

Restoration of historic South Pass City gold mine takes shape



State parks and Abandoned Mine Lands officials stand near the massive ore crusher in the old mill house at the Carissa Mine site in South Pass City. The mill house and other structures at the historic mine are being renovated by the state. Photo by JEFF GEARINO, Star-Tribune.



Carissa Mine project engineer Brenton Leavitt (right) and other state officials walk underneath the newly constructed trestle that runs to the refurbished gold mine's mill house (background) during a recent tour of the facility. Photo by JEFF GEARINO, Star-Tribune.

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SOUTH PASS CITY -- Picture yourself, if you will, as a big chunk of relatively worthless rock lying several hundred feet underground beneath the sagebrush-strewn hills of South Pass in the southern Wind River Mountains.

Suddenly, about a century ago, you're hacked from a hole in the ground, placed in a huge metal bucket, lifted to the surface, placed in a wheeled coal bin and pushed by hand across a rickety wooden tram to a nearby mill house.

Once in the mill, you're crushed, powdered, fed into tanks with water and cyanide, then circulated from agitator tanks to settling tanks for several days. Finally, what's left of your solution is passed over zinc filings, and presto: You're gold!

It won't be long before visitors to historic South Pass City will be able to trace the course of that former ore production from start to finish at the newly renovated Carissa gold mine.

"That's our goal ... to develop a walking path and basically allow people to follow the ore and get that feel of what it was really like to experience the milling process as it would have been in the 1930s," South Pass City State Historic Site Superintendent Joe Ellis said.

He said when restoration is completed on the \$3 million project in the next few years, the Carissa will provide visitors with "the missing picture" of South Pass City's history and culture.

"This will be a great, great addition to this historical site," Ellis said during a recent tour of the project.

"The Carissa Mine, like South Pass City itself, was Wyoming's first real boom and bust community," he said. "The actual mine is probably one of the oldest in the state."

South Pass City sprang up during a gold rush in 1867-68 in the area next to the famous crossing of the Continental Divide by the Oregon Trail that gave the city its name. Its glory days were over by the early 1870s, but some gold mining continued.

The Carissa Mine was the chief mine at South Pass City and served as the main economic engine for the tiny mining community for nearly 80 years. The mine is located about two miles south of State Highway 28 south of Lander.

For the past few years, the state has been working to stabilize and restore the Carissa Mine as part of a four-phase project spearheaded by a unique partnership between the South Pass City State Historic Site and the Abandoned Mine Lands Division of the Department of Environmental Quality.

Dominic Bravo with the State Parks and Cultural Resources Division said one aim of the project is to "leave a legacy and honor" the rich history of South Pass City.

"Cultural heritage tourism -- that's the buzzword," Bravo said. "We want this to be a fulcrum point of South Pass City ... something we can showcase that ties the legacy we have here to future generations."

'Amazing thing'

In 2003, the state of Wyoming bought the 201-acre Carissa Mine site through funding allocated by the Legislature.

With the mine came nine historic structures and 17 significant mine features in what some consider one of the most complete and unspoiled historic mine complexes in the country.

"It was an amazing thing for the state to be able to purchase this site," Ellis said. The AML Division began hazardous material cleanup work at the mine in 2004.

Ellis said although some of the features at the Carissa site date to as early as the 1870s, the South Pass City historic site aims to restore the Carissa mill house and hoist house to their 1929 appearance, a period that represents the last significant modernization of the mine facility.

The work includes refurbishing the 1929 head frame, hoist house and shaft house, which moved miners and ore from underground to the surface, and rehabilitation and reconstruction of the huge mill house.

Ellis said the head frame, shaft house and trestle served as a critical transportation link between the mine's operating shaft -- where the ore was extracted from a mine shaft known as the "glory hole" -- and the mill house, where the ore was crushed and gold recovered.

Historically, ore was hoisted from the mine to surface cars at the head frame. The shaft house was used to sort the ore and direct the cars to the trestle. Once it was loaded on the trestle, a worker pushed the car across the trestle's 400-foot span into the mill house.

"The path of the ore basically follows gravity ... Mother Nature brought it down to the next step in the process," Ellis said.

The trestle was replaced with a more modern conveyor belt in the late 1940s, while the original head frame and shaft house were destroyed in the 1980s. Workers removed the remains of the conveyor, which had collapsed, in 2005 as part of the project.

Ellis said estimates of the amount of gold mined and processed over the lifetime of the Carissa Mine vary between 60,000 ounces of gold at the low end to 180,000 ounces at the high end.

"It was most likely around 100,000 ounces or a little more," he said. Ellis noted gold sold for around \$39 per ounce in 1929 and fluctuates around \$800 an ounce today.

Workers have laid out pathways, placed railings, cemented floors and taken other measures to carve out the walking path.

Ellis said he hopes to begin offering guided tours when the site eventually opens to the public.

"The next big step will be to approach the Legislature for the funding of an interpretive center and to replace some missing pieces of equipment (in the mill and shaft houses), plus hooking up some basic infrastructure work such as electric, water and sewer," he said.

"We got a tremendous knee-up on the project with the help of the AML, but the next step will have to come with help from (lawmakers)," Ellis said. "Our ultimate goal is to have a really nice interpretive center where the tour can start."

"But that's probably four or five years down the road," Ellis said. "Right now, we think we've got a good start on a pretty bright and exciting future with this project."

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