

Redstone coke ovens return to former glory

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Janet Urquhart The Aspen Times

REDSTONE – More than a century ago, bricklayers were summoned from Denver to Redstone to construct what was to be the largest coking plant in Colorado. Now, a handful of masons from Denver are returning some of Redstone’s historic coke ovens to their former glory.

Keeping close tabs on their progress is the tiny community of Redstone, south of Carbondale, and curious passersby on adjacent Highway 133. Already, a couple of the beehive-shaped ovens leap from the crumbling row, their rebuilt facades standing in stark contrast to the deteriorating brick of the untouched ovens with their and dark, jagged openings.



Today’s masons are working with old, recovered firebricks from the site to the extent they can. Bricks that migrated into town are turning back up at the restoration site, and others have been recovered from inside the excavated kilns, as has stone that is being used to rebuild the wall that fronts a long row of ovens.

Construction of 100 ovens began in 1899; in all, more than 200 were built over several years, according to F. Darrell Munsell’s “From Redstone to Ludlow.”

The ovens aren’t uniformly constructed, according to lead mason Bernie Fanelli, heading up the crew from Building Restoration Specialties, or BRS, of Denver. Different styles were built and even ovens of the same design don’t match up, he said.

Still, he can’t fault the work of his predecessors. The ovens are still standing, after all.

“I’m sure they could have had three of these built by the time we’ve stabilized three of them,” he said.

BRS is a subcontractor on the project, which also involves Boulder-based design/engineering firm JVA Inc., and Evergreen construction contractor TC2 Inc.

The masonry project began in late April and will continue into October. Four of the ovens will be restored to their original appearance – two of them are nearly there now – and an additional 56 of them will be stabilized to prevent additional deterioration. Others will be left as they are, a testament to the march of time since the days when Redstone first rose to prominence as a coal town.

Work on the ovens has been a long time in coming, according to Ron Sorter, a local resident and Redstone Historical Society member who helped bring the oven site into the public’s hands.

Formerly the property of Mid-Continent Resources Inc., which also owned much of the property in Coal Basin, where the mines were located, the strip of land containing the ovens was identified for a potential convenience store in a liquidation plan for Mid-Continent’s assets, Sorter recalled.

“At that time (1995) there was only one gas station between Paonia and Carbondale – in Redstone – which is now gone,” he said.

Historic preservationists had another goal in mind, though it would be almost a decade before the 14-acre site was

acquired for nearly \$300,000, with Pitkin County Open Space and Trails putting up about a third of the price and the Colorado State Historical Society providing the rest.

A landmark piece of Redstone's history was saved, but it was still falling apart. More than a half-dozen years later, nearly \$800,000 has been amassed to fund a restoration effort, including three different grants, plus county matching funds of \$128,678 and \$500 from the West Elk Loop Scenic and Historic Byway Commission. In addition, the county has secured a separate grant for landscaping and signs after the work is done.

"Getting together this amount of money to do a project like this, in this economy, is huge," Sorter said.

For a town steeped in its history, it's also exciting.

"The idea of preserving a part of it really strikes a chord with people," Sorter said.

The ovens, along with buildings now known as the Redstone Inn and the Redstone Castle, were part of the town developed by coal magnate John Cleveland Osgood. The mines in Coal Basin provided high-grade coal that was brought down on a narrow-gauge railroad to the ovens.

Fed into the top of the ovens – the front openings were temporarily sealed with firebrick – the coal was heated for two days, with only enough air to support combustion. The resulting coke was shipped by train to Pueblo for use in the production of pig iron and, ultimately, steel. Both the Pueblo plant and Redstone operation were part of Osgood's Colorado Fuel and Iron Co., which produced coke from Coal Basin from 1900 to 1909.

The rebuilt ovens would be capable of making coke again, according to Fanelli, but the mortar being used now isn't made for heat and would disintegrate over time, he said.

The refurbished ovens boast yellow brick, in contrast with the faded pink of adjacent domes, but break open an old brick and it's yellow, Fanelli explained. High heat and the reddish soil that appears baked onto the ovens resulted in the discoloration, he said.

janet@aspentimes.com