

REDGRANITE QUARRY DRAWS VISITORS, HEARTACHE

'AT YOUR OWN RISK'



DAN POWERS/POST-CRESCENT MEDIA

Tony Sattler, 16, jumps into the Redgranite Quarry as Max Karpfinger, 16, takes his picture on a recent weekday afternoon. Both were visiting from Milwaukee. The Redgranite Quarry in southeast Waushara County is a popular summer destination, sometimes drawing 1,000 people on a warm day.

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POST-CRESCENT MEDIA

REDGRANITE — Redgranite Quarry Park, an idyllic setting in a rural stretch in southeast Waushara County, an hour's drive from Appleton, draws a thousand visitors on summer's hottest days. Tucked in the middle of the park's six-acre swath

of wooded pathways, the quarry is said to reach depths of 163 feet.

Signs posted at the park's entrances read "Swim at your own risk" — an ominous reminder that there have been 18 drownings reported at the park since 1979, two of which occurred this summer.

"I think it's a beautiful spot," said Catherine Deringer, 52, a resident of nearby Lohrville. "I still

swim there myself."

Her son, Jake Deringer, drowned in the quarry in 2006. He was 17.

And while only some locals choose to frequent the site, most recognize its hazards. Still, many don't want to see it closed — or are hesitant to speak about the dangers

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of the quarry, the double-digit list of drowning victims or whether the quarry's heartbreaking history demands greater oversight.

Beautiful, but dangerous

Nestled in the tiny village of Redgranite, Quarry Park is roughly an hour's trip southwest of Appleton and 30 miles west of Oshkosh, just off State 21.

Two parking lots mark its west and east entrances.

The fire department is only footsteps away, with the village hall and police department about a football field's length beyond that.

"It's a beautiful place, but it's dangerous," said Jerry Sieg, village board president. "You have to be very careful and have to be knowledgeable about your surroundings."

Trees, jagged rocks, tall grass and gravel walkways line the quarry's outer edges. Redgranite Fire Chief Jim Angelo said the village makes every attempt to cut down ropes hanging from trees over the water.

"You can't climb trees," Angelo said. "You can't put up ropes."

Dogs, cats, open fires, littering and alcohol are also prohibited at the quarry. Cookouts are acceptable, but alcohol remains one of the park's biggest problems.

"We pinch them every day," Sieg said, referring to the contraband confiscated from the park's visitors.

While the occasional crumpled beer or soda can is visible from the park's woods, Sieg said the village's street department empties garbage bins from the park twice a week.

Inmates from the Redgranite Correctional Institution clean the park during the summer.

What's not so easy to clean, however, is the graffiti found among the quarry's rocks.

Scrawled along scores of heavy stones are hearts, peace symbols, dates and names. Some of the names are the same as the quarry's victims — a sort of impromptu memorial.

In 2001, then-police chief Ron Masticola asked the village to close the quarry as a safety measure.

Residents rejected the idea, and village leaders decided to limit the park's daily hours from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. Masticola, who is retired and lives in the area, declined comment on the quarry or the drownings when contacted by Post-Crescent Media.

Today, police try to patrol the park multiple times a day, but Police Chief Kyle Tarr said the frequency of patrols fluctuates by the day.

"With one guy on, I can only be in one place at a time," Tarr said. The village employs two full-time and three part-time officers, including Tarr.

Rich history

People worked — not swam — at the quarry for the first half of the 20th

Tragedy in the water

Two swimmers died at the Redgranite Quarry this summer, bringing to 18 the number who have died there since 1979. On June 19, rescue units recovered the body of Alaya Hua Chee Lo, 17, of Appleton, who was swimming at the quarry with friends. Divers located her body about an hour after dispatchers received a 911 call. She was a student at Appleton North High School. On Aug. 12, the body of Daniel R. Whitmore, 49, of Green Bay, was pulled from the water.

century.

In the late 1800s, the Bannerman family identified numerous granite deposits and purchased tracts of land in the Redgranite area.

Querino Monacelli, a 98-year-old Lohrville resident, was among a wave of turn of the century migrants who grew up near the bustling quarries.

"It was quite a time because the villages were awfully busy," he said.

The quarries brought hundreds of European migrants to the area. Monacelli worked in limestone excavation after the quarries, including Redgranite, closed by the early 1930s.

Following World War II, the Chicago Pickle Company used the Redgranite Quarry to clean pickles until sometime in the 1960s. Records are scarce, but locals said the public has been swimming in the quarry since the pickle company's closure.

"If (the quarry) got a shower or a rain in the summer, they would have to shut it down because all of the water would come in and land right where they had to work," Monacelli said.

Today, it's neither granite nor pickles that occupy the public's attention about the quarry. It's the number of drownings.

An open records request with the Village of Redgranite revealed only four drownings dating back to 2003. But Roland Handel, Waushara County coroner, said three management systems make it difficult for the county to locate drowning records.

Oshkosh Northwestern archives indicate the drowning of Jake Deringer was the 16th at the park since 1979. The deaths of Alaya Hua Chee Lo, 17, Appleton, and Daniel R. Whitmore, 49, Green Bay, in June and August, respectively, brings the total to 18 fatalities in the 36-year period.

Angelo said he recalls 10 deaths during his 43-year career with the village fire department.

Sieg, who formerly operated a scuba tank business across the street from the park, said he has responded to seven drownings at the quarry. Six of the victims were divers.

He said panic and lack of coordination among the diving instructors likely contributed to their deaths.

"(Swimmers) don't realize that water gets pretty cold," said Joan Rinaldi, a first responder with the Redgranite Fire Department. "Cramp up, down you go and nobody's going to save you because they ain't gonna get to you in time."

Tragedy has a silver lining

Following the death of her son, Catherine Deringer created the nonprofit "Jake Fest" to finance the implementation of a dive team in Redgranite.

"It wasn't because of the quarry," Deringer said. "It was because of a small community that poured their time and efforts out to me and my family at a really tragic time."

Through a local music festival and other fundraising initiatives, she raised \$67,000 for the community.

Deringer's efforts outfitted and trained four village firefighters as dive team responders.

Chris Wedell, an Oshkosh firefighter and water operations team commander in Wautoma, said the quarry is one of the few venues that's open to the public for deep dive training.

Wedell, whose Wautoma-based water operations team trains with Redgranite and Neshkoro's dive teams, responded to the drowning death in June. He said misunderstandings about the quarry create dangerous situations.

"Unless you actually go below the surface you don't understand that the quarry either has a vertical face and fades away or (it) is stepped out in some of the areas," Wedell said. "There are some ledges that you can't see from the surface."

Wedell said the quarry has multiple water level temperatures, or thermal climbs, which can be dangerous.

He said temperature in the water is about 70 degrees near the surface, but can plunge to the upper or middle 40s the further down you go.

"If you choose to swim across (the quarry) and your swimming abilities aren't there, you can get yourself in trouble in a hurry," Wedell said. "When you're having fun, it's not always convenient to think about safety."

Recreational immunity

State law protects both private and governmental property owners with immunity if people injure themselves while recreating, a measure known as "recreational immunity."

"Those statutes are there to protect both private and public entities," said Mike Zagrodnik, an insurance agent with Baer Insurance, who works with the village. "Swimming is a recreational activity. The recreational activities are very broad."

Because the village does not charge an admission fee into the park, state law can exempt the village from liability if deaths or injuries occur at the quarry. Seig, the village president, said the village owns both the park and the quarry.

Sieg said he could not recall any instances where the village faced legal responsibility as result of injuries or deaths at the quarry. He said he does not remember police wanting to close the quarry.

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https://www.newspapers.com/image/127019380/

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ry but said safety precautions would likely shift accountability onto the village.

“(Lifeguards) put the village at risk,” Sieg said. “It’s a liability factor that way.”

He mentioned the signs that say “Swim at your own risk” as the village’s warning to visitors wanting to swim in the quarry.

Joan Olson, the village’s legal counsel, declined comment to Post-Crescent Media due to the recent drownings.

Respect the quarry

The prospect of shutting down the quarry for safety reasons doesn’t sit well with many residents of Redgranite.

Even though village officials are uneasy discussing deaths at the quarry, most agree on two things — park-goers need to respect the quarry, and the major-

More photos of Redgranite Quarry online at postcrescent.com

ity of problems at the park are instigated by visitors, rather than local residents.

There have been no significant attempts to close the quarry since the former police chief’s efforts in 2001. Many residents of the village — population just above 2,000 — remain protective of the quarry, a popular summertime destination that draws visitors from east-central Wisconsin.

“If they close that quarry, you’ve just taken away the last thing Redgranite has,” said Jeff Bonnell, the owner of Redgranite’s CJ’s Sports Bar.

“It’s the only thing Redgranite has.”

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DAN POWERS/GANNETT WISCONSIN MEDIA

Young people gather at the Redgranite Quarry, a popular summer swimming destination. “You can’t climb trees. You can’t put up ropes,” Redgranite Fire Chief Jim Angelo said of efforts to keep the quarry safe.

Redgranite Quarry Wisconsin

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