

The following history of the Leadville Mineral Belt Trail was submitted to Leadville Today in 2016 by Lake County local historian Howard Tritz.

MINERAL BELT TRAIL ORIGINS

Back in 1991 most of the Leadville and Lake County citizens were upset about the EPA designating the county as a Superfund Site.

Citizens were meeting with the EPA and wanting to GET THEM OUT OF TOWN AND NOW. There were times when some of the public meetings were almost to the point of getting violent. Unlike today, many citizens attended these public meetings.

A group was formed, they were called the Leadville and Lake County Liaison Committee whose purpose was not to run the EPA out of town (hell, there were enough folks trying that) but to acknowledge they were here and here to probably stay and therefore making an attempt to get something for Lake County from them while they were here.

There were nine initial members on this committee who were noted as being more or less leaders in the community. As with all community volunteer endeavors it did not take long for this membership to reduce to five individuals who had the energy to stick with it.

On the third meeting we left the meeting room and rejoined at the Elk's Club where over a beer or two we discussed a plan of action and decided that all of us should go home and think about it and come back at the next meeting with our individual brainstorms concerning what we each thought was best for Lake County.

Following are the ideas formulated at this third meeting:

- A bobsled run from the top of Mosquito Pass to downtown Leadville.
- An aquarium and highway rest stop at the foot of Dutch Henry Hill which would feature exotic fish swimming in the cleaned up California Gulch water.
- Preservation of the mining district to enable tourists and future generations to enjoy and learn about our mining heritage.
- Cleanup of the tailings pond at the south end of Harrison Avenue and in its place construct a hotel and facilities to train athletes in our rarified two mile high atmosphere. "If they can make it here they can make it anywhere" was the intended motto.
- Bicycling was getting to be a major sport in those days and we should capitalize on it by building a trail.

The decision was made to make a ballot of sorts with the brainstorm ideas displayed and asking the readers to vote on them through the local newspaper. No. 1 is your favorite idea and No. 5 is your least favorite idea.

The group met at the Smith Lumber Company one Saturday. Dick Smith, the owner, was a member of the committee. We built three wishing well replicas and placed one in front of the Social Service Building which is halfway between the Post Office and the Court House, we were not allowed to place a well in front of either the Post Office or Court House. The second well was placed in front of the Safeway Grocery building and the third well went in front of Sayer and Mckee drug store. The newspaper instructed people to deposit their ballots in these wells.

The results were astounding. We ran the add in the newspaper for several weeks and received hundreds of ballots.

Preserving the mining district garnered the most votes by far and building a bicycle trail came in at a close second. It was obvious, the people were asking for a bicycle trail through the mining district. I am happy to say at the risk of being boastful that both of these ideas were mine. That is primarily why I have worked hard these last 21 years to help maintain and care for this remarkable trail. Before we proceed any further I want to make it clear that the trail would have never occurred if it had not have been through the efforts of many, many individuals working hard through the years. I want to single out one man who was hired by the county to be the consultant for planning this trail. Mike Conlin has done a remarkable job in his capacity of designing a trail second to none in this world. At first I envisioned a simple trail winding around Carbonate Hill and back to town. Mike in his expertise has engineered an 11.6 mile trail that starts in Leadville, passes through pristine forestry on its route through the greatest mining district the world has ever known and along the way providing unsurpassed mountain beauty of the Sawatch, Collegiate and Mosquito ranges as it continues along through historic Leadville to it point of beginning. Thank you Mike Conlin.

The plan in the beginning was to compile a list of abandoned rail lines which could possibly be utilized for pedestrian and biking trails.

A major portion of the Mineral Belt Trail is on the Colorado and Southern Mineral Belt Line. This rail line was built in 1898 and abandoned in 1937. It winds through the famous Leadville Mining District passing through well known old mines such as the Little Pittsburg, Robert E. Lee, Robert Emmet, Wolfstone, and Tabor's Matchless Mine. In 1987 the fee simple ownership of this line was transferred from Burlington Northern to Ken and Stephanie Olson. The Olson's generously donated this rail line for the development of a bicycle/pedestrian trail.

Sections of the Denver and Rio Grande Chrysolite mine extension and the Moyer Branch of the Colorado Midland Line are also abandoned rail lines used for the Mineral Belt Trail.

Partnerships were formed with the following entities who assisted in one way or the other in the financing and building of this trail. Following is a list of these partnerships: City and County Officials, individual landowners, ASARCO mining company, the Leadville Coalition, the Colorado Mountain College, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Lake County School District, Leadville Chamber of Commerce, Leadville sanitation District, Newmont Mining Company, Lake County Tourism Task Force, Colorado Division of Minerals and Geology, Union Pacific Railroad, Leadville Colorado and Southern Railroad, Colorado Department of Local Affairs, U.S. Forest Service, Lake County Assessor's Office, Conlin Associates, Lake County Recreational Board, Lake County Road and Bridge Department, Colorado Department of Transportation, Buena Vista Correctional Facility, T & C Services, the Leadville Rental Company,

The Mineral Belt Trail was laid out in a manner to capitalize on things that make Leadville spectacular. It showcases a full range of historical and cultural resources in Leadville proper as well as the adjacent mining district. On its journey it takes the traveler through fantastic forests with breathtaking views of mountainous terrain.

The Mineral Belt Trail is a trip through time that starts with the original gold placer mining in California gulch and moves forward to the numerous silver mines and smelters and proceeds into the present time period of Superfund cleanup.

The trail:

- uses portions of three railroads that served the mining district in the late 1800's and early 1900's
- has two bridges crossing main busy roadways
- average grade is slightly over 3 percent
- different sections have different colored paving stripes to enable identification of location for emergency services
- is 12 feet wide with additional 3 feet gravel strips on each side
- passes across Fryer, Fairview, Carbonate, Iron and Rock Hill
- describes the people who came to the area poor and became rich by working the mines and making Leadville famous; people such as Horace and Baby Doe Tabor, the "unsinkable" Molly Brown, Meyer Guggenheim, David May, and Charles Boettcher
- is none motorized and ADA accessible
- connects points such as the three public schools, the library, Colorado Mountain College, the hospital and medical clinic, three museums (National Mining Hall of Fame, the Heritage Museum and the Healy House)
- construction began in early 1995
- grand opening was on July 29, 2000

On the last weekend in February each year the Mineral Belt Trail Committee hosts a Loppet. This is a cross country skiing race involving 5K, 10K and 22K sprints through the Colorado Mountain College and the Mineral Belt Trails. There are two classes, Nordic and freestyle. The first Loppet was held in 2004. Funds derived from participants entry fees are used for the care and maintenance of the trail. In 2009 the Mineral Belt Trail put \$13,000 towards the purchase of a snow grooming machine. The trail is routinely groomed throughout the winter months.

Funding for the trail was provided by:

- grants from the Colorado Historical Society, the Great Outdoors Colorado Trust, and the Colorado State Parks
- cash, land easements and in-kind work from private citizens, CDOT, Colorado Lottery Fund, Colorado Mountain College, ASARCO, Union Pacific Railroad, City of Leadville, County of Lake, and the Leadville Coalition

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