

Interview with James Forbes  
March 8, 2012, Jane Daniels

Jim Forbes is the son of Charles Davidson Forbes, a surface machine operator for Mohegan Granite, the quarries that are part of Sylvan Glen Nature Preserve. The elder Mr. Forbes emigrated from Scotland as a granite cutter to work in the quarries. He died in 1951. Jim's mother, Martha Todd Forbes was the bookkeeper for Mohegan Granite for two years before marrying his father in June 1930.

Jim (born March 1931) grew up in the house just north of the gas line on the east side of Lexington Avenue. It was a converted barn. His maternal grandmother Annie Elizabeth Todd lived next door. Mildred Strang, a teacher in the Yorktown School is his mother's cousin.

Grenci and Ellis, the owners of the quarry, were based in Frankfort, Maine. They bought the quarry in 1912 or 1914, hoping to finish St. John the Devine Cathedral, which is still unfinished. The entrance to the property was across from what is now the Curry Honda dealership. It went gradually uphill. Jim drew a sketch map of the property, but it is not to scale.

The buildings were wood with the main building 300 feet and the generator building about 100 feet long. A cable car came down from the quarry. The buildings were still standing in the 1950's. The large pile of rocks at the top was scrap. They dumped it off the end. The pipes still in the area were for compressed air to run drills. The original quarry is the water filled one which supplied water to the main quarry through pipes. The main quarry was designed such that it was open at one end so water did not accumulate. Its entrance was off the property on an easement according to Jim.

Workers used feathers and plugs to make holes in the rocks and then split them. Jim has his father's set of feathers and plugs. Black powder was used with granite as an explosive as it pushes rather than destroys the rock. Quarrymen worked their way up from using hand tools to more skilled work. The men who carved the stone were another line of workers. There were also men who worked with explosives.

The drills were operated by air, which accounts for all of the pipes in the area. The saw to cut the granite was six feet in diameter and cut the granite at 12 inches per minute. When it was working it, could be heard at Jim's house, a half mile away. The quarry generated their own electricity as the electric company could not supply enough power.

Part of the financial troubles that Greneci and Ellis faced was that workers had to be paid NY union rates. The quarry they owned in Mt. Waldo Maine paid half that amount.

Jim remembers going with his father to check on whether there was work at the quarry sometime in September 1941. He was not sure the quarry closed because of financial reasons or because of the war. When the quarry closed, "they up and left" Watch dogs were turned loose and eventually shot as they were dangerous. After the quarry closed, the area became his playground beginning around 1943-1944, as his mother did not let him go there when he was 10. He remembers seeing foxes in and around the quarry.

Jim's father went to Quincy Mass, seeking work, but while waiting to find work at the quarry he worked in a leather factory. Since the factory made leather tops for jeeps in World War II, he was not drafted. He was working in Brooklyn doing surface work on monuments at the time of his death in 1951. Since

the stone workers were brought into the area, once the quarry closed, there was no reason to stay. Jim knows of no others who remember the quarry.

There were three rights of way through the property but only one of which would have been wide enough for a train. The railroad was never built. When Grenci and Ellis needed some money to meet payroll, his grandmother bought one of the rights of way. Trucks hauled the granite to Verplank on the Hudson River, where it was transported to its final destination.

Later years:

The gas line went through the area in 1952 and the line was doubled in 1956, which ends at Lexington Avenue. Jim called the lime kiln, the Indian fireplace and said clam bakes were held there. (However, shells are a source of lime).

In the 1960s, Finney (spelling?) Fiske wanted to make a garbage disposal plant for what is now known as cogeneration, but it did not happen. There was objection to the project. Machinery on the property disappeared one night. There were claims it was stolen, others hinted at it was reposed for financial reasons.

Mogel Park, a bungalow colony near Amazon Road ran a day camp for residents on what is now Sylvan Glen Nature Preserve. It operated in the 1950s.

A side note about the Bear Mountain Extension: In 1930, Angelo Rotella owned property by what is now Cortlandt Lanes. In 1931, they fought the parkway being built. The suit dragged on until 1949, when they were ordered to move their house with 90 days notice. Because they were farmers, they were given more time in order to harvest their crops. The house was moved, but in 2012, the road still has not been built.