

The Highlights - The Rocks of Rocklin

In a long line east from Sacramento, exits along Interstate-80 link the sprawling suburban developments that bloom on the periphery of the state capital. Finally free of the commuting traffic that plagues this asphalt artery, I descended at one such off-ramp. I was here to investigate a curious example of civic signage, a cloverleaf beautified and branded by the residential city of Rocklin, California.

Exiting, I slowed to a red light and looked left to the awkward patch of land caught between the interstate and its outlet. In contrast to the dirt and dead grass easements that line the freeway elsewhere, this cloverleaf was elaborately landscaped. A shiny, low, polished and etched granite sign read "City of Rocklin, Established 1893." To the left of the sign stood what appeared to be a cluster of monumental granite boulders. Some rose thirteen feet high and six feet deep, with a tracery of mineral veins and the impressions of blasting holes for dynamite.



The City of Rocklin sign

Pulling into the adjoining gas station, I parked and set out on foot for a closer look at the sign and monument. The only other pedestrian was walking toward the local community college, his backpack in hand and iPod earplugged against the steady din of traffic. There is no city center for the ballooning suburb, yet twenty-five thousand cars per day pass this sign on Rocklin Road - the highest traffic volume in the area. It makes sense considering these

numbers to mark the city at such a point of convergence, but it is a strange way to make a place.

Something was vaguely unsettling as I stepped off the sidewalk and onto the redwood bark that covered the ground of the cloverleaf. The massive boulders were a little too grey, and overly textured. In fact, they weren't actually granite. This "faux monument," as members of the City Council referred to it in conversation, was actually concrete that had been elaborately molded and painted, giving it the astonishingly realistic appearance of stone. The simulation was exposed by the contrast of many small chunks of real granite, only about one to two feet in diameter, which dotted the feet of the looming fakes.



Closer view of the monument

But for me, the real surprise came in realizing that this faux-granite cluster of imitation boulders sat on top of, and covered, a fully real and original massive granite outcropping. The hillock of redwood bark that rose up behind the artificial monoliths decoratively concealed the original granite for which Rocklin was so named. An actual granite outcropping was apparently not rocky enough to signify Rocklin, and so the city simulated itself.

I placed a call to the Rocklin Historical Society to see if they had any information on this sign-cum-quasi-public sculpture. The first words from the kind historian who answered the phone were, "We had NOTHING to do with that thing." Digging deeper, I learned that the

City of Rocklin sits on one hundred square miles of granite - so, clearly, you never have to look far for the stuff. In 1880, six quarries were shipping granite out of Rocklin and around the state for imposing architectural projects, including the San Francisco Mint and San Francisco's Palace Hotel. At a peak of production, there were twelve quarries operating simultaneously. However, the availability of cement-based concrete in the early 1900's began to make granite an increasingly less popular material for builders and architects, and by 1920 most of the quarries had closed permanently.



View from across the off-ramp looking toward the sign and Interstate 80. Images courtesy of Kristin Posehn.

Rocklin's roadside synthesis of signage, branding, landscaping and public sculpture is a curious sample of civic postmodernism - perhaps fitting as a wry testament to the history of the city. As demand for concrete replaced granite and led to the demise of the city's industrial quarries, Rocklin grew into a residential suburb that now has one of the highest population growth rates on the west coast. There is a touch of poignancy that these civic emblems are made of the same material as the concrete overpass they sit next to, as if the city was no different from the interstate, but instead an extension of its trafficking fluid. Granite is Rocklin's past, but this concrete virtual rock may better mark its present. The rocks of Rocklin are a patch of government-funded Disneyland to welcome visitors or weary commuters, most of whom will mistake them for the real thing, or more likely, simply pass them by.

