

SAN JUAN BASIN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Chapter of Colorado Archaeological Society



FIELD TRIP REPORT

Date: **June 2 - 4, 2017**

Destination: **Uranium Mining and Milling in Western Colorado**

Leaders: **Janice Sheftel**

Number of Participants: **5**

Five SJBAS members experienced the exceptional hospitality of Jane Thompson and her sister Sharon, both members of the Rimrocker Historical Society (RHS), and enjoyed a fascinating and extremely well-organized weekend. On Friday, the group met at the Rimrocker Hotel for a tour of the Uravan townsite, where Jane and her sister grew up. The town has been demolished and lands reclaimed, as those who attended Jane's talk at the April SJBAS meeting are aware. We visited the hill where the Uravan airport was to locate the buildings of the prior town with old photos. We visited the ball park, of which the RHS has recently acquired ownership and which RHS members maintain. Camping is allowed and donations accepted. RHS received a \$100,000 grant to begin restoration of the old Uravan boarding house. However, just before the UMETCO corporation was to turn over ownership of the building to RHS, the company burned it down for fear of liability.

We then visited the hanging flume – a true wonder. Built in the 1880's over a three-year period, it stretched ten miles in an open ditch and then in a wooden flume attached to the vertical sandstone walls of the Dolores River Canyon. The ditch and flume were to deliver water under pressure to a placer mining site where the water would be used to wash gold from the placer deposits. Unfortunately, the gold was too fine to be recovered in this manner and the flume fell into disuse. Where possible, locals retrieved lumber from the flume for housing. That night, after dinner at the Rimrock Hotel, we visited the Naturita community economic development building to watch a video on the flume's history and the story of the recent reconstruction of a portion of the flume. Naturita is losing several hundred jobs with the closing of a coal mine and processing facility and the community business start-up facility was established to broaden the community's economic base.

On Saturday, we visited the Rimrocker Museum in Naturita sponsored by RHS, with fascinating exhibits from Naturita's history. Naturita started in in 1880's as a farming community. (Naturita in Spanish means Little Nature.) Originally, miners came to the area looking for gold. but it was too fine to capture easily. As a natural crossroads, Naturita came to be a supply center for freighters transporting supplies and ore between the mines and the railroad in Placerville. We then carpoled, together with Jane's sister and the Naturita development director, to travel for the day tour of the Long Park mining trail. We each had a brochure of the tour sites prepared by RHS for a national Historic Mining Association conference, which took the same day-long tour last year. In the Paradox Valley, we saw one intact and one partial coke oven of the original five now

in the yard of the Coke Oven Ranch, which still uses the original rock ranch house. The ovens supplied coal coke to the Cashin Copper Mine. When Standard Chemical Company bought the Ranch in 1910, it became company headquarters and a small community of living quarters for administrators and workers.

Next, we traveled along Highway 90 from where we spotted numerous uranium mines in the Morrison Formation. At a scenic overlook, we had a great view of the La Sal Mountains at one end of the Paradox Valley, and Lone Cone and the San Juan Mountains at the other.

We saw many mining roads; stopped at old mine sites with such names as the Popcorn Claims, the Firecracker Claims, and 22 Long Park Claims; visited mining sites which had remaining chutes and hoists; saw mining reclamation sites, including inclines with grills to allow bats free access to and from the sites; stopped at old mine town sites, even picnicking at one with lots of scattered artifacts; and saw two sites with long-abandoned cars. We also drove along the Dolores River to view the Hanging Flume and see the reconstructed part. On Saturday night, we ate dinner with Jane and Sharon and their husbands at the local hangout in Nucla and did a brief tour of the town. On Sunday, Jane was kind enough to take just two of us to visit several nearby petroglyph sites. To make sure the sites were accessible, Jane and her husband drove over after dinner on Saturday night to check out the areas. Since we could visit only two sets of petroglyph panel areas, and there are lots more, we hope we can arrange a future field trip with the local BLM archaeologist. Jane really went out of her way to ensure we had a wonderful trip.

- by Janice Sheftel

Participants: Janice Sheftel, Joel Arnold, Bob Powell, Peggy Morris and Dennis Lopez