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got out of Detroit?

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Rock 'n' Restoration

by Ben Fulton

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Afew plastic buckets are scattered about. So too are bits of leftover blasting pipe, in the first stages of rust. A car tire is cast to one side of the access road. Close by, an oil spill stains the ground. Soft-drink cups peek out of the foliage, and Jonny Woodward is hiking up this section of Little Cottonwood Canyon with all the disgust of someone who's watched his neighbor turn their back yard into a wrecking site.

He's hiking up the very section of the canyon where the LDS church blasted, lifted and transported huge slabs of granite for its new Conference Center.

"You can see how much damage has been done just to make the road," Woodward says. "A lot of trees have been destroyed. And now we're coming up to the wasteland."

The road forks farther up. Stretching toward the ridge are whole sections of blasted granite, as if some giant cut slices out of the canyon's side. Huge boulders sit perched on the edge, with crisscrossing dirt roads directly below.

The LDS church owns this part of the canyon, the same place where pioneers mined granite to build the Salt Lake City Temple. Climbing enthusiasts—for whom the area is an international attraction—and environmentalists tried to persuade the church to get its granite for the Conference Center elsewhere. For reasons of heritage and sentiment, the church insisted on using the same granite church fathers used for the downtown temple.

Critics contend that the LDS church was granted several waivers from county regulations governing development in the canyons. The debate over that issue ended when the church began blasting for its granite. But old fights die hard. Now those who formed the Little Cottonwood Coalition two years ago to stop the harvesting of granite have a new focus: the promised reclamation and revegetation of the area.

Those who loved the canyon in its former state plan to hold the county, and the church, to their promises. "None of us were very politically adept at this kind of stuff when the coalition was formed. After a while, it became demoralizing to take a stand because it seemed like no one cared," says Woodward, who designs climbing products for a living. "Now I think they need to show some good-faith actions and restore the place. They certainly have their work cut out for them."

Indeed they do. There is a long list of concerns for the area, which includes erosion,

safety and irrigation for new vegetation. Greg Baptist, a civil engineer for Salt Lake County, says the church must abide by "Foothill Canyons" zoning regulations. That means the area must be restored using all native soils and plants. And for every tree of a certain diameter that was destroyed, two or three new ones will have to be planted as replacements. Final reclamation plans should be approved next month, with work beginning in July.

"It's not going to look the same as it was, but it's going to look as close as possible without the boulders," Baptist says.

That's true, but also an understatement, say those who tried to preserve the canyon. David Carrier, a physiologist and former member of Little Cottonwood Coalition, couldn't believe what he saw after the church wrapped up its work last fall. Aside from restoring the area, his biggest concern is safety. According to 1997 Utah Department of Transportation statistics, 3,000 vehicles pass up and down the canyon road daily, and Carrier worries about erosion that would bring boulders rolling down.

"I never imagined it would turn out as scary as it did," Carrier says. "You can be mad at the church for not demonstrating enough wisdom to leave this beautiful area alone, but the county is supposed to be here to protect the community from developers. It would be nice if someone at the county would put their name on the line and say, 'This is not a danger.'"

Bruce Cunningham, who keeps a house in Little Cottonwood Canyon, says he's already noticed boulders in places where there were none before. "I've been up there on three different days, and it's definitely not stable," he says.

If so, that's news to Baptist, who says the county conducted an engineering geologist's review of the area on a day-to-day basis soon after the church got its granite. "Their report shows it's stable," he says.

Nor should anyone be worried about erosion, Baptist added. Coverts, silt ponds and fences, plus big bails of straw, stand ready to keep dirt in place. Just as Baptist maintains there were no special favors granted the church for its granite mining, there will be no special exemptions where restoration is involved. "If anyone else had owned this property, they would have been put through the same process. And anyone else—had they met the requirements of the ordinances—would have been allowed to do what [the church] did."

Words like that still hit a sore spot with environmentalists who wanted the boulders left alone. Carrier lists ordinances he believes the church was allowed to skirt, the most important being U.S. Forest Service zoning regulations that prohibit quarrying near recreational areas. But the county and church never called it "quarrying." They preferred the words "mineral extraction." It's that change of definition that galled Carrier the most.

"Technically, when you dig for rock, that's quarrying," Carrier says. "Every time I said the word quarrying to them, we'd get in an argument that went in circles about the meaning of that word. I thought it was very strange that they would get upset over that word. It never made sense to me until someone pointed out to me that quarrying isn't allowed in the area."

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Cunningham, too, was convinced the county was giving the red carpet to church plans for the canyon. So much so that he filed a lawsuit against Salt Lake County, alleging county officials weren't holding the church to ordinances as written. Third District Judge Stephen Henroyd ruled in favor of the county.

Even today, Cunningham says nothing was done to code. He also argues that county ordinance requires the church to have had a restoration plan in place before it started work, not after.

As for the LDS church, it's ready to let the healing process begin. And Kerry Nielsen, the church's project coordinator for the new Conference Center, firmly denies that the church was served any special exemptions for gathering its granite rock.

"We'll review our [restoration] plan in the next few days. We're following through with due diligence," Nielsen says.

Woodward, Carrier, Cunningham and plenty of local rock climbers will all be watching.

"It could turn out that they'll do a really great job of cleaning the place up, but they'll never be able restore what was once there," Carrier says.