

U.S.

In Quarry's Dark Water, Grim Tales of Danger and Despair

By CAREY GOLDBERG DEC. 7, 1997

By the black-water depths of the old Granite Rail Quarry, Charlie Hammond stood waiting again today, waiting to find out whether a naked female corpse recently spotted in the murk by police divers and then lost from sight was that of his long-missing daughter, Karen.

"Nothing of any good has come of these quarries since the granite was gone," said Mr. Hammond, a truck driver from South Boston with blue eyes bleared by grief. "Everyone who wanted to do something wrong, this was the place they came to.

"So many lives have been lost here over the years," he said of the still onyx waters surrounded by great jumbles of leftover stone blocks, their sides blanketed in alphabet-soup graffiti left by generations of teen-agers. "It's been a dumping ground for bodies. Who knows how many other bodies are down there?"

The answer is: Nobody knows. But in this tough-edged town on Boston's South Shore, people know that the granite pits that were once a source of pride and prosperity are now stained with crime and sorrow.

In the 19th century, Quincy's 54 granite quarries provided the fine stone to build much of nearby Boston, including the Bunker Hill monument, and even the Merchants Exchange Building in Manhattan.

Over the decades since the quarries closed and filled with water from underground springs, more than a dozen daredevil young men have died in summer leaps of 70, 80 and 100 feet from the treacherous ledges; insurance chiselers and thieves seeking to dump cars where they would never be found have so littered the waters that in Granite Rail alone, divers say there are more than a dozen submerged vehicles.

Local legend has it that when Boston mobsters do their equivalent of the East River cement shoe, the victim often ends up here, 200 feet down.

For all the quarries' local infamy, though, never before has their propensity to attract death and wrongdoing created such a prolonged and painful drama as the one under way.

It began in mid-November when police divers, acting on a tip, descended into Granite Rail Quarry to look for the body of a slain Boston prostitute. They eventually encountered not one but two corpses: one of a naked woman, curled into a fetal position and weighted down with something, and one of a clothed man.

But some things have gone awry in the dark 35-degree water. Divers have had close calls and a marker at the female body became dislodged, so that the search for her had to begin again. It has proved a difficult task for divers to retrace their steps.

It is difficult altogether to work in the quarry, said John Perry Fish, an oceanographer with American Underwater Search and Survey Ltd., a company hired to help the police in the quarry search. The company has worked all over the world, from the Atlantic Ocean for TWA Flight 800 to Loch Ness in Scotland, he said, but the terrain here is about the most treacherous he has ever seen.

It is not only that the quarry is a stew full of cars, telephone poles, highway fences, bicycles and shopping carts, he said, but that "a lot of it is sitting on ledges, so it's very precarious, and there may be an underwater slide of debris."

For the last few days, the searchers have been using robotic devices to explore rather than descending themselves. Mr. Fish's company uses a very low-light camera hung from a boat to inspect the quarry bottom; it has also used acoustic equipment

to map the the quarry's 40,000 square feet. When they zero in on the body -- or bodies -- divers will be sent to recover it.

That is what happened on the day before Thanksgiving, when the male body was brought up. It belonged to Patrick McDonagh, a 19-year-old student who had been missing since a night of drinking that ended at the quarry in 1994.

As the body came up, Mr. McDonagh's relatives stood at the quarry's lip and watched, and they said later that there was a certain relief in finally knowing his fate.

Mr. Hammond, with his wife, was there, too. He has yet to learn such relief. His daughter, Karen, mother of two daughters, now 5 and 7, disappeared in January 1995, when she was 21. Since then, Mr. Hammond has put up thousands of posters offering a reward and the promise of "no conviction" for word of her whereabouts. He has tried his best, he said, to run down any leads he could, even checking trash bins when a rumor reached him that she had been dismembered.

He does not know if the body in the quarry is hers, but he will be coming every day until it is found again, he said.

Jeffrey Locke, the Norfolk County District Attorney who is overseeing the murder investigation behind the dive, seems to come to the quarry every day as well. He will say almost nothing about the murder case, but its basic outline has been reported in local newspapers. In 1994, a 17-year-old prostitute named Sonia Leal was picked up in Boston's Combat Zone, tortured and killed. Her body was thrown into the quarry. It was retrieved in 1994.

Three local men were accused of the crime. Two of them were convicted and are now serving life terms; the third was to face trial this month. As part of a plea bargain, it is said, he told the authorities that they would find the body of another prostitute in the quarry.

Mr. Hammond's daughter, Karen, is known to have sometimes resorted to prostitution to support a drug habit. But the authorities have not made clear whether they expect the body to be hers -- some reports indicate they believe it is not -- and to

muddy the picture even further, there have been unconfirmed rumors of a third body in the quarry.

Which would surprise no one in Quincy (pronounced QUIN-zee.)

"There's so many bodies in there, it's unbelievable," said Charlie Peterson, a local lifeguard and baseball coach who used to jump off the quarry ledges when he was a teen-ager. "This was considered a baptismal rite for Quincy and Dorchester kids," he said of the ledge-jumping. "And it's almost like, if you're swimming, you'd imagine 10 corpses coming up and reaching for you. All the time we were swimming, we knew the corpses were down there."

State and local politicians have long talked of making the quarries safer; at one point, former Gov. William F. Weld pledged \$1 million in state money to drain the Granite Rail Quarry.

But \$1 million was not enough, and there are environmental issues and purely physical problems as well, such as the tendency of the rock walls to collapse when the water is drained.

Some expect all the recent attention to provide the final impetus to get the quarries drained and filled. Others expect the issue to fade away again.

Mr. Hammond has his own suggestion for the quarries. "If you count all the tragedy and heartache that has been gone through these quarries, they're more like the devil's ground," he said. "They should have an army of priests down here to exorcise it and then seal it up."