneath is lined^{up} a collection of foot gear. This is particularly his sleeping room. The "bar room" below is his sitting room, where he deposits his outside garments, chats, reads, smokes or plays cards. Except in the small groups the family in the house know little about him. He has his own outside entrance and mingles little with them. General conditions are improving in that the boarding house is steadily yielding to the fireside. About one-half of the men in the district are married. Of the more than two hundred houses, at least two-fifths are owned by the occupants. Comfortable homes and normal family circles are increasing in number.

A book agent who has been making periodical visits to the place for two years, affirms that, within that time, he has sold there \$2,000.00 worth of books, principally the standard novelists. Some men indeed are reading Ruskin and Carlyle. A large amount of mail matter comes to the district, men could be found taking two daily papers, and many households receive nearly an average of one weekly a day. Of the scattering ones who, perhaps owing to hard conditions in early life, can neither read nor write, three, at least, have lately applied to a friend to be taught. The three public schools of the district, with their enrollment of as many hundred children, ought indeed to be supplemented by at least one night school for adults.

Of the four religious bodies established in the locality, the Roman Catholic surpass the three Protestant organizations combined, both in numbers and in cost of plant.

The Good Templars' lodge has a flourishing membership of 100, meets weekly and is an influence in local life. The forresters lodge is smaller.

For enlivening daily routine, the arrival of the stage coach from Barre, at 8 P.M., is the chief event. From 75 to 150 men crowd the Post Office store and steps, pending the distribution of the mail. This finished, they drift away, some to billiard tables, some to each other's rooms, some to an evening of whist, some to "see their girls," some to sit on the fence and play an harmonica and sing songs, some to their books or newspapers.

Recreative opportunities are sorely meagre. After supper, in Summer time, a group of men may often be found in front of the livery stable, pitching quoits, or putting the shot, and a little baseball is played at times. Any proper organization of outdoor sports, however, is prevented by the lack of a Saturday half-holiday.

Separated, as the people are at the quarries, from the more variegated and engrossing life of the neighboring young city, the absence of adequate diversion and sparkly in their experience, undoubtedly tends to provoke them to coarse substitutes and to render them prosy, unimaginative, and sometimes morose. "What do people do up here to have a good time?" was recently asked of a number of persons on the spot. It was put to one man who, compelled to loaf for the day on account of his proprietor's death, had "cleaned up" and was sitting on the back piazza of his boarding house, while a pool of sewage below was spreading its odors through the air. "What do they do?" he replied. "Nothing as I know, 'cept to sleep, and eat an' work." To the same query a very intelligent engineer answered. "They hire a team, drive to Barre, get drunk, smash the wagon, pay a fine or go to jail". "Them as sez they have a good time", answered a young man of Methodist proclivities, "comes back to the quarry on Monday morning an' tells how as they went off with a team, day before, an' got drunk. But the fact is, they don't have no good time". In full agreement, an officier of one of the unions re-iterated, "They don't have any good times"; and one of the pioneer residents added, "There aint no amusements". To the same interrogatory, however, a clergyman answered, "Oh they dance". For a very considerable portion of the population the promiscuous dance is certainly the favorite amusement, a masquerade ball being the brilliant acme of local recreation.

The realization of a proper social existence at the quarries, has been chiefly hindered by land speculation. By preventing people from living where they wished to live, this has prevented a natural development of community life, and thwarted or impeded the normal functions of that little social body. When about fifteen years ago, the steady expansion of the quarrying industry became assured, three wealthy men, one residing in Barre, one in Montpelier, and one in

in Albany, N.Y. bought up most of the desirable land in the district. One of these proceeded to erect upon a portion of his land a score or more of small houses, little better than shanties, containing one room below, and an attic above, the water supply being from a tub in the general area. This group of red huts bears the aristocratic title of "Stovepipe City". The houses rent for \$3.00 per month for four winter months and at double that rate for the rest of the year. The income is perhaps from 20% to 35% upon the investment. Having gone thus far, this owner rested and simply "held" his land. The holdings of the other two men included entirely and precisely the area forming the natural site of the town. This area, however, they have kept out of the market, declining either to sell or lease on reasonable terms. Working men have thus been compelled to go afield for habitable houses to rent or suitable lots on which to buy. The result is, not only that nooks and corners, knolls and sidehills, have been resorted to as building sites, but, still worse, the people are most injuriously scattered. Their dwellings straggle through five distinct settlements, which ramble over a distance of more than two miles.

From the ^tstandpoint of sanitary needs this has been a serious disadvantage. The area has been so great and the population so sparse, that no proper water or drainage facilities have been afforded. Sewage is nowhere cared for, and two of the settlements, including the principal one of all, depends entirely upon shallow wells for water, though springs of ample flow might be available for a larger and more urgent demand.

From the standpoint of access to work, to the Post Office, to stores, churches, lodges, social events, this dispersion is most unfortunate, and thereby the entire collective life of the people has been permanently handicapped. The Post Office and the trading center

center are not in the middle of these settlements, but at one of the extreme edges. The Roman Catholic church, in seeking to be central, was obliged to choose an unsettled locality, without so much as a farm house close at hand. Distance, thus, from each other, especially in view of the severe weather during much of the year and the lack of sidewalks, results in isolation and monotony which would have been greatly lessened had people been allowed to group themselves naturally, according to convenience for work and for social contact.

To the social student, such a development as has taken place in this quarry district, has a unique value. Being so rapid, it epitomises a series of events which, in other cases, extend over long periods. Where a community takes fifty years to grow from 200 to 2,000, the people have time to re-adjust themselves to abnormal conditions. Consequently the abnormality is never glaring, and may be almost completely disguised. When, however, as is true if Millstone Hill, a single decade changes 200 to 2,000, the situation will be less conventional and less the product of artificial re-adjustment. Unnatural constraints can then be more clearly perceived.

In accord with this fact, the most urgent truth which the quarry life illustrates, is that of the irresponsible and selfish power and the injurious influence, which land speculation may exercise, particularly in small and remote centers, over the life of an entire community. The speculators themselves are in no sense improvers. They do not reside on the spot; they spend none of their profits there; they assume no responsibility for the welfare of the people; they simply regard the growing community as their promising milk cow. Any idea that such land-owning is a trusteeship, primarily in behalf of those locally concerned, is entirely out of mind. The exigencies of prospective values preclude the social growth of the community. This is the most obstructive fact which meets the student of life at the Barre Granite Quarries.