



Historic dredge is last one standing in Colorado

Park County Historical Society meeting examines stalled project

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The Snowstorm Dredge still resides in its last resting place, along the Snowstorm Placer between Fairplay and Alma. Sept. 12, the Park County Historical Society hosted Jackie Powell and Gary Higgins, who discussed the past and the hopeful future of dredge.



Dig we must

The Snowstorm Dredge was the subject of a talk at the Park County Historical Society Sept. 12. The dredge is the last mining dredge still intact in Colorado. It sits on part of the Snowstorm Placer, between Fairplay and Alma. It is 50 feet wide, 86 feet long and 42 feet high and could process 10,000 cubic yards of gold-bearing gravel per day. It operated between 1942-48 (Photo courtesy of Jackie Powell and Gary Higgins).

Powell has a B.A. and a M.A. in anthropology and Higgins is an engineering geologist. Over the years, they have both been involved in preservation and restoration projects across Colorado. They are now retired and live in Salida.

Imagine a gold extracting device that is 50 feet wide, 86 feet long, 42 feet high and weighs 483 tons. That's a bit bigger than the average gold pan of 10 to 17 inches that was carried into the gold fields before Colorado was a state.

The dredge was a latecomer to the Colorado gold scene, designed to eke out the remaining gold in the placer, gold mixed in the layers of heavy stones and sand, hidden deep from a gold pan or small sluice.

“A gold dredge is a placer mining machine that floats in a pond of water,” Powell said. “It excavates gold-bearing gravels from the bottom of the pond and extracts the gold from the gravel.”

The Snowstorm Dredge used a bucket on a dragline, which was manipulated by a crane, dragging the bucket through the gravel and depositing the material in the dredge hopper.

“After being dumped into the hopper, the material is sorted using water,” Powell said. “The material is funneled into a steel rotating cylinder and carries away oversized material and dumps the rock behind the dredge.”

The cylinder is called a trommel and consists of holes of varying sizes. As the material moves through the rotating trommel, smaller material drops through the holes, taking with it the gold bearing sand and pebbles.

The material was then sent over sluices, which contained riffles that separated the gold. The rocks and gravel were expelled out of the back of the dredge in large piles called tailings.

The dredge was constructed in the 1930s by Bodinson Manufacturing Co. of San Francisco.

“Bodinson made dredges to fit the placer’s conditions,” Higgins said.

The dredge was installed at the placer in 1941. The Timberline Dredging Co. owned the placer and they designated the dredge as number two. Between 1942 and 1948 it only operated for about 16 months.

During 1975 and 1976 the dredge was fired up and used as a stationary plant, having the material brought to the dredge instead of floating it along the placer.

The Snowstorm Dredge is the only dredge that still exists in its entirety in Colorado. From 1997 to 2004, Powell and Higgins were involved in an effort to save the dredge.

“Many folks were involved in the project,” Powell said, “which at that time was to try to move the Snowstorm Dredge to South Park City.”

During the five years that Powell and Higgins work to try to relocate the dredge, then met

with numerous corporations, public agencies, nonprofits and other interested parties. All in all they raised \$22,000, which still sits in a bank account.

They even secured a seven-acre site just north of South Park City from the town of Fairplay.

Everything was in place to purchase the dredge and move it to its new home when the company who owns the placer site and the dredge changed its mind on the price. The price went from around \$65,000 to \$2 million.

“So, things ground to a halt,” Powell said.

Powell and Higgins would still like to see the dredge purchased, moved and then restored but interest has waned. The banked money is held by the PCHS and the property is available. All that’s needed is the dredge.

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