Matchless Mine, CO

September 12 - 24, 2017

PROJECT PARTNER: National Mining Hall of Fame and Museum

PROJECT SITE DESCRIPTION AND HISTORY: The Matchless Mine, located in Leadville, Colorado, is one of the most famous sites in the country linked to the history of the old West – but not because of its silver or gold.
The Matchless Claim was first recorded by prospectors in May of 1878. It was eventually purchased by its most famous owner, Horace Tabor (then Lieutenant Governor of Colorado), in 1879-80 after silver was struck at a mine nearby, it proved lucrative for Tabor, and by 1884, according to the Leadville Chronicle as quoted by the National Mining Hall of Fame, “nine-tenths of the high grade ore in Fryer Hill had been mined,” eventually forcing Tabor to mortgage all of his Denver real estate assets. He died in 1899, almost completely penniless.

Horace Tabor was not simply a rich miner, however. Born in 1830 into a poor family in Vermont, Tabor moved to Buckskin Joe, CO with his then-wife Augusta Pierce in 1859. He operated a mining supplies and general store there until the couple moved to Leadville prior to his purchasing of the mine. Perhaps the most famous character from this part of America’s history is Horace’s mistress-turned-wife “Baby Doe” (née McCourt), who lived in a cabin annexed to the mine until her death in 1935 when her frozen body was discovered on the wooden floor. Perhaps the most famous example of American opera from the first half of the 20th century, The Ballad of Baby Doe, was composed by Douglas Moore and premiered in Central City, CO in 1956. Listen to some excerpts and learn more about the opera on the “DoeHEADS” website.

In Leadville, Horace is most famous for the remaining evidence of his once-wealthy lifestyle, such as the luxurious Tabor Opera House. In fact, Horace’s rags-to-riches and back to rags life remains one of the most enduring tales in Colorado’s history. The site is so important to Colorado history that it was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2011, having been transferred to the National Mining Hall of Fame and Museum in 2006. Read a complete timeline of the Matchless Mine here.

The preservation work at the Matchless Mine’s headframe will allow it to continue to tell the history of this famous area for future generations.

**CHALLENGE LEVEL: MEDIUM.** Leadville and the Matchless Mine are located above 10,000 feet. High altitude work environments present unique challenges and safety concerns. Nights and even days may dip into freezing temperatures, and the thin air and bright sun can cause rapid sunburns.

**SCOPE OF WORK:** In order to preserve the Matchless Mine’s last remaining headframe, volunteers learned to:

- Install concrete footers between the headframe’s legs
- Re-plumb and align the mine’s railroad track
- Restore the headframe’s timbers, replacing them as necessary
WHERE: The Matchless Mine is located in Leadville, CO, about 2 hours by car from Denver [map]  
Coordinates: 39.255893, -106.2716572

Another view of the Matchless Mine, featuring the "Baby Doe cabin". Photo courtesy Plazak.

Baby Doe Tabor. Photo is in the public domain.