A Plea for Parvin Butte

‘We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us.’

- Aldo Leopold, A Sand County Almanac

Parvin Butte and the community of Dexter are the backdrop for the Covered Bridge Regatta.

Photograph by Pete Helzer
Willamette River meets the dams. Cutthroat trout before the Middle Fork of the Willamette River. This is the last free-stone bowls and obsidian points still nudged by the hands of the people who lived along Lost Creek for over ten thousand years, their presence marked by the rocky crest sculpted by wind, rain, and ice. The Kalapuya camped along the banks of the butte for over ten thousand years, their presence marked by the traces of their ancestors. The cast iron woodstove is an early road into Lost Valley also bear his name. People who live along Lost Creek have also found red-legged frogs and western pond turtles basking on half-submerged logs, both are listed as “critical species of concern.”

According to the Oregon Watershed Enhancement boards, a half million dollars have been invested in restoration projects within the Lost Creek watershed since 1999. Fish counts conducted by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife have documented the success of these projects.

The creek flows through the property of Lost Creek Rock Products. Not only is Parvin Butte a “not in my backyard,” issue, but residents are forced to live out the consequences of a decision made almost 40 years ago. The creek would leave a 200-foot buffer of trees to help mitigate the effect of noise and pollution. With this assurance, DOGAMI issued the mining permit. The first covered bridge across Lost Creek and Parvin Butte was acquired by the railroad in 1893. The creek flows through the property of Lost Creek Rock Products. Parvin Butte is as significant to Dexter as Skinner Butte is to Eugene.

Lost Creek Rock Products has managed to maximize its profits by exploiting what Lane County hearings officials Gary Dennelle has called a “poorly written” county regulation that exempts a quarry owner from negotiating with neighbors. If a 200-foot buffer of trees is left between the quarry and the neighbors, the code suggests that a site review may not be required. Lost Creek Rock Products stated on their application to DOGAMI that they would have a 200-foot buffer of trees to help mitigate the effect of noise and pollution. With this assurance, DOGAMI issued the mining permit. Lost Creek Rock Products stated on their application to DOGAMI that they would have a 200-foot buffer of trees to help mitigate the effect of noise and pollution. With this assurance, DOGAMI issued the mining permit. Parvin Butte was acquired by the railroad in 1893. The creek flows through the property of Lost Creek Rock Products. Parvin Butte is as significant to Dexter as Skinner Butte is to Eugene.

Lost Creek Rock Products is owned by Greg Demers and the McDougal Brothers under the name of Lost Creek Rock Products. Not only would Parvin Butte be devastated, its rock would be used to upgrade the railroad tracks to facilitate the transport of dirty coal through the Willamette Valley, causing widespread environmental damage far beyond the valley’s borders. Lost Creek Rock Products is owned by Greg Demers and the McDougal Brothers under the name of Lost Creek Rock Products. Not only would Parvin Butte be devastated, its rock would be used to upgrade the railroad tracks to facilitate the transport of dirty coal through the Willamette Valley, causing widespread environmental damage far beyond the valley’s borders.

A photo of the Oregon Department of Geology and Mining Industry (DOGAMI) issued them a permit to remove Parvin Butte from the Lane County landscape.
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In 2010 the state agency Department of Geology and Mining Industry sold the land to Greg Demers and the McDougal Brothers under the name of Lost Creek Rock Products. In 2010 the state agency Department of Geology and Mining Industry (DOGAMI) issued them a permit to remove Parvin Butte from the Lane County landscape.

Web of Water
Lost Creek Rock Products has managed to maximize its profits by exploiting what Lane County hearings official Gary Daniele has called a “poorly written” county regulation that exempts a quarry owner from negotiating with neighbors. If a 200-foot baffle of trees is left between the quarry and the neighbors, the code suggests that a site review may not be required. Lost Creek Rock Products stated on their application to DOGAMI that they would have a 200-foot baffle of trees to help mitigate the effect of noise and pollution. With this assurance, DOGAMI issued the mining permit. Lost Creek Rock Products then used a forestry permit to cut the trees right to the property line. After what remained of the vegetation in this buffer zone was scraped into piles and burned, the quarry owners planted ten-inch seedlings, in order to remain technically in compliance with the mining permit.

Minerals produce a tremendous amount of noise. A quarter of a stick of dynamite can generate 177 decibels. Rock crushers also produce sound levels well over the 85 decibels level known to damage human hearing. Ten-inch trees, of course, do not provide an effective sound barrier. Nevertheless, Commissioner Faye Stewart, a mining and timber advocate who once wore a letter in support of allowing Lost Creek Rock Products a half million dollars in public funds, puts out that such activity is “perfectly legal.”

Lost Creek Rock Products (ironically named for the boulder stream that will bear the company’s impacts) intends to dynamite and strip mine the butte to extract more than 60 million tons of aggregate — crushed stone, sand and gravel. Over the next twenty years these rock products will be transported over county roads from Dexter, through Eugene, to a loading facility in West Eugene. At the end of twenty years, Parvin Butte, which rises twice as tall as Skinner Butte, will be scraped away to a 200-foot buffer zone.

Battles for the Butte
As the noise and environmental destruction began to unfold without official oversight, Dexter neighbors fought back. Rural citizens from various walks of life — residents, loggers, farmers, artists, school teachers — banded together as Dexter-Lost Valley Community Association. They hired an attorney with money raised in bits and pieces from bake sales and small donations to fight a multi-million dollar corporation that had been profiting from logging, mining and land sales for years.

When Dexter residents brought their concerns to a wider audience, they faced the misconception that the Parvin Butte quarry was a “not in my backyard” issue. Some industry advocates tried to paint Dexter residents as people who had built houses next to a quarry, only to complain about mining noise. However, it is important to remember that when the land was zoned for mining in 1973, Parvin Butte was surrounded by small family farms. These people didn’t move in next to a property zoned for quarry mining; the quarry moved in next to them. Everyone in Dexter understands that our transportation system is dependent on rock. The trick is to identify those areas that are less environmentally — and culturally — sensitive to mining activity. In the case of Parvin Butte, the quarry not only poses environmental threats to Lost Creek, it also disrupts the lives of over 800 people residing within a mile of the quarry. Dexter residents are being forced to live out the consequences of a decision made almost 40 years ago.

Other momentous decisions loom just around the corner: Some of the rock from Parvin Butte is intended for use on the Coos Bay rail link, according to an ODOT grant application filed by Lost Creek Rock Products. Not only would Parvin Butte be devastated, its rock would be used to upgrade the railroad tracks to facilitate the transport of dirty coal through the Willamette Valley.

Lost Creek Rock Products is owned by Greg Demers and Norman and Melvin McDougal — men who have long been in the business of using land for profit, manipulating the system to their advantage and passing on the costs to the public and the environment. A judge recently ruled against another of their ventures, Willamette Water Company, saying that they were “speculating” on water as they tried to gain control of 22 million gallons of water a day from the McKenzie River to sell to rural communities. County Commissioners Jay Bratvold, Sid Leiken and Faye Stewart had voted in support of the company.

When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect. 

- Aldo Leopold, A Sand County Almanac
No Voice

When a mine starts up in a community in Lane County (and it’s not that unusual thanks to out-of-date zoning laws) neighbors are usually given a say in how the mine operates through a process called site review. This process gives neighbors the ability to negotiate such things as how late a quarry can operate at night, how much prior notice must be given before blasting occurs or how many trucks a day may rumble past their houses. As Dexter resident Arlen Markus so aptly put it, it amounts to “a say in how our community is destroyed.”

Initially, Lane County fined Lost Creek Rock Products for mining without a site review. The fines were appealed, and the case went before a hearings official. Dexter residents were allowed to testify but had no legal say in the case. After a confusing ruling by the official that required a site review for mining activity occurring within the 200-foot buffer zone but exempted mining imposed on the butte and its immediate surrounds, Dexter residents asked their elected officials to appeal the decision to the state Land Use Board of Appeals or to Circuit Court. But the right-wing majority on the Lane County Board of Commissioners, including the neighbors’ own representative, Faye Stewart, voted against this request.

Before the majority voted to block the appeal, Tea Party Libertarians and West Lane Commissioner Jay Bozievich chided the Dexter community, saying, “I believe that the hearings official has given you half a loaf right now,” and that this is more than the community deserves. He said Dexter should be happy with what it got. However, since the three mining advocates on the board believe that Lane County should take no enforcement action when trucks and mining machinery cut through the 200-foot buffer, the stark reality is that Dexter got nothing at all.

That’s not entirely true. Dexter got a harsh lesson in how Oregon’s land use planning goals can be subverted by big business interests. The first goal of Oregon’s land use program is “citizen involvement.” Dexter’s involvement has been to watch as Lost Creek Rock Products reaps huge profits by crushing a community heritage into a commodity. Neighbors have been awarded front-row seats to silently witness the removal of a historic landmark and cultural icon.

As soon as neighbors learned that Parvin Butte had been purchased from the railroad for $361,000, they explored the possibility of buying the property from the new owners. Deners and the McDougals said they’d let it go for $30 million.

Dexter-Lost Valley neighbors and their supporters are committed to demanding justice. Even if Parvin Butte is fully removed from Lane County, they will fight on, directing their energies to changing the political landscape until laws are drafted to ensure that communities are granted the legal right to defend themselves against callous corporate interests.

To help tell the story of Parvin Butte, the community of Dexter-Lost Valley is fighting the devastating mine with art. Artists have come forward to bear witness to an environmental issue in Lane County’s own backyard, the mining of Dexter’s Parvin Butte, a historical natural resource.

"Silent Witness: Parvin Butte, OR"

May 14, 6pm - 8pm: Opening reception, photographs by John Bauguess and Pete Helzer
May 16, 6pm - 8pm: Jazz musicians Don Latarshki and Friends
May 18, 7pm - 9pm: Closing reception and poetry reading by Cecelia Hagen, Carter McKenzie, Ingrid Wendt, Ralph Salisbury, Erik Muller and Anita Sullivan

Join us!
Maude Kerns Art Center
1910 East 15th Eugene
541 345-1571

VOLUNTEER
We need your help and expertise in this important effort to save this beautiful historic landmark. We are currently seeking volunteers to help by supporting the community’s participation in the decision-making process with Lane County and with Dexter-Lost Valley Community Association fundraising efforts to pay for legal services and expert witnesses needed to address the adverse impacts of this proposal.

DONATE
Visit us online to donate by PayPal or donations can be sent directly by mail to the Dexter-Lost Valley Community Association (DLVCA).
Please make checks payable to DLVCA.

FIND OUT MORE
Visit Maude Kerns Art Center May 14-18, and see for yourself the photographs of John Bauguess and Pete Helzer. Find us online at saveparvinbutte.org for more information and updates about the battle for Parvin Butte. Share the site with your friends

DLVCA PO BOX 89 DEXTER, OR 97431

saveparvinbutte.org