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Granite: The Gift of Ages

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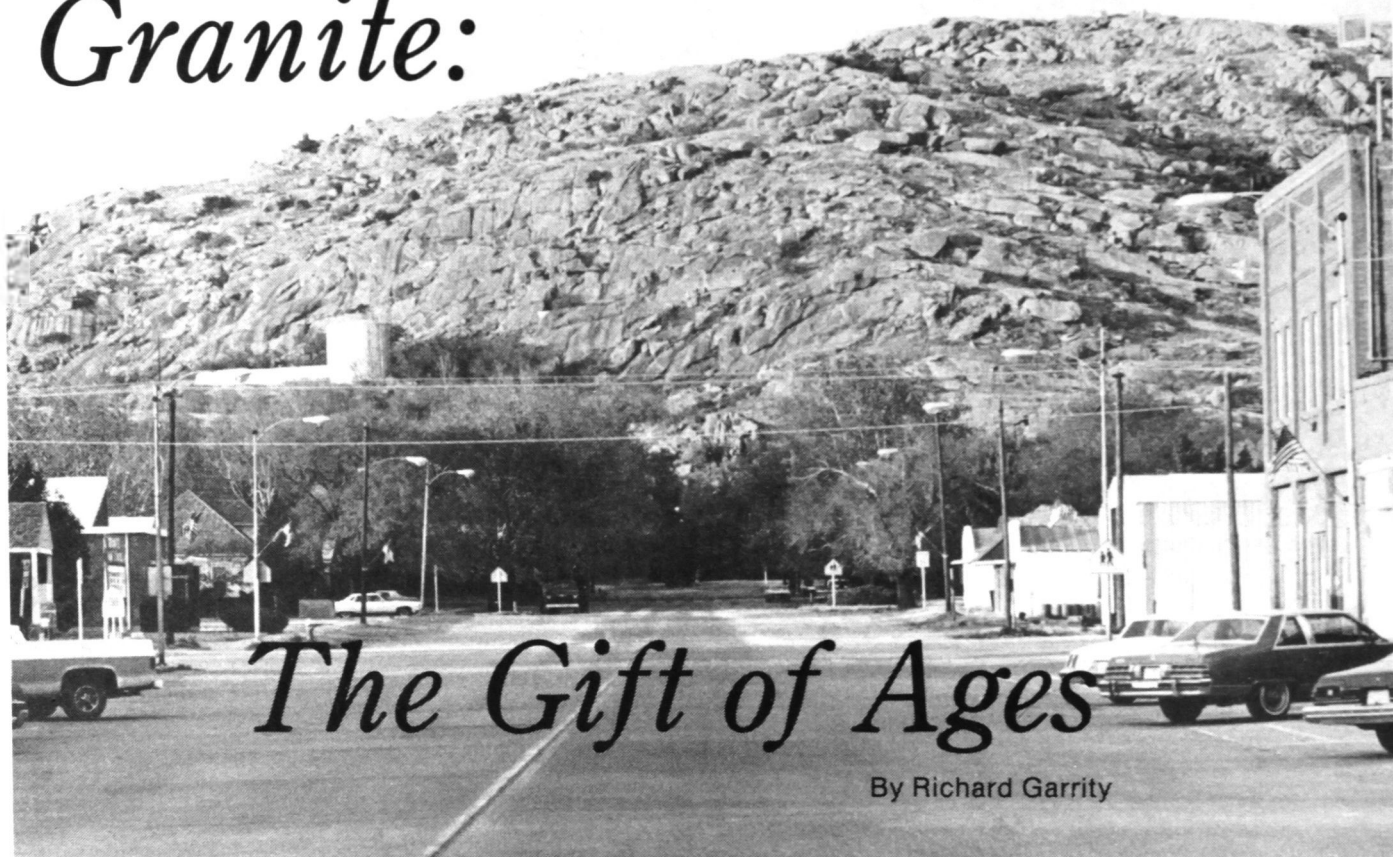
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Providing beauty for a variety of locations.

Granite:



The Gift of Ages

By Richard Garrity

Headquarters Mountain provides the background for this photo of Main Street in Granite, Oklahoma.

Photo courtesy the author.

People all over Oklahoma and even in other states know about a small town nestled at the foot of Headquarters Mountains because of a unique use of a product from that mountain range. Bill Willis of Granite manufactures monuments and memorials from the Wichita Granite (W.G.) Group, a 500,000,000-year source. Before statehood, the production of granite products was established in the area.

About 1902, the Pellow brothers were quarrying from Headquarters Mountain. They used steam and wood and steel cranes to move the material. Granite became a symbol of the town. For instance, building fronts were constructed of polished granite. Rougher materials were used for the walls, and street storm gutters were stabilized with the product. Lawns were graced with granite seats, and some of the houses were granite-veneered. With the arrival of the railroad, the market became nationwide.

In 1950, J. R. Willis, Bill Willis' father, purchased the quarry. When Bill returned from Oklahoma State University, he moved easily into the granite industry. Bill's explanation of the operation is given in understandable terms: The granite quarry, the largest in Oklahoma, is located on a half section of land and is of undetermined depth. To obtain the red granite, holes are drilled by air into the rock, filled with black powder, and detonated. This removes a section as large as a room. Wedges are then applied to split it again. Care is taken to prevent damage to the surface. It will

produce a block about the size of a small car. The block is placed upon a platform and sliced by a wire running over wheels. Once sliced, it is removed to a diamond-tipped saw to be cut into desired thickness. With a rating of seven on the hardness scale, the procedure is time-consuming. The slab is then ready for polishing and engraving.

Bill Willis and all of his family members, including his three daughters and his wife, are involved in preparing the granite surface. Linda is an artist; Brenda, a geologist; and Karen, a combination artist and office manager. Cooperating with the girls is their mother, Ellen, who directs the sales department. J. R. Willis, Bill's father, is also always ready to assist.

In the process, a cutout stencil is made, placed upon the slab, sandblasted, and removed. Further details are obtained with a hand drill to produce the fine lines. The finished slab may have a portrait of a person, history of a location, or a panorama. It is hard to believe a rock as hard as granite can be so worked.

Some other existing examples may be found at the Hall of Fame in Mangum, Oklahoma. This display contains sixty upright panels five feet six inches tall, nineteen inches wide, and four inches thick. Each monument has an engraved picture and short biography of an early settler of Old Greer County. At Cheyenne is a panorama marker overlooking the site of the Black Kettle Massacre. Elk City

has a description of the Anadarko Gas Basin, and a few miles east, there's a polished-granite slab at the entrance to the Southwestern Oklahoma State University campus.

Willis has also branched into other states. An outstanding work attesting to his creativity, a tribute to Bob Wills, was unveiled at Turkey, Texas, in 1971. This thirty-foot shaft has four life-sized engravings of Bob Wills on the sides. As the shaft slowly rotates on the base, a tape recorder plays the singer's best-known songs.

Presently the quarry is in heavy production. In addition to the usual demand for customized grave stones, the Willises are busy on Civilian Conservation Corps markers to recognize the CCC's work. Another is a memorial for the Daughters of the Confederacy, and the Oklahoma Historical Society has constant requests.

Recently Bill was commissioned to supply the granite for the Aquaticus in Oklahoma City, which has added more to his busy schedule; but he is happy to be part of the project.

The Aquaticus is a \$5.2 million-dollar 65,000 square foot marine life facility east of the Oklahoma City Zoo. The Oklahoma Zoological Society, under the direction of Lee Allen Smith, developed the funding. It will contain the most comprehensive aquatic life collection in the Central United States. It was designed by the architectural firm Glover, Smith, and Bode of Oklahoma City.

After three years of construction, the unit will contain salt- and fresh-water pools with 250,000 gallons of water for the dolphin activity to the 200-gallon aquarium. The partly glass pools will feature dolphins, seals, or other sea creatures.


At the main entrance is the dolphin fountain. Three six-foot bronze dolphins appear to play in the water which tumbles over four large granite rocks. Immediately beyond the fountain is the Donor's Wall.

The wall is twenty-two feet long and six feet high. Forty assorted granite slabs of a two-inch thickness are fastened to the wall. They range from eighteen inches wide by twenty-three inches high to five feet wide and ten inches high. They contain the profiles or names of the donors. These were crafted by Bill Willis.

Within the building are conference rooms, gift shops, banquet rooms, and educational rooms. The structure can also be entered from the zoo. Excepting Christmas Day, it will be open year round from 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.

Salt-water fish need salt water. Again, Oklahoma supplied the needed product. Brine is pumped from the salt flats of the Cimarron River near Freedom, Oklahoma, by the Cargill Salt Company. It is piped into vats where the water is evaporated by the sun. The resulting dry salt is trucked to Oklahoma City. There, the laboratory under the direction of Jack Schneider combines it with city water to get an acceptable salt water.

Bill says he was very anxious about finishing the project by the time of its April 6, 1986, opening. He has always managed to beat deadlines and will do so in the future, a future which will undoubtedly be crowded with granite creations.

CREDITS: Bill Willis—Granite, OK. Al Bode of Glover, Smith, and Bode, Inc. Oklahoma City; Oklahoma Zoological Society—Oklahoma City; and Dr. Robert H. Arndt—OU, Norman. 



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