

May 9, 2014

Board of County Commissioners approve South Park City nomination to National Register of Historic Places

By Lynda James, Correspondent theflume.com

The nomination of the South Park City Museum to the National Register of Historic Places as a historical district will be heard by the Colorado Historic Preservation Review Board on May 16 at the History Colorado Center in Denver.

The Park County Commissioners approved the nomination at its May 1 meeting.

If approved by the Colorado Review Board, the nomination will be submitted to the National Park Service for final approval and listing on the national register.

South Park National Heritage Area partnered with Abbey Christman of the Center of Preservation Research, University of Colorado Denver and her college students to prepare the nomination.

Information for this story was taken from the nomination packet that describes each building and other structures, construction date, location, original use and if it was converted to a different use as part of the museum and when each became part of the museum.

South Park City has 50 buildings, structures and objects, of which 38 qualify for the national nomination.

Two buildings were previously listed in 1974, the South Park Brewery and the Summer Saloon.

Both, built in the late 1800s, are two of the 13 museum buildings that are at their original locations. All were built after an 1873 fire that destroyed much of Fairplay.

Four other buildings were listed as Park County Historical Landmarks in 2009 and

are also in their original locations. They are the Mayer House, the Burro Room and Transportation Shed, the Wagon Barn and the Smoke House.

Eight buildings were moved from their original location in Fairplay to the outdoor museum when it was constructed between 1957 and 1966.

The rest of the historical buildings were moved from other places in Park County extending from the London Mine area to the Buckskin Joe town site, other nearby old mining towns and Alma.

Some came from the Garo town site south of Fairplay on State Highway 9, the Tarryall Valley area and Lake George.

A few buildings and structures, such as the mine tunnel and the Diorama building, were constructed on-site to help portray life in the heyday of mining in Park County.

Some of the historical buildings, such as the Father Dyer Chapel and the first Park County Courthouse from Buckskin Joe, don't qualify for inclusion because they were moved to South Park City after its original construction period from 1957 to 1966.



Historic courthouse

The first Park County Courthouse was incorporated into South Park City in 1978. Here it is being moved into the museum. It was built in 1862 at Buckskin Joe, the first county seat. Behind it are the Bank of Alma (1870) and the J.M. Merriam Drugstore Store

(1880) from Alma. Both were incorporated into South Park City in 1858 before the grand opening in 1959. South Park City's nomination to the National Register of Historic Places as a mid-20th century outdoor museum will be heard by the Colorado Historic Preservation Review Board on May 16. If approved, the nomination will be sent to the national Park Service for final approval. (Photo courtesy of Amy Unger, Park County Preservation Planner)

The national nomination evaluates the significance of South Park City as an outdoor museum for the time frame of 1957 to 1966 when first constructed.

South Park City was the vision of Leon Snyder, a Colorado Springs attorney who owned a ranch in South Park and saw historic buildings throughout the county falling apart, burned during fires or being vandalized.

Snyder and local historian Edward Baer decided that the only way to preserve the local mining history and buildings in the county was to bring them all to one location where they could be protected and shown to the public.

Two blocks at the north end of Front Street in Fairplay were chosen as the future site of South Park City because it had been a prominent commercial district during the 1800s.

Of the thirteen historical buildings onsite, only the Mayer house was still in use at the time of purchase.

Snyder organized the local community and some prominent Colorado businessmen and politicians to create the outdoor museum.

Snyder provided the leadership and most of the funding as well as founding the South Park Historical Society and South Park Historical Foundation in 1957.

Snyder's vision to create an authentic mining town museum was designed by Colorado Springs architect Edward Bunts

and completed in 1966 with the purchase of a narrow gauge train engine.



Historic train

A narrow gauge railroad train in South Park City became part of the museum in 1963. The letters D.S.P. P.R.R. stand for Denver, South Park and Pacific Railroad that ran from Denver to the mining areas in northern Park County and beyond. Later it brought vacationers to the county from the Denver area. Its last run through Park County was in 1937. The train is part of the contributing structures for South Park City's nomination to the National Register of Historic Places. Park County commissioners approved the nomination on May 1. (Photo by Linda Balough, Park County Historic Preservation director)

The engine was purchased from a company in Guatemala because Snyder could not locate one in the United States.

Other railroad cars were purchased from the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad.

Snyder enlisted Park County residents to provide artifacts to furnish the buildings and 40,000 were donated. Items for the drug store were bought at an auction in Westcliffe, Colo.

Local residents also provided the volunteer labor to construct the museum, complete with boardwalks and hitching posts.

Three main areas are represented at the museum, a typical mid-to-late 1800s mining town, a transportation area and a mining area.

The transportation area has a wagon barn, fifty feet of narrow gauge railroad track and

train, water tower and a building honoring the role of burros in mining and also a collection of early vehicles.

The mining area has a tunnel, a mill and mine gallows, which held a cable and pulleys used to pull ore buckets from a mine shaft.

South Park City's opening in 1959 before it was finished coincided with Colorado's 1859 gold rush centennial celebration called Rush to the Rockies and the centennial of the founding of Fairplay.

Rush to the Rockies was a year-long statewide celebration that was highly advertised throughout the United States and other countries.

The opening season of South Park City was a huge success with 16,000 visitors.

The museum received national press in newspapers and magazines. In 1960, South Park City received an Award of Merit from the Association of State and Local History.

The museum was nominated for the award by the president of the Colorado Historical Society and presented at the Society's 80th annual meeting.

South Park City was very different from the theme parks of the mid-1900s in that it was never commercialized as a "tourist trap" for making money.

Snyder's original vision was a museum and educational site depicting the life and culture of a mining town and it still is today.

South Park City is open daily from May 15 to October 15. Living History Days occurs each year in August.

More of its history and events can be located at www.southparkcity.org