

# History of quarrying holds hard tales of tough business

By June W. Kennedy

Outside of the town, Westford is well-known for its prolific quarries. Generations of people have grown up around the great stone quarrying businesses that once dotted the community.

In an interview about 15 years ago, Iver Olsson recalled:

"I was born in Sweden and came to Westford in 1894 when I was about two years old. Father worked in the H.E. Fletcher Quarry near the Chelmsford line. He did cuttin' and pavin'.

"From the time I was 10 or 11, my brother and I would help him with the tracin' and drillin' on Saturdays and during school vacations.

"The granite there was used for curbin' and street work, and then later in buildin' work. That whole hill is granite.

"When I was there the quarry was 100 feet in depth and covered an area of 14 acres. I suppose it's a lot bigger now. It'll take them years to quarry all that.

"When I first got out of school, I carried tools, then served my time as a stone cutter, curb cutter and on buildin' work. At that time you had to serve three years before you could join the union.

"I worked in different quarries, but came back to Fletcher's and was in charge of the pavin' department for fully 20 years. I had over 100 people working for me. We shipped pavin' all over the country by rail.

"The H.E. Fletcher Co. had its own railroad which carried granite from the quarry to the main road in Brookside [Nabnasset]. I remember when that railroad was built. I think I rode on it when they first opened it up. Before that oxen and horses provided the power.

## Sumner Tunnel

"During that period we furnished the blocks for the Sumner Tunnel. I know we shipped [by truck] over a million blocks in there. The engineer invited the wife and I to go down there to have dinner and then he took us through the tunnel. It was quite an honor. It sure was. My wife got the greatest kick out of that...first woman through the tunnel.

"You know, it wasn't even finished. They'd dumped a lot of pavin' in there. We had to crawl and climb all over to get through.



Photo courtesy of June W. Kennedy

Many famous landmarks, bridges, tunnels and solid urban buildings owe their longevity and very existence to quarrying operations in Westford. The base of the Minuteman statue near North Bridge in Concord was made from granite quarries near the Westford-Carlisle line.

"A great deal of the curbin' in Boston, Lowell, Lawrence and Haverhill came from Westford. Years ago the buildin's were made of big granite blocks. The Lowell post office is heavy block from town here. Later, they sawed the granite about four inches thick to face building.

"At first quarrying was all done by hand...pointing, chipping. In cuttin' the curbin' you'd have to align them first. Then you'd put lines around them with a chisel and point the interior out. We'd drill and use wedges to split the stone. It was hard work.

"Sometimes the granite chips

were put in paper bags and sold for chicken grit. I brought it home for my own chickens. Some of us also used the chips as a base for our driveways and put hot top over it.

"Quarrying is a dangerous job. Of course stone is heavy and it has to be handled with caution. It was dangerous and I suppose it is now.

## Tales of danger

"As a young boy — and it always made a big impression on me — this fella' was running what we called a steam drill. He was up on this tripod. They hollered for him to get out of the way from under the

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derrick, but he stood there lookin' up at the stone as it was goin' by and just as that stone went over him the chain broke. It came down, and, of course, it killed him.

"I was standin' on the edge of the quarry lookin' down. Yes, it made a big impression!

"Another time when I was working in a quarry at Millford, Mass., I had an accident myself. I was hittin' the side of a hand-set. I was chippin' off some stone there and a piece of steel from that hand-set broke off and got in my eye.

"I spoke to the man next to me and said, 'Buddy will you pick that steel out of my eye?' He walked up to me and with his fingers picked out the steel. I'll always remember... After that happened, I had to walk from the stone shed up the track for at least 2-3 miles where I boarded with a Mrs. Hatch. She and I walked two more miles down to the eye specialist's office. He fixed me up best he could. Then I had to walk all the way back home.

"Mrs. Hatch gave me ice presses. It was quite a while before the pain left. I lost the sight pretty much in that eye.

"You know, it was a long time before they could get men to wear goggles. They were a nuisance in a way. You'd get hot and perspire. I probably wouldn't have had the steel in my eye if I'd had goggles on. In the latter part of it, the men did wear metal on their shoes for protection.

"Up here at Fletcher's, I got my nose broken on the job. I was gonna' go right by him and go to my car, but I saw that this fella' was hookin' on to a big flat stone, wanted to turn it over. I thought I'd help him.

"On the locomotive train we had a drill for drilling holes so the hook could hook good. I noticed this fella' had just taken the small drill. I should have stopped it right there. I was afraid my hook might slip on him, so I told him to be sure to get out of the line of mine in case it should let go.

"Well, when he tried to turn the stone over, his hook let go and hit me in the face and knocked me into a pile of grout. I'll never forget it!

"They got me picked up and over the bank into a car and drove up to the medical office. The first aid man said, 'You gotta' go to the hospital.' I says, 'all right.'

"So I got into his car and he took me to Lowell. Of course they fixed my nose with tapes. I always remember, one of the doctors said, 'Well, you know, noses are made to be broke.'

"Well, I says, 'I hope the next one is yours.'

"I went right back to work in the afternoon [no workmen's compensation in those days].

## Other hardships

"We had to get along as best we could in the winter time. The stone froze and so did we!

"You couldn't always work right at the quarry. Sometimes Father would pick out a big boulder, cut pavin' from it and in the spring sell it to Mr. Fletcher.

"One year, across from where we lived, there was a big boulder 15-20 feet long and about 10 feet high. Father would go over and drill in the good weather. Granite is like wood. You could cut on the rift on bad days, but it had to be warmer for the hard way [cross grain] cut.

"Mr. Herbert Fletcher was a good

man. He was tall and thin and so fair and honest in my opinion. One day I said to him, 'Mr. Fletcher, why do you have so much faith in me?' All he said was, 'David, you're your father's son.' That was enough for him.

"Nothing could have pleased me more. My father couldn't even talk to him. For one thing, he was hard of hearing, and he couldn't speak English.

"I remember when I was a boy I found some money rolled up on the sidewalk. In those days it was 'Find-sies Keepsies', you know. I told my mother and father; it amounted to \$11 or \$12.

"Father said, 'David, my son, you know it's not yours.' I put a sign in the P.O. and sure enough, it belonged to an old lady. I felt better.

"Mr. Fletcher must have seen that [honesty] in my father. In fact, that's what I think is the matter with the world today. People have lost their sense of honesty. I heard a man on T.V. the other day said the same thing... 'We'll never be right until we get back to the sense of honesty.' "

June W. Kennedy is a Westford resident and author of "Westford Recollections", a series of historical vignettes and photos.

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