

The Stone Industry in Quarry Town, Colorado

In both a physical and economic sense, the roots of Lyons are set deep in sandstone. The town is surrounded by red rock formations that are the residual of ancient sand dune deposits. This massive legacy of prehistoric times is named the Lyons Formation. Because nature structured this formation in layers, the quarrymen of Lyons can easily extract slabs of various thickness to be used as building materials. It was sandstone from the Lyons Formation that built many of the most notable and sturdy buildings in town.

Today Federal and State authorities recognize the historical significance of many Lyons properties. These buildings demonstrate post-Civil War construction techniques featuring local stone erected by local craftsmen – the combination of geologic material and superb skill that has been the Lyons hallmark for over a century. Thirteen of these structures are situated within the town's borders; the remaining four are close by. Originally mercantile buildings, liveries, a dynamite storage shed, an old schoolhouse, residences and a bar or two, their initial purpose evolved into current use and their historic significance grew accordingly.

These examples of historic Lyons craftsmanship remain fully functional buildings today, as well as sources of pride to their owners and neighbors. Primarily made of Lyons Sandstone, mostly within walking distance of each other, they are part of Lyons' everyday life in 2010 just as they were a century ago - timeless tributes to the quarrymen and stonemasons who built, and who continue to build, our community.

The fact that local people used local stone to build local buildings is only part of the story. The astonishing part of the story is the fact that stone from Quarry Town, Colorado was used to construct major public buildings and elite private residences of dignitaries and tycoons in New York, Boston, Washington and other big cities in the East! Beyond that surprising fact is this: the sandstone our quarrymen have been pulling from the earth for over a century has been used on fine, enduring buildings throughout the world.

The reason? Lyons Sandstone is the best there is.

Unlike much of the sandstone quarried elsewhere on this planet, our stone has distinct advantages: it is very hard, fine-grained, structurally strong and exceptionally durable. It can be cut and split to incredibly close tolerance and requires no surface finish to protect against the weather. Contractors and architects know Lyons Sandstone is inherently beautiful, maintenance free and incredibly long-lasting. It is an ideal material for construction and decorative use on interior and external surfaces of buildings designed for a long lifespan.

Local quarryman Mike Loukonen compares buildings that use Lyons sandstone to more transitory commercial buildings and says, "Colleges and churches are prime customers for Lyons stone. Those institutions have a deep sense of history. So they build their buildings to last." Examples offered by Loukonen included the 9/11 World Trade Center Memorial in New York, the Shanksville, Pennsylvania memorial at the site of the 9/11 crash of United Airlines Flight 93, Coors Field and the Visitors Center at Red rocks Park in Morrison, Colorado.

In addition to its presence in historic buildings, throughout Lyons you will see our rock used creatively in many ways, including building blocks, retaining walls, patios and sidewalks, lawn furniture and public artwork of all sizes. Much of the sandstone art was created and donated by the Vasquez family and Blue Mountain Stone. In a 2007 interview, Manny Vasquez said the most fun he has from the business is to drive by completed projects that have artfully integrated Lyons sandstone with architecture, like the 29th Street Mall in Boulder. Speaking of public art made from sandstone he said, "After all the years of hard work, we are now able to give back to our community and make our little town a little nicer to look at."

Lyons Sandstone was first recognized as construction material in 1873, when Chester Smead, an early settler, quarried the first rock from what is now Meadow Park. He shipped it to Longmont for use as a sidewalk to connect Central School with the Congregational Church. Quarrying remained a sideline business for the early farmers until Edward S. Lyon purchased some land to raise crops and cattle. Examining the sandstone outcroppings on his property, Farmer Lyon quickly realized that rock could be more valuable than cabbage and beef. Within a year Farmer Lyon had become Quarryman Lyon. The

rock crop was so good after his transformation that the Denver, Utah and Pacific Railroad opened national distribution channels with a track from Lyons to the Longmont railhead. An industry was born!

Lyons Sandstone began to pave sidewalks in rapidly developing Eastern and Midwestern cities. Soon the quarry business was booming. Our community was on its way to becoming Quarry Town, Colorado. By 1890 hundreds of miners worked for seven different quarry companies in the Lyons valley. Our unique red stone was on its way to being used all over the world. Lyons quickly developed into one of the largest stone producing areas in the United States. Other quarries named Beech Hill and Nolan were opened northeast of town.

Today the Lyons stone industry continues to be a small group of family-owned quarries and stone yards. Most concentrate on wholesale distribution. Some have been handed down through several generations. Loukonen Brothers Stone, the oldest of the group, was founded by John Gust Loukonen, a tanner by trade, who crossed the Atlantic from Finland in 1890. Stopping first in Minnesota, he learned of the stone business in Colorado, and moved to Beech Hill. In 1895, Loukonen purchased the quarries on Beech Hill for \$10,000, an enormous sum in those days. Nevertheless, he and his quarry were so productive that he was able to pay for his investment in under 2 years. Today the family business is operated by grandchildren Mike, Dean, Ken, Kathy, Cynthia and John.

In the 1920s, recently invented concrete emerged as a construction alternative. It began to undercut the popularity of Lyons Sandstone. According to Dean Loukonen, "Cement nearly blew out the bottom of the stone business from the 20s until the post-war building boom of the 40s. Then things went back to normal." Despite the slump, the stone business has been the historic lifeblood of this community. Referring to his father and uncle, the legendary Leonard Loukonen and his brother Reino, Mike recalled, "My dad and uncle always looked out for the working people. During tough winters, when there was little activity in the quarry, they carried many of them financially. In fact, a number of the stone companies and stoneworkers in Lyons got their start from my father and uncle. Our family traditions seemed to become community traditions."

The brothers acknowledge the industry is changing. There was a time when each quarry shipped trailer load after trailer load each day to construction sites throughout the nation and the world. Now the emphasis may be shifting to lower volume for more decorative and refined uses. Lyons quarrymen, long known for their innovation, are beginning to apply technologies long used on marble and granite. They intend for this approach to generate new uses of Lyons Sandstone with a greater range of uses and even higher perceived value.

The tradition continues.....