

Land, Water and People

## **A Mining Legacy**

By Maggie Barnes

In 1880, rich silver and gold veins were found in the Kerber Creek district in the northwestern part of the San Luis Valley. The towns Bonanza, Kerber City, Sedgwick, Exchequerville, and Parkville sprung up from the ensuing mining boom. Only Bonanza survives today.

In those first few years, population estimates range from 500 to 1500. Bonanza is said to have had seven dance halls and thirty-six saloons. The excitement over the Kerber Creek mining district dissipated as quickly as it had come with the population shrinking to around 100 as miners realized that accessible, high grade ore was not as easy to come by.

Over the years, Bonanza continued to boom and bust. The final and largest boom came in the 1920s with the reopening and Eastern investment in the Cocomongo, Bonanza, and Rawley Mines. The bulk of that work finished in the 1930s, with a fire nearly decimating Bonanza in 1937. Large scale mining never returned to the area, although there are those who believe that there are still fortunes awaiting those who look in the right spot.

Unfortunately, the mines left a larger legacy than the rich history of the mining towns. As early as the mid-1880s, there are records of ranchers downstream becoming adversely affected by the mining operations. The water quality in Kerber creek declined and mine tailings were being deposited downstream as tailings dams ruptured. Today there are over 60 acres of tailings deposited downstream of the large mining sites.

Reclamation work finally began in the 1990s. At that time, Kerber Creek ran orange with acid mine drainage and was devoid of life. The American Smelting & Refining Company partnered with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Forest Service (FS), the Colorado Department of Public Health and the Environment, and landowners to clean up some of the most polluted areas by the Rawley mine site and downstream.

Further cleanup efforts were initiated in 2004 by the BLM and FS and continue today. Most of the work is being done with the consent of landowners on private land under legislation called the Wyden amendment, which allows the BLM and FS to work on private lands for the benefit of public lands or human health and the environment. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Trout Unlimited (TU), the Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Western Hardrock Watershed Team have joined forces with the BLM, FS, and the landowners, who have formed their own group – the Bonanza Stakeholders Group.

The goals are to create a stable stream with a fertile riparian zone, immobilize metals and improve water quality. Tailings piles are undergoing the process of phytostabilization, which involves immobilizing metals by incorporating lime, organic material, fertilizer and appropriate vegetation. This also creates extra grazing land for livestock and improves wildlife habitat. In addition, the stream bank and channel are being stabilized. Work is scheduled to continue through 2012.

In 2008, the stakeholders and partners were mobilized. BLM relocated tailings at three sites, phytostabilized six sites and completed stream bank stabilization on two reaches. BLM and TU also successfully competed for over \$400,000 in grants, obtained 404 and Storm Water Permits, and completed a project implementation plan. NRCS secured over \$300,000 of Wildlife

Habitat Incentive Program funding, completed four phytostabilization sites and three fishery projects.

Field trips will be scheduled to review progress at these sites in the summer of 2009.

*Maggie Barnes is a full time volunteer with the WHWT, an initiative of the Office of Surface Mining and Americorps\*VISTA. She is working on coordinating and improving the Kerber Creek Restoration Project and is stationed at the Saguache Field Office. When not working, she enjoys biking, romping around with her puppy, and planning her next adventure.*