

On the ROCK WALL



▲ Painters working for Michael Cooper of Murals & More began Monday to transform the concrete parapet walls along Highway 321 into "stone" walls. The large retaining walls on the opposite side of the road will receive a mottled paint effect that will help them blend into the background. For more on the project see story on page A5.

Candice Grimm/The Mountain Press

Artists transform concrete into stone along Highway 321

By **CANDICE GRIMM**

Staff Writer

GATLINBURG — The ugly concrete walls along Highway 321 were cause for much controversy, but the walls began “disappearing” Monday.

Thanks to the magic of a centuries-old painting technique known as Trompe L’oeil, the concrete parapet walls that had been painted with white primer since late last year are now starting to look like the real cut stone used throughout Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

The work is being done by 15 artists from across the country under the hands-on guidance of Michael Cooper, owner of a business called Murals & More in Franklin. Cooper was hired by the

Tennessee Department of Transportation to help beautify the parapet walls and large retaining walls built during a project to widen the highway.

“This is such an unusual project that they all wanted to be involved,” said Cooper of the group of artists. “They never get to work on projects of this scale.”

According to Cooper, the work requires an artist’s touch because, “You need an eye for balance, for realism. The painter needs to understand that if this were real stone, where would the light be coming from and where the shadows would be hitting. Everybody’s got some artistic ability.”

Because the work can be very tedious, Cooper said the painters are being treated to catered meals and twice-a-week massages while they are

here.

The painting, as well as the landscaping that will begin next fall in a raised median and in front of the retaining walls, was chosen as the best way to beautify and soften the impact of the walls while being more cost-effective than replacing them. The project was one of 15 in the state that came under review after Gov. Bredesen took office because of complaints that public input was ignored or not sought by TDOT officials in those projects.

The work will be completed in about a month, and Cooper said, “The beautiful thing about this is that we are using a silicate dispersion paint for concrete which is non-toxic, environmentally friendly, and it won’t fade or chip — ever.”