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Mount Harris townsite preserved in conservation easement

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The 88-acre site of the former coal town of Mount Harris east of Hayden, including some 1.3 miles along the Yampa River, is now preserved in a conservation easement through the Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust.

CCALT/Courtesy photo

Land along the Yampa River east of Hayden that was once home to the coal mining town of Mount Harris, with some 1,300 residents, is now preserved in a conservation easement through the Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust.

Laurel Watson, curator of the Hayden Heritage Center, praised the announcement of the conservation measure.

"It's wonderful to preserve our land as a way to preserve our heritage," Watson said. "It's such an important part of our history in the development of Routt County."

According to Watson, Mount Harris, where 63 buildings were auctioned off in May 1958, is one of four former coal mining towns stretching from Milner to Hayden that were once home to some 2,000 people in the towns of McGregor, Coal View and Bear River that are now on private land.

The conservation of the 88-acre Mount Harris townsite was accomplished through a partnership among the landowners Karen and Richard Whitney, CCALT, Upper Yampa Habitat Partnership Program, Keep It Colorado and The Nature Conservancy, said Amber Pougiales, assistant director of external relations for CCALT, which has a satellite office in Steamboat Springs.



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Mount Harris was founded in 1914 when the Colorado-Utah Coal Co. acquired the land for a coal mining venture. Brothers George and Byron Harris developed the town into one of most populous communities in Routt County, according to a CCALT news release.

The Hayden Heritage Center hosted a pioneer picnic called Mount Harris Day in July at the actual site, with 145 people in attendance, including former employees, residents and local history enthusiasts. Watson currently is creating four or five new interpretive panels about Mount Harris to add to the existing roadside pull-off area to help people understand the impact of the town on the culture and economy of the region.

“Miners and their families from the U.S., Mexico, Italy, Greece, eastern Europe and England worked in the three mines in the area and resided in Mount Harris,” according to CCALT. “Most of the business district was comprised of a large sandstone building, which contained the mining office, a general store, drug store, pool hall, barber shop and post office. The town boasted three churches, three boarding houses, a community center for dances and movies and a two-story bandstand.”

As the mines began to close and the population diminished, the entire town was dismantled. Houses and mining equipment were sold and moved across the region. Only some foundations, clearings and a bridge remain to outline the town’s history, Watson said. The auctioned homes from Mount Harris were relocated largely to Hayden and Craig and some to Steamboat and rural Routt County, Watson said.

Emily Katzman, executive director of Historic Routt County, said the relocation sites of about half of the 63 Mount Harris buildings have been identified through a group research project among Historic Routt County, Hayden Heritage Center and graduate students in architecture and historic preservation from the University of Colorado Denver. The original records from the auction sales were lost in a fire. Individuals are asked to submit information about relocated Mount Harris buildings at HistoricRouttCounty.org/mtharris.

The former townsite encompasses important agricultural, wildlife and scenic values that will be protected in perpetuity by the new conservation easement, according to CCALT. The acreage includes open meadows, sagebrush rangeland and a forested riparian and wetland corridor along 1.3 miles of the Yampa River. The property supports modest summer grazing and beekeeping operations, as well as provides big game habitat for mule deer, elk and moose.

The property provides “great bird habitat, sustaining critical species, such as bald eagle, golden eagle, sandhill crane and Columbian sharp-tailed grouse,” according to CCALT. The section is home to river otters, rainbow, brown and cutthroat trout and is a popular float-fishing corridor.

“It is important to preserve this site for a number of reasons, from ensuring the natural habitat for our diverse wildlife to preserving our historical heritage and sense of place and continuity in the face of an ever-changing world. Mount Harris was a community that no longer exists; however, it was a part of our past, our history and the families who were a part of that history and the development of Routt County,” Watson said, noting the Hayden Heritage Center Museum also provides an exhibit on Mount Harris.

The curator of the Hayden Heritage Center is preparing more interpretative panels for installation next summer at the Mount Harris roadside pull-off area.

Laurel Watson/Courtesy photo

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