

***The Mountain Loop express wrote a short foreword to the article “Big Dig at Monte Cristo” (originally published in Oct 2012), to put things into perspective. It is now Apr 2016, the cleanup work is done, and the USFS is preparing to restore access to Monte. It’s good to go back and review the project . . .***

Editor’s Note:

With expectations that the township and surrounding areas of Monte Cristo will once again be open to the public, interest in its history and an accounting of the events of the past thirteen years is peaking.

The U.S. Forest Service began researching clean-up options at Monte Cristo in 2003, but actual work on the project wasn’t started until nearly a decade later.

The area is rich with history and has been a long-lived phenomenon to local residents. From the discovery of metal-bearing lode deposits in 1889 until it ceased mining operations in the fall of 1920, this romantic era of Monte Cristo took on a life of its own.

The subsequent mass exodus of miners and their families left little but a ghost town behind. Decades later, discovery of contaminated rock and soil from ore tailings sealed its fate until the federally mandated cleanup.

Red tape combined with environmental concerns interrupted the proposed timeline too often to comprehend, but perseverance and extraordinary amounts of funding appears to have brought us close to witnessing its rebirth.

In anticipation of the reopening of the area, we take a trip back several years when local historian, Fred Cruger, shared his article, “*Then and Now ... and Tomorrow: USFS and DOE Dig Contaminants from Monte Cristo*” in the October 5, 2012 issue of the Mountain Loop exPress.

## **The Big Dig at Monte Cristo**

Tomorrow (Monday, Oct 1) it starts. The USFS and and Dept of Ecology will start the immense task of digging up contaminated rock from the slopes and flats of Monte Cristo, and burying it to protect the public from the dangers of mining contaminants. We’re well past the point of arguing about the costeffectiveness of the project and/or about how much additional protection will actually be realized. The USFS wasn’t anxious to undertake the effort, but a combination of litigation and available mitigation funds from the infamous Anarco settlement have forced their hand. As most readers have already heard, the work to clear a route into the site (for the heavy equipment required) is about to get underway. By Summer of 2013, the work will reach a point that will require closing off the area to tourists and hikers for a year or two. Hundreds of visitors have been making the trek to say "au revoir" during our recent good weather.

So how do we make it really pay off? By making sure that when the area re-opens, it does so with a level of care and interpretative signage that makes a visit to Monte Cristo even more educational and enjoyable than it is today! That of course requires that special care be taken during the mandated cleanup, and even more importantly, during the cleanup of the cleanup. Before you bemoan the historical destruction that might take place given the vast amount of activity, take the time to read Appendix C of the Removal Action Memorandum, which reflects the care that has already gone into USFS planning for the preservation and eventual recovery. You can find the entire document at [http://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE\\_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5392906.pdf](http://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5392906.pdf) . They’ve identified specific actions to be taken (and to be avoided) in an attempt to preserve and enhance the historical perspectives that Monte Cristo can continue to provide when re-opened to the public.



Most Monte Cristo aficionados are familiar with the United Companies concentrator, certainly the dominant structure in the city for years. A long, curving, covered horse-drawn tram brought ore from the aerial tram stations to the upper levels of the concentrator, after which mechanical processes crushed, separated, and delivered concentrates from the bottom level to waiting box cars of the Everett & Monte Cristo Railway. Now a jumble of hillside rubble, and a major site of contaminants, the USFS has suggested that when the cleanup is done, the concentrator site should be cleaned, terraced to match the original "contour" of the structure, and accompanied with pictures and signage to re-create the scene. That would, in fact, be an improved learning tool for visitors!



**Picture Taken  
in 1894**



**Picture Taken  
in 1949**



**Picture Taken  
in 2004**

Other items in the immediate area are specified to remain undisturbed, so they can act as further references when the area is re-opened. A good example is an odd-shaped rock that appears in many early Monte Cristo photographs. Since in itself, it is not contaminated, preserving it in-situ will help visitors orient themselves while they learn the extent of the mining and railroad operations. Well-preserved portions of the still-existing puncheon road will be designated and highlighted as part of the historical preservation. It isn't going to be easy, and it will require immense care and labor. Volunteers will be critical in helping to preserve and replace artifacts throughout the area. But bottom line, with a conscientious effort by the USFS, and the cooperation of multiple volunteer organizations throughout the County, we should be able to improve visitor experiences. The "cleanup" is about to start - our challenge is to ensure that the cleanup of the cleanup leaves us with an overall improvement in the accessibility and interpretation of the historical treasure called Monte Cristo.

Excerpts from the plan:

**A. Sauk Wagon Road.**

1. The access route alignment and design was developed to preserve, to the extent possible within road construction and other resource constraints, intact portions of the Sauk Wagon Road. The design plan will be made available to the public prior to construction on the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National

Forest website (<http://www.fs.usda.gov/goto/mbs/CERCLA>).

#### B. Monte Cristo Mining Historic District.

- i. Leave large structural members (e.g. buildings and railroad trestle remains) and equipment (e.g. gears, rods, plates, ore bins) in situ;
- ii. Clean and salvage structural remains (wood/metal/bricks) or historic mining debris (pieces of equipment), and return to the approximate original location;
- iii. Reconstruct the topographic footprint of travel ways (e.g. roads, railroad grades and haulage routes) to resemble in the original feature in its original location;
- iv. Reconstruct the evidence of the United Company concentrator by shaping and contouring the clean soil to illustrate footprint and multiple terraces of the original structure;
- v. Surface collect artifacts for analysis and curation; and
- vi. Provide a professional archaeological monitor to record features, photo document, and collect artifacts as determined appropriate and safe. The monitor may temporarily halt activity as necessary to allow photography and recovery of materials and data.

#### C. Interpretation.

1. Preserve the natural rock feature seen in historic Monte Cristo photographs, that serves as an anchor point for "then and now" interpretation of the historic built environment (ref. Granite Falls Museum history brochure, compiled by F. Cruger, 2010).
2. Include on-site historical interpretation as part of the signage required for institutional controls at the site after the RA. Interpretive signs may incorporate text, historic photographs, and/or quick response codes for downloading applications to mobile phones and other devices.
3. Foster partnerships and seek funding to develop long-term interpretive products and presentations including, but not limited to, web-based interpretation (e.g. DAHP, HistoryLink.org, gfhistory.org, Snohomish County Community Heritage Program).
4. Place on-site interpretation about the Sauk Wagon Road at a trailhead, and/or at one or two locations along the access route where features and/or segments of the wagon road that were protected during the RA are visible and accessible. An existing Scenic Byway Enhancement grant received from the Federal Highways Administration may be available for trailhead interpretation at this location.
5. Provide interpretive presentations (e.g. 1 or 2 per season) at the Gold Basin Campground amphitheater regarding the history of Monte Cristo and the progress/status of the RA for the duration of the public closure of the area (estimated 2013 through 2014).