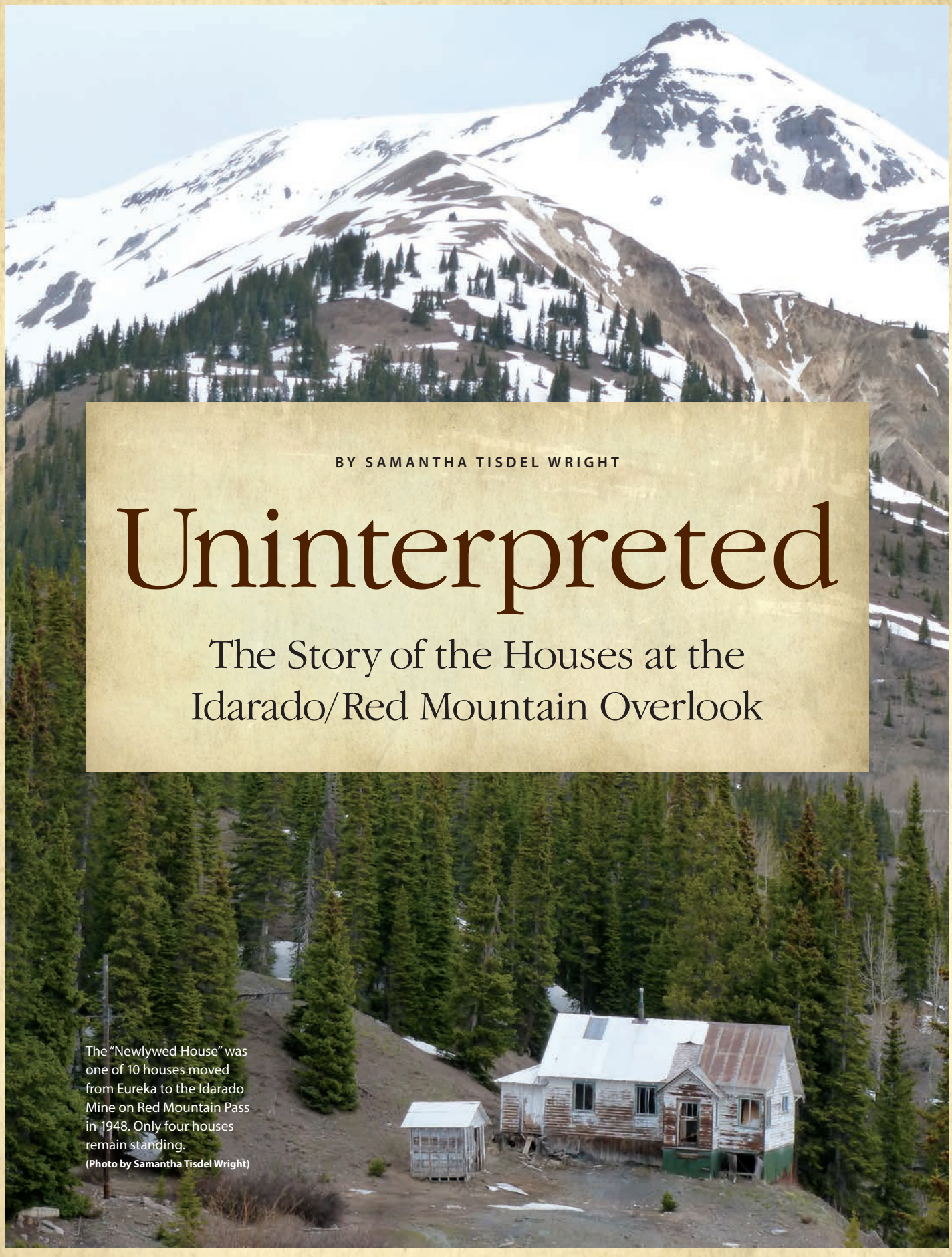
BY SAMANTHA TISDEL WRIGHT

Uninterpreted

The Story of the Houses at the Idarado/Red Mountain Overlook



The "Newlywed House" was one of 10 houses moved from Eureka to the Idarado Mine on Red Mountain Pass in 1948. Only four houses remain standing.
(Photo by Samantha Tisdel Wright)

"It is wild and rugged country, where nothing but rich mines would ever induce a human being to live longer than absolutely necessary."

I've passed by those houses a zillion times.

As you snake around a tight S-curve at mile post 82 on U.S. 550/Red Mountain Pass near the Treasury Tunnel, about halfway between Silverton and Ouray, there they are. Four simple clapboard houses, plopped down in a marshy meadow like discarded Monopoly pieces. Perched at 10,600 feet, their peeling white-painted siding and broken-out windows with aqua trim speak of too many winters and too little care.

An ever-shifting parade of Idarado mining personnel lived in those houses from 1948-1978. Before that, they were company houses in the now-abandoned mining boomtown of Eureka, in neighboring San Juan County. They've been vacant now for almost 40 years.

But when my family moved to Ouray in the mid-1970s, the Idarado was still a producing mine, and there was a girl at my school who actually lived in one of the houses. Once or twice, before Mr. Johnson drove us home on his regular school bus route to Panoramic Heights, he had to drive that girl to her home up the pass. It seemed like the drive took forever, and I felt sorry (and a little disdainful) for her having to live all the way up there, on the edge of a cliff, so far from the real world of Ouray.

In all the times I've driven past those houses in my adult life — cursing out loud in a slow slug of summer traffic; hunched over the steering wheel in a white-out blizzard with a bundled-up baby in the back seat; hauling ass over the pass on that familiar, harrowing, gorgeous commute between the two towns I call home — they've become almost invisible to me.

They are plain and modest (some would say dumpy). The kind of houses that a child would draw, comprised of squares and triangles with no embellishments. There's nothing special about them — except, perhaps, their lack of specialness.

Being a local, it took me years before I even bothered to pull into the newish Idarado overlook built above the houses in the early 2000s, with all that interpretive signage explaining about the Red Mountain Mining District with its famous Yankee Girl head frame across the valley, the Idarado Mine and the reclamation efforts that have taken place over the past two-and-a-half decades.



Eureka, as it appeared in 1929, with company houses at lower left, and the Sunnyside Mill at center top. Nothing is left of Eureka today except for the mill ruins and some building foundations.
(Photo courtesy of Ouray County Historical Society).

When I did finally take the time to check it out, I found no signage to explain about those houses, by then slowly sagging toward the earth.

Yet it turns out they have something to say. If you listen carefully, and look past the holes in the walls and the rat poop and broken glass scattered across ragged linoleum, they tell a tale of two of the most storied mines of the San Juans — the Sunnyside and the Idarado — and of the families and tramp miners that, for short amounts of time, lived little pieces of their lives within those homely thin-walled spaces.

The houses have names.

Let me introduce you: there's the Griffith's-Noel House, named for two of the many families who used to live there. That's the two-story closest to the highway pullout. Hammett's Hotel is right next door. The Newlywed House is tucked away against the wooded hillside across the marshy flat where other houses used to stand; you can see it from below as you're headed up from Ouray toward the top of the pass. And the Bachelor's House — that's the other one you can see leaning out over the cliff as you snake your way up the highway, just before reaching the old trestle at the Idarado Mine.

A historic structure assessment commissioned by the Ouray County Historical Society back in 2003 describes the four houses dispassionately:

"Their architecture and construction are not significant for their artistic value or skilled craftsmanship," the report states. But, it goes on to argue: "Together, these houses form a fine example of company housing in an isolated mining setting — a story important to the history of the region."

EUREKA!

The story starts on a flat patch of hardscrabble land squashed between steep mountains at the throat of the Animas River, seven miles northeast of Silverton, where the town of Eureka once sat.

"It is wild and rugged country, where nothing but rich mines would ever induce a human being to live longer than absolutely necessary," wrote George Crofutt of this place, in his "Grip-Sack Guide of Colorado," published in 1885.

The crumbling stair-stepped remains of the Sunnyside Mill (once one of the largest in Colorado) sigh down the nearby mountainside in an exhausted concession to time and gravity. If you know where to look, you can still find the foundations of the buildings that used to comprise the town itself.

During boom-days, Eureka rode the fortunes of a rich gold vein discovered at the Sunnyside Mine up Eureka Gulch in 1896. Otto Mears' Silverton-Northern

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Driving a 1946 Dodge truck with his name emblazoned on the side, Chester Yates of Montrose hauled 10 company houses from Eureka to the Idarado Mine's Treasury Tunnel complex in the early fall of 1948. "Persons accustomed to driving in the territory said that the houses seemed to 'appear like magic' at the [Treasury] tunnel," the Silverton Standard and the Miner reported at the time. **(Photos courtesy of Ouray County Historical Society)**





Railroad arrived that same year. Stores, saloons, hotels and restaurants filled the business district. There was a post office, and a monthly newspaper — the San Juan Expositor — published by Theodore Comstock.

Eureka wasn't an easy place to live; in 1906, an avalanche swept away an entire bunkhouse at the nearby Silverwing Mine. But the town had electricity and cheek-to-jowl views of the rugged mountains.

When flotation milling came into vogue, low-grade ores could then be mined. The Sunnyside upscaled, and the little dinky-ass stamp mill in Eureka gave way to a huge industrial facility in 1915, capable of processing 1,000 tons of ore per day.

That's about when the houses that are now up at the Idarado got their start. Who built them? Today, nobody knows. But they likely went up in a hurry as Sunnyside Mining and Milling scrambled to provide housing for its swelling work force in the 1910s and 1920s.

Those unnamed builders employed a style that today would be characterized as wood frame vernacular. The interior spaces of the houses were typical of company housing — offering simple sleeping, eating and living quarters. They were built for utility, not luxury.

Photographs of Eureka from that era portray tidy ranks of identical, narrow two-story and one-story buildings — a hallmark of company housing — on the east side of town at the base of the mountain.

By the late 1930s, the Sunnyside Mine had pretty well played out (although it had a second coming decades later), and Eureka's fortunes sagged.

But life persisted there, for a time. Silverton local Darnell "Zeke" Zanoni was born in Eureka in 1936, and lived there until he was six years old. He remembers a big dance hall, where his parents attended dances most Saturday nights.

And the Silverton Northern looms larger-than-life in his memory. "One day I was standing very close to that railroad, and that train came by and the engineer pulled a lever and blew steam out," he said. "It didn't hurt me but it scared the hell out of me."

Although Zanoni wouldn't have realized it as a little boy, Eureka was in its dying days. The post office closed its doors in 1939, and the train stopped running later that year.

Bankrupted, Sunnyside Mining and Milling was sold back to its own major shareholder, US Smelting and Refining, at a sheriff's sale to clear the title in the 1940s. They tore the mill down to relieve themselves of that tax burden, and one by one, started selling off the company buildings that remained in the town.

As Eureka's fortunes ebbed, the nearby Idarado Mine was thriving. The Idarado's operations had expanded throughout the 1940s, ramping up production of base metals during World War II. The mine needed housing at its operations base at the Treasury Tunnel on Red Mountain Pass.

Eureka, of course, had company houses in copious supply with nobody left to live in them. So in 1948, a batch of 10 of those houses were purchased by, and moved to, the Idarado Mine. Four of them remain today.

MOBILE HOMES, CIRCA 1948

Idarado hired Chester Yates of Montrose to move the 10 company houses 23 miles from Eureka to the Treasury Tunnel, for 500 bucks a pop. Hauling them behind a bright red 1946 Dodge truck with his name emblazoned on the side, Yates and a crew of six men got the job done in less than a month's time, in the early fall of 1948.

Yates' daughter Mary Ann Watts, interviewed for OCHS's Historic Structure Assessment of the Idarado houses, recalled that "Daddy had to jack the houses around some of the curves on Red Mountain. The first house they moved from Eureka to Treasury Tunnel took 28 hours from start to finish, which includes getting it ready, jacking it up and moving the dollies under it and the logs under it, then the road time to get it 23 miles. Then lowering it onto blocks. You have to take into consideration that he was not moving them onto level ground, and they are all set up and down the mountain side."

The road back then was narrow and unpaved, more like a jeep road than the Million Dollar Highway we know today. The Ouray County Herald reported that "it was found necessary to shoot off some of the ledges along the highway to allow the houses to pass."

The following week, the Silverton Standard and the Miner reported: "Persons accustomed to driving in the territory said that the houses seemed to 'appear like magic' at the [Treasury] tunnel."

Families soon moved into those houses, and a small community was born.

(Bellow) The Idarado Mine's Treasury Tunnel complex on Red Mountain Pass, circa 1950s. Company houses can be seen at far left. **(Photo by Richard Wilson Unger, courtesy of Mary Unger Fulton)**

"There was a time when we almost got swept off the road going to school."

IDARADO MARY

Mary Unger Fulton lived up at the Idarado from 1950-1956, until she finished sixth grade. Her father, Richard Wilson Unger, was a metallurgist in a managerial position at the mill.

Although Fulton can't be sure, she thinks that her family may have lived in one of the transplanted Eureka houses for a time, before moving into another house that has since been demolished, up on the hill where the Idarado overlook is now.

She shared a bedroom with her brother, and "it was really, really cold," she said. Eventually, the family treated themselves to electric blankets. But earlier on, they slept with hot water bottles, filled with water heated on a stove in the middle of the living room.

In the winters, the snow got so deep off the back of the house that it covered the windows, "and Dad would shovel his way out to get over to the mine."

Quite a few families lived up there at the time, and the Idarado Mine provided a station wagon that took the Idarado kids down to school in Ouray each day. Avalanches were a frequent and terrifying hazard. "There was a time when we almost got swept off the road going to school," Fulton said. "I remember being very, very scared."

Living up at the Idarado, routine household tasks took on new dimensions. "We would hang the clothes up and they would be out there for days like boards, frozen, until finally the water would just evaporate," Fulton recalled. "I vividly remember the icicle clothes!"



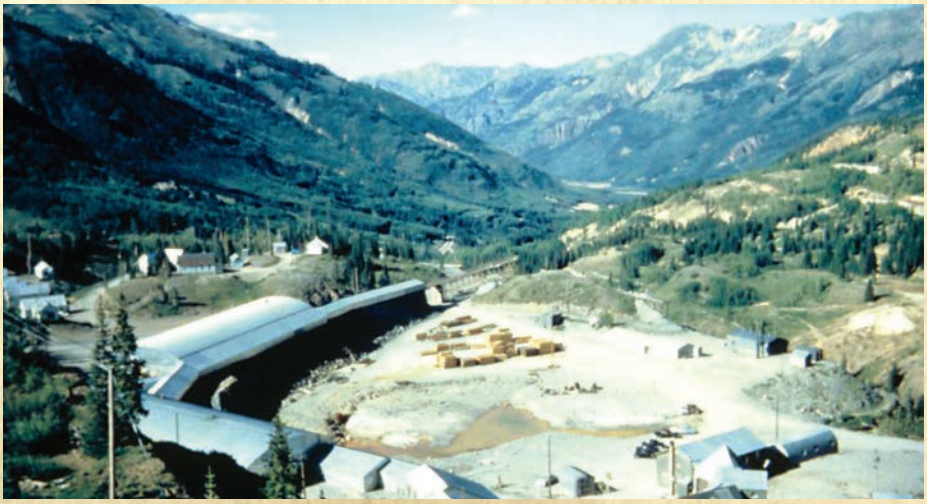
"Idarado Mary" near her childhood home at the Idarado Mine, circa 1950. **(Courtesy photo)**

But as tough as it could be, there was also a rare magic to living up at the Idarado.

"In the winter, they would put powder boxes on the back of these long sleds and put us in and we would go sledding all the way from Idarado to Ironton," Fulton said. "The road was perfect, with all these switchbacks. On moonlit nights people would get together, build a bonfire and a whole bunch of us would sled down and roast marshmallows, then they pulled us back up behind the cars."

Once or twice, Fulton got to go all the way through the Idarado Mine with her dad, emerging on the other side in Telluride.

Summers were filled with jeeping and hiking. Once they got old enough, the kids were turned loose to explore on their own. "My brother and I went into all those abandoned mines," Fulton said.



It may have been a lonesome lifestyle up at the Idarado, "but I don't remember it being bad," Fulton said. "I was a big reader. I read every Black Stallion book in the world. My mother had a phonograph and had a lot of music. She would knit. She made all of our sweaters."

Fulton's family left the Idarado and moved to Moab when she was 11. Years later, on a family road trip through Colorado, she revisited her childhood home with her husband and teenaged kids. The houses that were left were all vacant and vandalized, and the mine had shut down.

"It was pretty much a mess," Fulton said. "I remember wanting to show my kids all the wonderful stuff I did, and they were appalled I had to live up there, with no phones, no televisions. And they didn't understand. They were not terribly impressed."

ELWOOD'S PLACE

The blue-painted front door of the Griffiths-Noel House has a sign that says "No Trespassing" and the steps that once led up to it have been removed. So Elwood Gregory and I push our way through budding pussy-willows toward the back of the house, hunting unsuccessfully for a way to get inside.

Gregory, now in his late 70s, moved into this house with his wife Roseanna and three kids in the fall of 1966 and stayed about two years. He had been working as an amalgamator at the Idarado's mill in Telluride, but "we had relatives and friends over there that drove Roseanna nuts," he said. So, he took a job at the Idarado warehouse on Red Mountain Pass and moved his family there.

At that time, the mine was "going good," he said – with 300 or 400 workers brought up in busses from as far away as Montrose every day.

As Gregory squints up at the vacant house where he once lived, snapshot memories scatter back. How he used to sit on the back porch in the fall and watch the pikas make their nests in the scree slope below the highway. How he once raised a rescued groundhog from bald pink baby-hood and named it Whiskey. How Roseanna was doing laundry in the back porch one day, when of a sudden, crash! The window in the back porch door was shattered.

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Elwood Gregory surveys the cluster of Idarado company houses where he and his young family lived for two years in the late 1960s. At that time, the mine was "going good," he said — with 300 or 400 workers brought up in busses from as far away as Montrose every day. **(Photos by Samantha Tisdel Wright)**





"The highway crew had been using a snowblower to clear the highway, and it threw a chunk of ice right through that window," he said.

It was not an easy time in Gregory's life. Four days after moving here, his baby daughter died. And he had problems with co-workers who made his life so miserable that he finally quit the job, and moved down to town so his surviving children could be closer to the school.

But, he said, he'd love to live up here now, in the midst of all these mountains and splendid solitude, away from the irritations of modern-day life.

We poke our heads into the house next door, Hammond's Hotel, where the bachelors used to live. The whole downstairs is now inexplicably stuffed with a bunch of old lockers, presumably stashed there by the Idarado years ago.

Then we amble across the marshy flat to the "Newlywed House."

"I always wanted to live in this one over here," Gregory said. "I was happy in that one over there, but I just liked this location."

It looks the same as the others on the outside, but inside, it has been quite a bit more updated, with late '60s-era appliances, carpeting, aluminum-framed windows, insulated walls and sheetrock, rather than the old green-painted Celotex fiberboard that the rest of the houses have.

Everything is in terrible shape. It is not a pleasant place to be — strangely more unsettling than the other houses that are more connected to an earlier era than our own. I can't wait to get out.

And I wonder out loud, What would be the point of saving a house like this? Would you "restore" it back to the way it used to be, when it was scraped off its original foundations in Eureka? And to what end?

Gregory, who worked as a carpenter after his time at the mine, has some thoughts on the subject. "If it was me, I wouldn't particularly restore it historically," he said. "I would probably come in and insulate it, and maybe make it somewhat modern, but keep the outside as historic as possible, and make it livable, basically. 'Cause this is ridiculous here. It's just getting worse all the time. There is no sense in restoring these houses unless you are going to have people living in them."

It raises the whole question of what constitutes historic significance and what's worth saving. This house, with its shattered glass, rusted-out appliances and rotten carpet, has historic significance. Among other things, it preserves that sad little capsule of time that still resides within both our memories, Gregory's and mine, when mining shut down for good at the Idarado and everything changed down in Ouray.

Gregory has a strong, warm grip as he helps me step down out of the Newlywed House. We stroll over to the last of the four houses. In spite of the fact that it is now known as the Bachelors House, Gregory recalls a woman who used to live there with her husband and little kid.

"This gal was good lookin' too, and she wore short shorts and a halter top," he said. "Do you remember the comic strip Li'l Abner? It kind of reminded me of that. Daisy Mae. With that short dress. Hillbilly type. Her husband, one time, shot himself in the butt. After that, they left."

We poke around the house. "I hated all these green walls," Gregory said, picking at a piece of Celotex and then scolding himself for doing so. He stares out the broken window on the stoop at the traffic speeding down the pass toward Ouray.

"Within your lifetime to have this whole chapter closed. That is interesting," he said.

WHOSE HOUSES ARE THEY, ANYWAY?

The last time any stabilization work was done on the Idarado houses was 15 years ago. That effort, headed by the Ouray County Historical Society, faltered due to lack of clarity over who owns the structures. Now, a fresh effort is afoot to preserve them.

Last fall, the Ridgway-based Trust for Land Restoration, in consultation with OCHS and the San Juan County Historical Society, prioritized the Idarado Houses as the area's most pressing need for emergency stabilization.

TLR met with key players from the U.S. Forest Service; obtained a 1998 survey of the property; pestered local preservation specialist Chris George for background on the structures and obtained the now 15-year-old Structural Building Assessments that had been commissioned by OCHS in 2002.

Then, they hit the same old snag over who actually owns the houses.

Time and the elements have taken their toll on the four remaining Eureka/Idarado company houses. From left: The Newlywed House, the Bachelors House, Hammond's Hotel and the Griffiths-Noel House. **(Photo by Samantha Tisdel Wright)**

Only the wind visits now, blows their doors open, or closed, with a whine, or a groan.

Idarado/Newmont believed that all four houses sat on Forest Service property. The USFS, meanwhile, believed that the back two houses were illegally on Forest Service property and the front two houses were on Idarado property. This was confirmed to be the case by the 1998 survey that TLR obtained. But regardless of whose land they are on, the question of ownership remains unresolved.

TLR is working with the various players to formally clear the matter up and perhaps develop a memorandum of understanding to take custody of the buildings, then perform emergency stabilization and seek additional funds for long-term stabilization, restoration and preservation.

It has been a damn tricky business.

Newmont/Idarado has other preservation priorities — primarily at the Pandora Mill in Telluride — and is concerned about its potential liabilities in regard to remediating lead and asbestos on the Idarado houses before they could be signed over to TLR's care.

The USFS, meanwhile, recognizes the historic merit of the buildings – all four of them are eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places under the terms of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. "But because of the question on ownership, we are at a standstill," said Forest Service Archeologist Jeremy Karchut. "We cannot expend funds on structures that do not belong to us."

In spite of all this, a complicated and fragile deal may be in the process of coming together to preserve the houses before it's too late.

"We want to save the houses where they are; they are a part of the site," SJCHS president Bev Rich said. "When you are driving over Red Mountain Pass and you drop down and all of a sudden you see the houses there, they remind you of the history of that place."

Rich feels connected to that history; she was born in Silverton after the houses were moved away from Eureka, but her father worked up at the Idarado for a time — slept, perhaps, in Hammond's Hotel on snowy nights when avalanches kept him from coming home.

THE HOUSES SPEAK

Deep drifts of winter snow melt into the hillside, and water gushes out of a culvert that funnels runoff beneath the highway up above. It's late May and I've returned to the Idarado houses, on my own this time.

I take a closer look at the house where Elwood Gregory used to live. Its boarded-up windows have curtains and houseplants painted on them. The lean-to leans away from the house, and the white paint has almost completely peeled away from its broad side, revealing naked, pale-brown clapboards underneath.

The air is cold, soaked through with the sound of birdsong and running water. The wind strums a nearby pine. A jet plane whispers through the pale blue sky. A black crow clucks, and a snowstorm roils in over the mountain tops.

These four houses make me feel lonely. Their gaping doors are mouths hanging open, spilling silent stories that loom in small rooms, where people once gathered to play cards and share homemade ravioli on snow-strewn Friday nights.

Broken glass and rat feces cake the floors. Pieces of metal roofing, peeled back like the lids of sardine cans, shift and clatter with the wind. A broken toilet sits on the wet ground outside Elwood's place, tender red pussy-willow stems pushing up through its drain.

The houses are inviting, yet repellent. Thick with history, and empty, empty. Only the wind visits now, blows their doors open, or closed, with a whine, or a groan. They speak the language of abandonment.

The Bachelors House is buckling under its own weight. Base boards splay out toward the mountains in supplication, exposing a crawl space underneath that smells like the cold breath of a mine. Asphalt roofing drapes like mud flaps across the hillside.

This place is alive with the scent of pine. Nature is reclaiming it, as RVs rumble down the highway, and a thin curtain of water ripples across the marshy flats where the rest of the company houses used to sit.

Somehow, I don't want to revisit the Newlywed House, with its rotten shag carpet and aluminum-framed windows that look like the ones in my childhood bedroom, even though the door creaks and the roof clatters for me to come.

I walk instead into the woods behind the house, where there are pools of snowmelt everywhere, tiny green things pushing up out of brown ground.

I answer the call of a chickadee. The woods answer back, in the trickling language of melting snow, as pink clouds speechlessly glide through the sky.

I think about what Bev Rich said: "When you see the houses there, they remind you of the history of that place." And I wonder, what is it about people that compels them to throw rocks through the windows of abandoned houses, and punch holes in the walls? What is history? What is worth saving?

