


BOULDER CRUSHES RED ROCKS; GARY LANE TO THE RESCUE

📅 June 10, 2020 (<https://basedontruth.com/boulder-crushes-red-rocks-gary-lane-to-the-rescue/>) 
admin (<https://basedontruth.com/author/admin/>)

The headline about the time an 80,000-ton boulder crushed part of Red Rocks Amphitheater in Morrison, Colo., was never written. Gary Lane, who managed Denver's eight sports and entertainment venues at the time, kept it quiet, an amazing feat that would not have been possible today.

Red Rocks was a gem among the venues he managed, turning a regular profit which helped fund operating budgets for the entire department.

Lane, who had started with the Denver venues in marketing after 10 years on the road with Feld Entertainment, had been in charge for about three years when he got a most unexpected call at 7 one morning, a month prior to the start of the amphitheater season. It was 1989.

Fred Leutzen, Red Rocks operations manager, was on the line.

"Gary, we have a problem. We've had a rock slide."

Luetzen was always understated, a stoic German, Lane said, laughing.

Red Rocks, which opened in 1941, is a unique theater, carved out of the rock structure it occupies, seating 9,525. There is a large, tilted, disc-shaped rock behind the stage, a huge vertical rock angled outwards from stage right, and several large outcrops angled outwards from stage left. In its 50 years, it had been rock solid.

Lane rushed up the mountain to Red Rocks and here's what he found. "We had an 80,000-ton boulder slide off of the north side of the hill and wipe out a concessions stand, close off a staircase and destroy half of a restroom. There were only two sets of restrooms at that time to begin with because it's a quite complicated place to build anything."

He and Luetzen started brainstorming their options.

"The only way to ascertain how deep the damage is is to get the obstruction out of the way. Any building manager can understand that. What are you dealing with?"

He called Denver's public works for advice. "We have a very confidential problem," he began. Lane had learned in his years as the first private manager (his department was an enterprise fund) in a government environment that you need to do everything you can within the confines of public practices.

"I needed to know from the city attorney if there were any companies under contract with the city that had done this kind of work," he said. They identified an independent company that had done demolition work for the city before. "It could have gotten complicated and sticky if we tried to go outside the construct of what the city already had. Purchasing directors that have to sign off on contracts would force you to buy the cheapest broomsticks out there and we'd go through 10 of 'em. Whereas, if you have the brains to buy one or two really good broomsticks, you'd never break them. You learn there are just simply purchasing rules in government."

"To be safe and understanding that, I tried to go through the city infrastructure first. I didn't have to bid it as an enterprise fund, but I didn't want it to be an issue, because I was spending a lot of money not in the budget. Then my job was to earn this back. It was an extra \$500,000 by the time we got done rebuilding what was destroyed. I had the opportunity to make it back based on my entire budget, eight different buildings. Shuckin' and jivin'."

To further complicate the situation, Red Rocks had to run its own water supply, and the cistern on the side of the mountain had drained dry because of the slide. Lane had already started trying to figure out how to get out of the water business and connect with the Morrison water supply, which was part of the state water system. It turns out that was still 10 years down the road. He had to figure a patch this round.

Meantime, there was this giant boulder and a bunch of other rocks that slid off the mountain and wiped out the north side of the stage area. Oh my god, oh my god.

"Fred, how come we didn't anticipate this?"

"Who would ever think a giant boulder buried in the earth could do that?"

“Who would?”

The structural engineers and rock people got to work. It cost almost \$200,000 just to jackhammer that rock and tear it out of there. They parked a big truck at the bottom of the staircase – half a staircase at that point — hooked it up to a conveyer belt and started moving rock out.

“Fred, what are we doing with this?”

“Hauling it out?”

“Why don’t we work on the parking lot. This is good rock base, you know.”

Some they used in the parking lot; some they took away.

After the big cleanup, the priority was getting the water and restroom operating. They didn’t even address the concessions stand that season.

Then the remaining rocks on the north side of the building were reinforced with nets, a lesser version than is usually used because Red Rocks is not as steep a canyon as going into Golden Gate Canyon State Park and they didn’t want the esthetics of Red Rocks to be destroyed. You can see through it; it’s painted the same color. What you could see more was the spikes holding the net down because it had to be pile-driven all the way down to bedrock. But that stabilized that whole side.

It took almost the full month to get back to reasonable operating status.

That was a major concern for Barry Fey, the regional promoter who booked the venue. He arrived on the scene the next day and immediately realized his risk was through the roof.

“What will I do? I’ve got this show and that show.”

“Barry, we’ll get it done, whatever it takes. I’m a Chuck Noll/Pittsburgh Steelers fan. Whatever it takes.”

“It’s all about execution. When you work for city government and have to deal with the hardcore private sector, you have to be creative about how you’re going to execute,” Lane said.

“I had to spend a bunch of money we didn’t have in the budget. ‘This has to be done, period; I don’t care. You can scream and yell all you want, but this is what I’m going to do. I’m an enterprise fund. My job is to be enterprising. And that’s what I’m going to do, dang it.’”

LESSONS LEARNED

“You learn you can’t take almost anything for granted,” Lane said.

As a result of that wake-up call from Mother Nature, Lane decided:

- We have to get out of running our own water system.
- We need to hire engineers every year to inspect all the rocks, everywhere around the amphitheater proper

and the parking areas.

- We need to hire Alpine Rescue for every event. They became a line item on the budget. Prior to the 1989 season, they had been called as needed, when some patron climbed out on a rock and got stuck. We needed a response team on site.

“The biggest thing I learned was **status quo is a problem**. Just because it’s status quo, you better start looking around for shit in my book. I start turning things over, looking around, saying now what, what’s next?”

He also used that experience to kickstart the masterplan he’d always meant to fund, organizing the committee of interested, vested parties that very year. They addressed all the problems he knew of and some he discovered after the slide.

Like the liquor license. There was none at Red Rocks when Lane got there. No legitimate liquor sales caused all sorts of patron problems, because people would sneak their alcohol in. “We didn’t have any enforcement capabilities because we didn’t have a liquor license,” Lane said.

Fey and Lane fought like dogs about that because Fey wanted money from the liquor sales.

Denied a cut, Fey took that opportunity to sic Mothers Against Drunk Driving on Lane for wanting to intoxicate their kids as they drive down the side of the mountain.

“I had to eventually call 9 News and say come up here. We picked a half-house event, 5,000 people or so. I wanted them to watch an egress. I made them do a video and I did a stand up. ‘Do you notice how many cars get to move out onto the two-lane highway from the snaking roads at Red Rocks? We’re lucky if people can go five miles per hour, with the state police controlling the exit so we can get as many out as possible as quickly as possible. We are not endangering your children, Denver. We are not.’”

It wasn’t unusual that Fey would come out against something, Lane said. “We could be the best of friends and worst of enemies. It was an adventure every day.”

He’ll never forget a classic conversation between Fey and Denver Mayor Webb.

“Do you know the longest one-way street in Denver, Mr. Mayor?”

“Well, I think it’s Cheyenne Place.”

“No it’s not; it’s Gary Lane.”

THE SILVER LINING

After they had cleared out the boulder and begun repairing upstairs, Lane went down to check out the entire lower level, to see if there was any further damage. When he entered the stars’ dressing rooms, he noticed stains on dry wall. Feeling a little like, what now?, he walked up and kicked it and it fell in.

Frustrated, he continued to pull the dry wall down and, lo and behold, he uncovered beautiful red rocks, just

like outside, behind the cheap, 1970s-era walls.

“So we tore out the entire backstage area at Red Rocks — dressing rooms, Green Rooms, catering areas. We stripped it all out.

“In the two main dressing rooms, the rocks were floor to ceiling. They had indentations. Right away, guitar players and singers would go up there and pick and grin. The rock was like a chair,” Lane said. Arena managers are always looking for something unique and memorable to delight and entice artists into coming back, preferring that venue. Lane had a built-in advantage with the rock-walled dressing rooms.

That is a silver lining to changes brought on by that wayward boulder. Red Rocks was a must play when Lane first came to Denver, but the year prior to the rock slide, 1988, Fiddler’s Green opened on the south side of metro Denver, in Greenwood Village. “All of a sudden we had to compete for everything because they could seat 18,000, and we could seat 9,500,” Lane remembers.

He used the backstage ambiance at Red Rocks against Fiddler’s Green.

“Esthetically your artist wants to play Red Rocks,” he would inform the agents. “If you need to make another \$500,000 for your artist because they have 8,000 more seats than we do, do it somewhere else. Don’t do it in Denver. Make a half a million in New York. Your fans don’t want to go to the other building.”

Sometimes, it worked. — *Based on a true story as told to Linda Deckard*

Photo Credit: Photo © Brian W. Schaller / License: CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

[\(https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)

📁 [Operations \(https://basedontruth.com/category/operations/\)](https://basedontruth.com/category/operations/), [Vignettes](https://basedontruth.com/category/vignettes/)

[\(https://basedontruth.com/category/vignettes/\)](https://basedontruth.com/category/vignettes/) 📌 [Amphitheaters](https://basedontruth.com/tag/amphitheaters/)

[\(https://basedontruth.com/tag/amphitheaters/\)](https://basedontruth.com/tag/amphitheaters/), [Gary Lane \(https://basedontruth.com/tag/gary-lane/\)](https://basedontruth.com/tag/gary-lane/), [Red](https://basedontruth.com/tag/red-rocks/)

[Rocks \(https://basedontruth.com/tag/red-rocks/\)](https://basedontruth.com/tag/red-rocks/). 🔗 [permalink \(https://basedontruth.com/boulder-crushes-red-rocks-gary-lane-to-the-rescue/\)](https://basedontruth.com/boulder-crushes-red-rocks-gary-lane-to-the-rescue/).

◀ [ALLEN JOHNSON ON SURVIVING THE NATIONAL SHAME OF THE ‘MUD BOWL’](https://basedontruth.com/allen-johnson-on-surviving-the-national-shame-of-the-mud-bowl/)

[\(https://basedontruth.com/allen-johnson-on-surviving-the-national-shame-of-the-mud-bowl/\)](https://basedontruth.com/allen-johnson-on-surviving-the-national-shame-of-the-mud-bowl/)

Leave a Reply

Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked *

Comment