

Plaster, gun threat, pots and pans add to colorful history of Devil's Backbone

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Remains of a gypsum quarry are visible from the parking lot of the Devil's Backbone Open Space west of Loveland. Larimer County has been looking at historic buildings and ruins on some of their open spaces and parks. (Pamela Johnson / Loveland Reporter-Herald)

Did you know?

- Two disasters destroyed two versions of the plaster mill that was operated on what is now the Devil's Backbone — a fire in 1906 and a flood in 1965 that closed the mill for good.
- Half of the mill appears on a historic registers with owner Alfred Wild's house because the boundaries listed in the application were incorrect and split the remains of the mill's foundation in half.
- There are still visible signs of the quarries that fed the gypsum mill. The initial quarry can be seen from the open space parking lot, and the second larger one can be seen from the road nearby. That included a deposit that was 24-feet thick.
- In 1888, a news account stated that 40,000 tons of plaster had been mined and processed through the mill, with two railroad cars filled with product daily.

Just to the left of the main trail at the Devil's Backbone — an area rich in wildlife, recreation and history — the trail veers along the cement foundation of an old plaster mill.

The mill, one of the first in Colorado, helped develop an industry that became key to Loveland, to the building trades and to the medical business.

And it started with a curious landowner, his wife's pots and pans and an irrigation ditch through his farm.

"We knew we had some colorful history," said resource specialist Meegan Flenniken, who is involved in Larimer County Department of Natural Resource's effort to document historic buildings and ruins on four of its properties.

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But they didn't know how colorful until historian Ron Sladek of Fort Collins dug into pictures, newspaper, records and archives. (See the Aug. 28 Outpost section for what he found out about Hermit Park just outside Estes Park.)



Historian Ron Sladek of Fort Collins looks at copies of historic photos of Alfred Wild's plaster mill that operated on the land that is now the Devil's Backbone Open Space west of Loveland. (Pamela Johnson / Loveland Reporter-Herald)

One of the most interesting chapters for Flenniken was that of Alfred Wild, who was a farmer and industrialist who lived and made a living on the site that is now the 2,663-acre Devil's Backbone west of Loveland.

"Wild was not only a prominent farmer here he was also an industrialist, a pioneering industrialist," said Sladek.

And, according to Sladek's report, he also embodied a bit of the Wild West when he tried to settle a dispute by storming a board meeting with a shotgun.

History of the site dates back to the dinosaur times, but, a snapshot of about 75 years over two centuries captures the gypsum mine and plaster mill that operated from the late 1880s until 1965.

Wild, who secured from his brother the land on which the mill was developed, farmed wheat, vegetables and fruit trees on the property.

Because of the dry nature of the habitat, farmers in that area relied on irrigation. When the Loudon Ditch was being built through Wild's property, the ditch diggers encountered a problem — soft, white soil that soaked up the water, according to Sladek. That problem became an opportunity that led to thousands of tons of plaster and thousands of dollars in profit.

Wild surmised the substance might be gypsum, which is used to make plaster of Paris, a popular building material that at that time was most commonly imported from Nova Scotia.

To test it, he pulverized a sample, heated it and turned it into a fine powder in his home, using his wife's pots and pans.

He sent the sample to Brown University and to industries that used plaster for feedback.

"Instead of ideas to change, they came back with orders," Sladek said.

Wild began to mine gypsum and turn it into plaster on site, feeding a new and growing industry with a product used for construction, art, decoration and ultimately medical casts, and that is still used today.

At one point, Wild entered into a contract with Consolidated Plaster Co. to combine his mill and another nearby. He was named vice president, but became unhappy with how the operation was running and, in 1902, decided to act, leading to what became one of the costliest legal battles in Colorado.

"He walked into a board of directors meeting with a shotgun and said he was taking it back," said Sladek, noting that this is true and not just legend.

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"It appears that it really happened. There were newspaper accounts of it. He was mad. He was really mad."

Wild's actions resulted in an armed standoff at the mill, multiple lawsuits that wound their way to the Colorado Supreme Court and his refusal to follow at least one order that awarded possession of the mill to Consolidated, according to Sladek's historical report.

At the height of litigation, the company had three suits filed and asked for more than \$200,000 in damages.

After a 10-year battle during which Wild operated the mill and collected the profits, they settled with Wild, paying \$37,500 plus \$1,600 in court costs to retain ownership of the mill, according to Sladek. Records say both sides spent more than \$13,000 in legal fees, making it one of the most expensive battles in history at the time.

Wild continued to operate the mill for just under another decade — less time than the lawsuit lasted — before he sold it to U.S. Gypsum in 1919.

The company continued to operate the mill until a flood washed through on June 17, 1965. The cement foundation is all that remains just off the parking lot of the Devil's Backbone, blending into a majestic landscape and offering an outline of how the mill was laid out and operated.

"It's an important place to Loveland's heritage," Sladek said.

And now its foundations are a piece of one of Larimer County's most popular open spaces where hikers, runners and cyclists hit the trail year-round.

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Historian Ron Sladek, who documented the history of four Larimer County open spaces, stands on the foundation of a plaster mill that operated for nearly 75 years on property that is now the Devil's Backbone. Two renditions of the mill were destroyed by disaster — the first a fire in 1906 and the second a flood in 1965. (*Pamela Johnson /Loveland Reporter-Herald*)

Larimer County workers get national notice

By Reporter-Herald Staff

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FORT COLLINS — A handful of Larimer County employees earned four honors for print, radio and video projects from the National Association of County Information Officers.

The awards were given out in July, but the county commissioners celebrated them at their weekly administrative matters meeting on Tuesday.

An excellence award went to now-retired Budget Director Bob Keister as well as Senior Budget Analyst Cheryl Miget and County Information Officer Deni LaRue for a four-page document that highlights where county revenues come from and on what they are spent.

The county also garnered three meritorious awards:

- Board Chairman Lew Gaiter, Assistant County Manager Neil Gluckman, Business Operations Coordinator Michelle Bird and Senior Business Process Analyst Daniel Pace for a short video called "Larimer is a Wonderful County," which looks at what life would be like without county services.
- Heather Young, natural resources education specialist, for the 20-page junior ranger guide, which is full of activities and information to teach children about Larimer County's parks and open spaces.
- LaRue for her monthly radio program called Community at Work, which features different county programs, which is available on a local public radio station (88.9 FM) as well as by podcast on the county website.