

SAN JUAN BASIN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Chapter of Colorado Archaeological Society



FIELD TRIP REPORT

Date: **July 21, 2016**

Destination: **Lewis Mill Hike and Tour**

Leader: **Lyle Hancock**

Number of Participants: **10**

On July 21st, ten SJBAS members joined our intrepid guide and Telluride historian Rudy Davison for a 4.4-mile hike to the Lewis Mine and mill in the upper reaches of Bridal Veil Basin. We drove up the Black Bear Pass road to the Bridal Veil Falls power station where we turned around at the last switchback before the road becomes one-way. From this scenic spot at 10,300 feet we began our hike to the mine.

Rudy is truly a wealth of knowledge about the history of Telluride and all the mines in the area, and he knows his wildflowers and geology, too! We paused often to discuss various historic mining structures, check out the minerals in rocks along the road, and appreciate the incredible bounty of high country wildflowers that were at their peak. After hiking a couple of hours we reached the alpine basin of Bridal Veil Creek where the scenery was truly breathtaking. At this point we had some weather moving in, but we



were still dry. As the mill came into view the lighting started to pop and we hurried to reach a cabin next to the mill that is often left unlocked to offer shelter for visitors. When the mine was operating, several miners lived at this cabin. Now we were at 12,448 feet! After lunch in the cabin, Rudy showed us around and we toured the mill which has been partially restored and is now owned by San Miguel County. The mine was never profitable, but they sure spent a lot of money trying. It was amazing how much equipment the miners had hauled in to build the mill and work the mine. The headframe had toppled over, but the mill building and machinery were mostly intact. In spite of a few hand rails, walking through the mill and up and down precarious stairways seemed pretty treacherous. This would not be a place for children!

The Lewis Mill was built circa 1907, but the mine and mill operated for only three years. The mine complex consisted of a mine portal, a triple/tram house, the five-story mill, a bunkhouse and business office. The mill was powered by electricity from the Smuggler-Union Hydroelectric Power Plant at Bridal Veil Falls and it is an outstanding example of all timber-frame construction. The technology and equipment used in the mill mark the transition from stamp mill technology to full chemical flotation. The Lewis Mill is the only remaining transitional mill in Colorado to retain its original milling equipment, as its remote location prevented World War II metal salvage programs from scavenging the original machinery.



Colorado Preservation, Inc. (CPI) promotes historic preservation statewide. In 1998, CPI listed the Lewis Mill in its Most Endangered Places Program. Over the next few years CPI formed partnerships with the Idarado Mining Company, the mine's owner, the towns of Telluride and Mountain Village, San Miguel County, and the Colorado Historical Society that resulted in stabilization efforts commencing in August, 2001.

The \$125,000 project reconstructed structural framing members and re-established the roof sheathing. A helicopter was used to bring in the necessary construction materials. In addition to stabilizing the whole structure

and roof, the interior was cleaned up, flooring was restored and handrails installed so visitors could tour the mill safely. In 2009, the mill and mining complex were placed on both the Colorado State Register of Historic Places and the National Register of Historic Places. Recently, Idarado Mining Company conveyed ownership of the mill to San Miguel County.

Suggestions if trip is repeated: This is a long hike and it made for a very long day. Participants had to eat dinner along the way home and some did not get home until 10:00 p.m. It may be best to combine this with another hike or event in the Telluride area and plan to camp or stay in a motel.

Prepared by: Lyle Hancock

Participants: Rudy Davison, MaryAnne Nelson, Michael Moravan, Chris Merlier, Tish and Pete Varney, Cathy and Jim Callahan, Sherry Suenram, Rege Leach, and Lyle Hancock