

THE FLUME

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South Park City leaps into the
20th Century By Laura Van Dusen
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The Dredge Office is lifted by crane over the South Park City sign on Nov. 15, 2017. (Photo by Laura Van Dusen)



History of dredging in South Park is displayed in detail inside the former South Park Dredging Company office at South Park City. (Photo by Laura Van Dusen)

South Park City Museum in Fairplay is an authentic re-creation of an 1880s Colorado boomtown. Most of its structures and exhibits range in time from 1859 to about 1890. With its new Dredge Office exhibit, the museum timeline has expanded into the 1940s.

Gold dredging was a huge part of Fairplay and South Park history, according to Erin Pulsipher, curator of the museum. And that's why, when the former Dredge Office of South Platte Dredging Company was donated to the museum by owner and area resident Amanda Woodbury, it was decided that the exhibits inside would represent South Park's dredging history.

On display are photos and mementos from the three gold dredges that historically operated in the area, predominantly in the 1940s and 1950s. The largest was the South Platte Dredge, also called the Fairplay Dredge; its site was near the turn-off from U.S. Highway 285 to Hartsel on the southern jog of Colorado Highway 9 south of Fairplay.

Also displayed is information on the Snowstorm Dredge, which operated near Alma, and the Gravel Gertie Dredge (named after a character in Dick Tracy comics), operated by the Cooley

Brothers. It was used to extensively dredge Tarryall Creek northwest of Como, leaving no trace of the former gold rush towns of Hamilton and Tarryall City.

Also included in the Dredge Office is a display of Depression era glass once used as tableware by the workers on the Gravel Gertie. There are plates, bowls and serving dishes all donated by Linda Baker, whose family worked for Cooley Brothers.

In April 1941, her father, L. L. (Benny) Baker hauled the Gravel Gertie in pieces on a 1939 Ford truck from Chillicothe, Mo. to Como, where it was reassembled. Linda Baker's grandmother, Gertrude, was the cook for workers on the dredge. Gertrude was also a collector of Depression glass, and it is part of her collection that is displayed in the Dredge Office.

According to the website for the National Depression Glass Association, the tableware was called Depression glass because the pieces were made during the Great Depression and in the decade beyond the Depression. During those years, the market for fine crystal diminished as the economy dropped. Glass manufacturers started making cheaper versions of their dishes.

They were distributed free in sacks of flour and oats and other food containers, or given away at gas stations and other retailers. They were typically pastel colors and were made to last. The set on display in the Dredge Office is amber colored.

The Dredge Office was built about 1941 on the land from where it was moved, on a triangular lot bordering Colorado 9 directly across U.S. 285 from Prather's Market in Fairplay. Two other buildings are still on that land, a shed and a rock and steel building that was historically

used for gold retorting. (Retorting is the process of vaporizing the mercury that was used to separate gold from gravel. After retorting, only pure gold is left.) The three buildings, along with a group of about ten worker's homes, comprised the headquarters of the South Platte Dredging Company.

The Dredge Office was moved to South Park City on Nov. 15, 2017. It was driven slowly up Fairplay's Main Street on a flatbed trailer and then lifted over the South Park City sign by Breckenridge Crane Service, said Harley Hamilton, president of the museum's Board of Directors. The crane operator placed the Dredge Office on its new foundation on the museum grounds. Fairplay police officers escorted the movers through town and public works employees provided temporary side street closures.

South Park City has room for only one more structure on its grounds, said Hamilton in the March 25 edition of PBS's "Colorado Experience" about the museum. That structure will be South Park Dredge's retort building and will depict the town jail. No date has been set for the move.