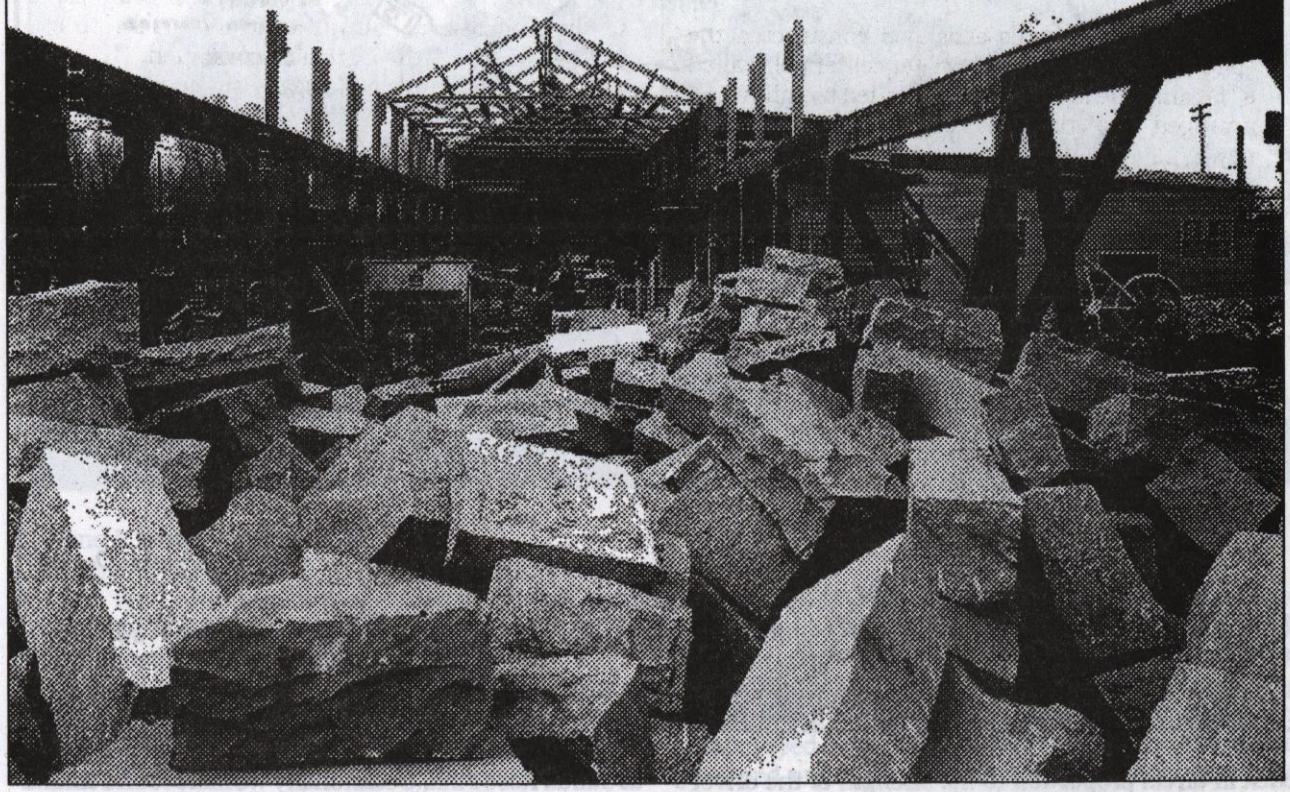
Hard Rock from Turret

BY DICK DIXON



FEW MINERS in the Turret Mountain Mining District in 1897 realized the immortality they sought for their tiny towns would come in pink granite piled on the Capitol grounds in Salt Lake City, Utah, rather than gold deposits in bank ledgers and history books.

Men who founded towns and camps such as Turret, Minneapolis, Manoa, Whitehorn, Nelson, Cameron, Badger, Minnman, Kraft, and others in the Ute Trail country northeast of Salida were after gold. They took granite for granted. It was everywhere.

Granite formed a hard cap over elusive gold veins they hoped would make them rich. It made hillsides impossibly rugged and roads difficult to build and maintain.

To most, it seemed granite was in the way of fame via golden riches. Gold from the camps was measured in a few hundred ounces and never returned enough to pay for its recovery. Granite was measured in tens of thousands of tons.

Towns withered and died. Most didn't last long enough to sprout cemeteries. Founding fathers — who hoped gold would place them in the history books — didn't realize that indestructible monuments of granite from quarries beside their towns were quietly being erected throughout the United States.

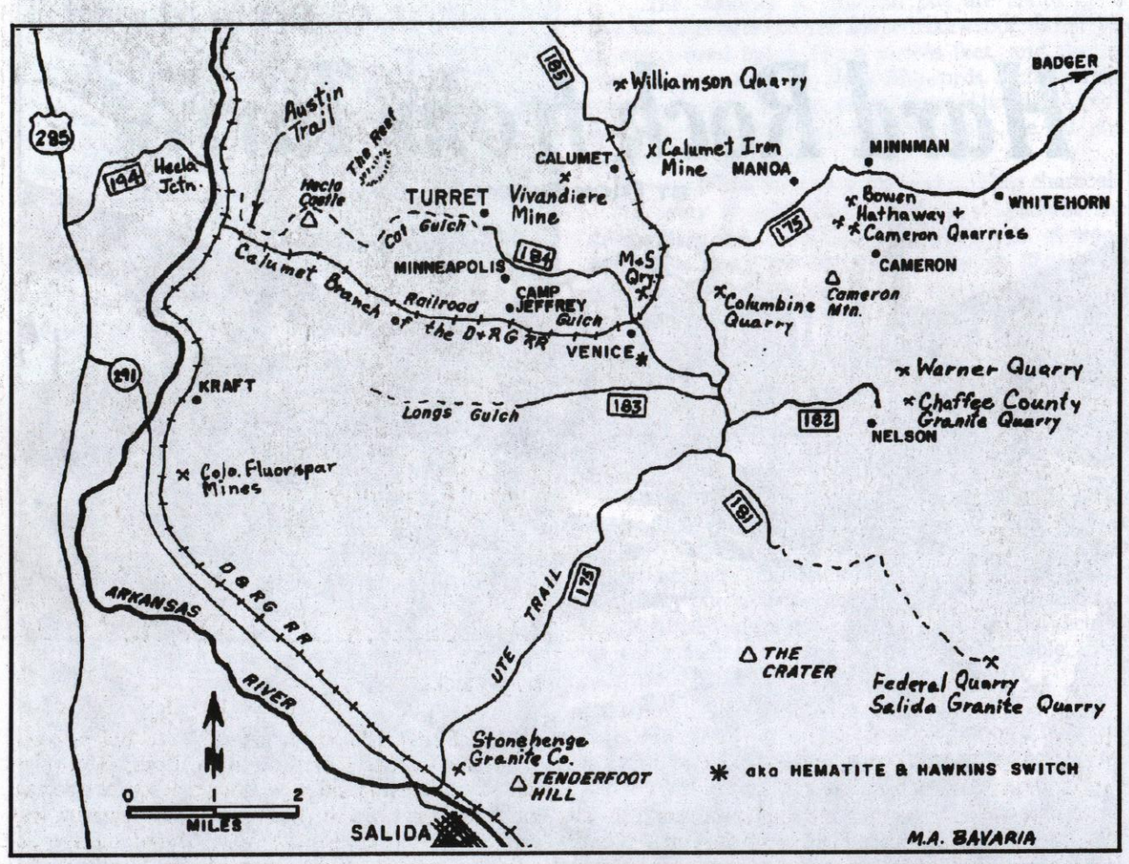
Possibilities for the fine grained, heavy stone weren't widely explored until after the turn of the century. Salida Granite Co. was in operation by 1903 and dark gray monumental stone was hauled by wagon to Salida for finishing.

The company's Federal Quarry was the biggest in Ute Trail country. It was also the only company that had a rough finishing plant at its quarry site.

Its fine-finish plant was established in Salida in 1903. The building today is the main warehouse at Hylton Lumber Co.

Getting rough stones from quarry to finish plant was a challenge down the 8-10% grades on narrow, twisting, Ute Trail. Most of the road ran in the creek bottom, creating additional problems when water from rain or snow melt insisted on using the same route.

Rough blocks weighed as much as twelve tons and it took a creative teamster to keep his wagon from running over his eight or ten-horse team. Wagons were equipped with rear wheel brakes which held the wagon



back in direct proportion to the strength of the driver's right leg on the brake pole.

Wheel horses (those closest to the wagon) had to be big — the preferred minimum weight was at least 1,600 pounds each. It was up to this team to hold most of the load.

In especially steep places, drivers chained a log across the rear wheels, allowing it to roll up against the wagon frame, keeping wheels from turning. An alternative was to use a heavy log or rock as a drag behind the wagon — a sort of anchor.

When stone arrived at the Salida plant, it was unloaded with heavy overhead gantry cranes running on parallel tracks above the work area. Once finished, stone was shipped via Denver & Rio Grande Railroad to destinations throughout the United States.

GRAY STONE was first called Dark Salida, but before the 1920s was known as Salida Blue. Fifteen years earlier, the editor of the *Turret Gold Belt* complained loudly — and without results — that the stone should be dubbed Turret Blue. He reasoned it should be named for the mining district from which it came rather than the city from which it was shipped.

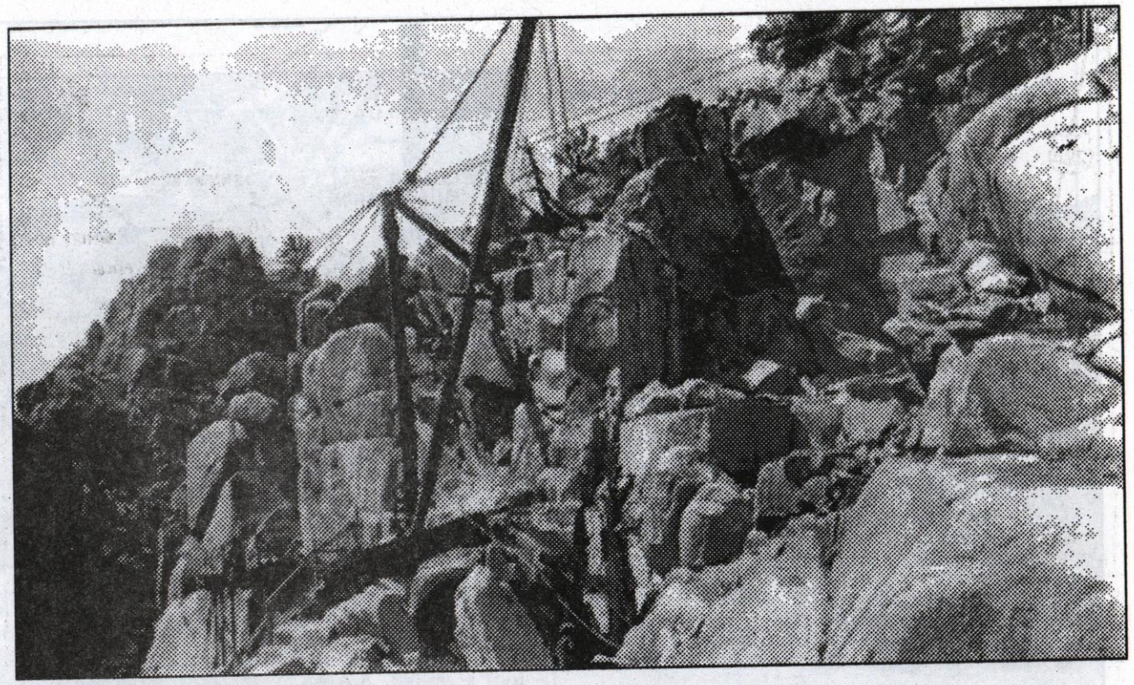
Salida Granite Co. expanded production to include a limited amount of fine grained pink stone marketed as Salida Rose Pink. Occasionally workers found similar fine-grained, dense granite which, when polished, took on a deep forest green color. Called Salida Green, it was extremely rare.

All the granite quarried by fewer than a dozen companies working in the Ute Trail country north of Salida was used for monuments. There was never enough to be used for general construction, and quality was too fine to market as common building stone.

In November 1904, the granite business was getting a good start, but was not widely publicized. After all, people in the Ute Trail area were looking for gold.

Salida Granite Company, which worked more steadily than others, was filling a large order for the city of Omaha, Nebraska, on Nov. 5, 1905. Shipments were running 10,000 to 17,000 pounds per block and workers quarried one a day. By 1907, granite production grew as hope for gold dwindled. Quarries employed men from nearby towns where mines were often closed. Boarding houses and cabins were built at each of the quarries to house workers.

Jan. 29, 1908, *Turret Gold Belt* editor Alba Robinson used granite production as another excuse to suggest that rebuilding the Calumet Branch of the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad, wrecked by a flash flood Aug. 3, 1901, would be "good business." The implication was that it would make quarry operations more profitable



— and it probably would have.

Stone could be loaded on rail cars for shipment high in Ute Trail country where the railroad branch terminated. The D&RG didn't figure granite would do anything to enhance its business and kept silent.

It was a wet spring in 1905 and teamsters from all the quarries had to contend with deep mud on Ute Trail. They continued hauling because of large orders that couldn't be delayed.

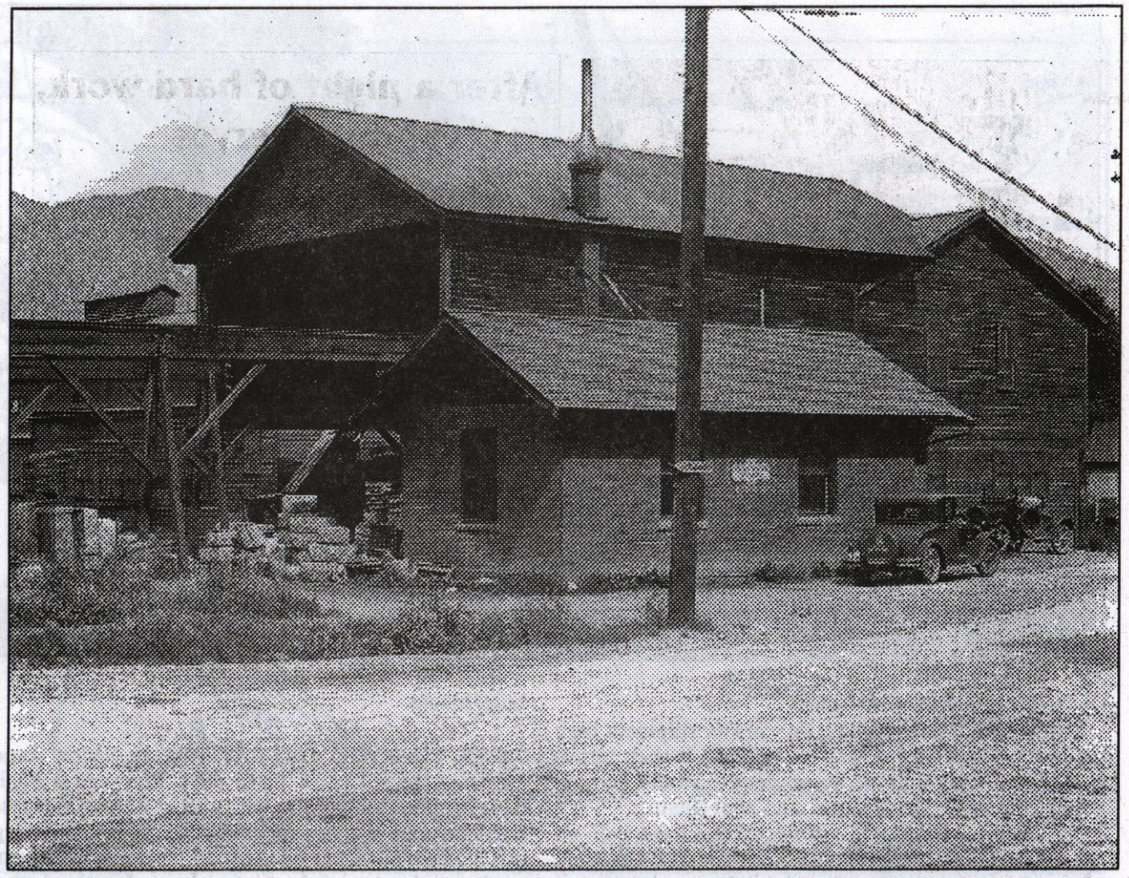
The road in places was nearly a bottomless quagmire. Teamsters substituted mules — as many as 30 in a hitch — for horses. Wagons bogged down, overturned, and had to be righted and reloaded with their huge blocks.

THE SUPPOSED ONE-DAY TRIP to Salida sometimes took two or three days. Companies might have been in competition with each other for business, but teamsters worked together, double-teaming wagons through bad spots on the road. They cut timber and corduroyed some of the worst places. In others, they dumped entire wagon loads of broken rock into mudholes.

April 1905 was busy as Salida Granite Co. shipped two orders daily to Seattle, Washington; Lincoln, Nebraska; and a "city in Missouri."

The visit of prospective investors to the quarry that month, led by Turret mining engineer Elmer Briggs, was no coincidence. It was carefully coördinated with the flurry of far-flung shipments for prominent municipal projects and apparently loosened purse strings among those who looked at the operation.

Irl M. "Tollie" Taliaferro of Salida was a teamster who hauled loads both ways to many of the quarries. He remembered getting hoist boom timbers, up to 100



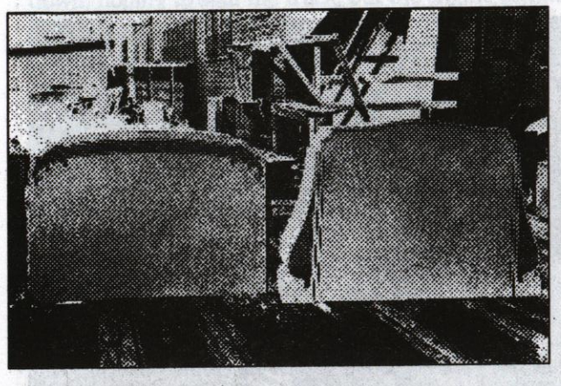
feet long and 24 inches in diameter at the small end, from Salida rail yards to quarries was "quite an operation" along the steep, twisting course of Ute Trail which ran in the creek bed at that time.

They were hauled by removing sides and ends from several wagon boxes and then chaining the timber loosely to each so it could twist and swivel on the flat bed. He said teams of eight big horses were used.

Sharp corners frequently "took some ingenuity and a little guts" to get around. Sometimes four horses were unhitched from the front of the outfit and were taken to the rear on a hillside. From there, they pulled upward and sideways at a 90° angle, dragging the timber and its supporting wagon to clear the corner.

The rear of the beam and its wagon sometimes hung in thin air above the gulch bottom, suspended by the rope to the team on the hillside.

Taliaferro said one main boom 125 feet long was hauled to the quarry by other teamsters. He said, "We had enough trouble with 100 footers. I don't know how



they got that monster in."

He said to his knowledge, "after all that work," the long beam was never used. Taliaferro died Jan. 27, 1994.

In 1990, a timber measuring 121 feet long, lay rotting on the ground among trees near the quarry. It didn't look as if it was ever used.

One of the tall derricks at Salida Granite Quarry fell about 3 p.m. Oct. 9, 1928. It hit A.A. Bailey, a tool dresser, as he scrambled to get out of the way.

He received a broken collarbone and numerous bruises and was treated at the Red Cross Hospital in Salida. Bailey was part of a crew setting up the machine when a rope broke.

Stan Warner, who owned Warner Quarry until his death May 2, 1976, said booms were made of Oregon fir. They were shipped to Salida on multiple D&RG flat cars and were chained down only in the centers of the cars to keep the timber from pushing cars off the rails on curves.

Warner, born March 19, 1919, worked much of his life with Salida granite from the Ute Trail area. Warner learned the trade from his father. He said that while there was some pit quarrying for stone, most of the material came from boulder quarrying.

THERE WAS ALMOST NO ledge quarrying as is common with other types of stone. This fact limited production to monumental stone rather than building stone.

Warner explained a boulder was located which had correct grain and color and it was unearthed. Granite has a grain, much like wood, he said, and an experienced eye could determine fracture lines. It was along those lines that stone cutters would set to work.

Holes up to a foot deep were drilled a few inches apart outlining the shape of the block. In early days, drilling was done with hand steel and a one-handed, four-pound sledge hammer known as a "single jack." Later it was done with air drills powered by compressors driven by steam or gasoline engines.

Oven-dried wooden plugs were driven into holes and then soaked with water so they would expand, splitting the rock. The process was faster in the winter

when wet plugs would freeze and expand more rapidly and with more force. The technique was known as "plug and feather."

Because of the nature of granite, Warner said it was frequently necessary to block out a much larger chunk than was necessary for the finished product. Once the block was removed, it was shaped roughly before shipment to a finishing plant in Salida. As a result, there is a lot of "spall" — large chips of broken rock — remaining at quarry sites and at finishing plant sites in Salida.

STEVE FRAZEE, miner, teacher, author, historian and former Turret resident, related a scary but humorous incident involving himself and Warner during the late 1920s. The two young men were on their way to Salida with a ten-ton block of granite on the bed of a flatbed truck owned by Stan's father.

The massive vehicle had hard-rubber tires and two-wheel mechanical brakes that retarded progress of the vehicle only in direct proportion to the strength of the driver's right leg. To help hold the truck back on steep slopes, the variable spark control lever on the steering column was retarded as much as possible which slowed the vehicle without stalling the big six-cylinder engine.

As the truck neared the D&RGW mainline railroad crossing near Salida on a long down-slope, the men realized an oncoming narrow-gauge train would reach the junction at the same time their truck would.

Warner was driving. He put both feet on the brake pedal and pushed as hard as he could. The vehicle slowed a little. He yanked the spark lever all the way down, hoping to stall the truck, but the engine continued to chug — one cylinder at a time — closer to the track and inevitable doom. It was too late for the train to stop also.

Without discussion, both men simultaneously leaped from the truck as it started across the tracks. Frazee made a clean jump, but Warner's baggy sweater caught the spark lever as he catapulted out the door, jerking the lever all the way up.

As the men rolled and stood up, the engine on the truck roared to full life. It lurched ahead, driverless, almost clearing the crossing.

THE RAILROAD locomotive gave the rear of the truck a gentle shove, steering it off the road and into a nearby field where the men caught up with it, leaped inside, and with both of them straining at the steering wheel, managed to turn it in the soft ground, guiding it back onto the road.

Neither truck nor locomotive sustained any damage and the men continued to the finishing plant where they unloaded their 20,000 lb. block of granite.

Warner's wife Rita, who owned the quarry in 1978, said the last piece of Salida Blue granite to be taken from a Ute Trail quarry went to make a monument for rancher George Everett, member of a pioneer Salida area family. Because of mass production and ledge quarrying possible at mines in other states — primarily Vermont — competition is too much for tedious boulder quarrying necessary in Chaffee County, despite the fact Turret granite is superior quality.

Warner said, "The days of the small quarry are just about over." She voiced hope that some day Ute Trail quarries can reopen because they "still contain the finest granite in the United States."

From 1920 Salida Granite Co. reported an "unbroken, profitable operation with the exception of 1931-32 following a fire in the plant." Profits continued through the Great Depression until 1944 when quarries were shut down by a U.S. Government order ending all mining not essential to the war effort. None was ever reopened on a large scale basis.

Once upon a time, the pioneers of Turret District sneered at operations that didn't seek gold. They made fun of companies and people who had the gall to suggest the district's future and fortune might be in something other than yellow metal. But looking back, it's safe to say Turret Mountain Mining District produced far more money from its non-glamorous quarries than it ever did from gold.

Dick Dixon has written several books of local history, ranging from a pamphlet about the smoke-stack to a substantial volume about the Turret gold district and the D&RG's Calumet Branch. He teaches journalism and American history at Salida High School. This, excerpted from a book in preparation, is the first of three installments about the quarries (and their products) that once operated in the Arkansas Hills northeast of Salida. Future segments will cover the Mormon Battalion Monument and the decline of the quarries.