



PRESERVATION MATTERS

Park County Department of Heritage, Tourism & Community Development

On Stony Ground: The Fairplay Placer

by Jason O'Brien

Approaching Fairplay from the north along Hwy 9 many people notice the large mounds of gravel to the west. But many also may not give them another thought after passing by or might just think they are unsightly. But the terrain of the Fairplay Placer is a carefully engineered landscape far from the random piles of rocks some may take it as. Furthermore, the Fairplay placer embodies a history that is important to Fairplay, Park County, and Colorado as a whole.

In 2014, to better understand its history and the actual artifacts and engineering that make up the placer, the Park County Department of Heritage, Tourism & Community Development commissioned a study of the Fairplay Placer. The county hired Mountain States Historical (MSH), a firm with extensive expertise in mining resources, to conduct the study. MSH intensively surveyed the placer itself and did in-depth research. Rough research, setting the placer in its historical context, and the identification of the historical archaeology on the property, MSH evaluated the placer as eligible for the National Register of Historic Places in the report completed in 2016.

The property was first worked as a placer mine in 1859, making it one of the earliest mining sites in the state, and

continued to be worked nearly continuously until about 1910. In many ways the site illustrates the story of mining itself, beginning with optimistic individuals using simple pans, transitioning to rockers, sluice boxes, and then hydraulic mining. Each evolution demand more capital and resource inputs, which in turn demanded more organization and corporate consolidation. The property is also noteworthy because of the presence of Chinese miners.



Photo courtesy of Park Co. Local History Archives.

Chinese working in the Colorado mining districts were rare throughout the state's history. In 1874, the Fairplay Gold Mining Company hired a crew of Chinese laborers which created a rift in the Fairplay community. Despite the tensions the Chinese set up what became a sizable settlement across the river from town and took the Fairplay Placer to its heights of profitability. What makes the Chinese presence even more exceptional was the fact that the company leased the property directly to the Chinese in 1882. With a short interlude in the late 1880s the Chinese continued to directly lease the property until about 1900.



Photo courtesy of Park Co. Local History Archives.

Today, the Fairplay Placer is a valuable archaeological site. The placer contains a large collection of placer workings and tailings, feeder ditches, sluice beds, foundations of derrick platforms, remnants of worker housing and more. To have such extensive and high quality remains for a placer mine is unique not just in Colorado, but the country as a whole. Many have been repurposed or have new workings—such as seen on the north end of the Fairplay Placer—or were simply washed away by the streams and rivers that made placer mining possible in the first place.

The Fairplay Placer is a unique and significant historic resource that can contribute to the field of mining history

on a broad scale and provides a unique piece of community identity on the local level. The site provides great potential for future public education and interpretation of Park County's mining history.