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*"If you don't want it printed, don't let it happen."*

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## Redstone coke ovens preserved

By David Frey/Aspen Daily News Correspondent

REDSTONE - The honeycomb of century-old coke ovens that line the highway across from the town entrance is in public hands after state and local officials worked out a deal last week to sign over the 14-acre site to Pitkin County.

The deal ended eight years of negotiations after community activists feared the historic site could end up as a gas station.

On Thursday, the Aspen Valley Land Trust sold the site to the Redstone Historical Society for \$290,000, the same price the land trust paid for the property last spring. The historical society then handed the land over to Pitkin County, which provided a third of the money for the site, augmenting a grant from the Colorado Historical Society.

"The Redstone coke ovens were the soul of the town," said Redstone resident Ron Sorter, a member of the Redstone Historical Society, who with his wife Michelle championed the effort to preserve the coke ovens.

Sorter shared his enthusiasm with crowds at the Redstone Sled Dog Races on Saturday, where he volunteered as an announcer. Spectators cheered as he made the announcement, the coke ovens forming a backdrop to the event.

"The coke ovens, as of last Thursday, belong to you!" he shouted.

Residents began trying to buy the coke ovens eight years ago when the property owner, Mid Continent Resources, Inc., which operated an extensive mining operation in nearby Coal Basin, went bankrupt and started selling off its assets.

When they learned of a company report that suggested the spot would be ideal for a gas station or convenience store, historical preservationists balked.

"We've got a lot of good people here who are really working hard to keep this place from becoming like every place else," Michelle Sorter said.

The state was willing to come up with a grant to help buy the land, but the entire property had to be protected by a historic designation first. That was something Mid Continent's owners didn't want to do, Sorter said, in case the deal fell through and left them with a money-losing property.

In the years that followed, as the area's real estate prices climbed, so did the value of the coke ovens property. Suddenly, the \$193,000 the state had committed didn't cover the costs. Pitkin County Open Space and Trails came up with another \$97,000. But the group still couldn't get the property without the historic designation.

The only way the deal could work, Sorter said, was if someone would loan them \$290,000 for an

uncertain amount of time, with no way to know when they'd get paid back. In came the Aspen Valley Land Trust, which held onto the property until Thursday, when the deal was finalized

It's a key piece of land for Redstone, said Martha Cochran, AVLTT's executive director. "It's the entrance. They have a lot of pride in their history. They spent a lot of time and energy in maintaining their historical sites. It's one of the only coke oven sites that's really visible from a highway. Highway 133 is a national scenic byway, which makes it more significant."

The deal followed a big year for AVLTT. The organization recently sealed two years of negotiations to turn over the historic town site of Independence to the Forest Service. Last year, it increased its protected acreage by a third, adding 2,400 acres in 20 conservation easements. The 36-year-old organization is Colorado's oldest land trust. Last year, it merged with Colorado Agricultural Heritage Fund.

If Redstone's most famous historic landmark is the embattled Redstone Castle (see related story on page 3), the coke ovens make up the other part of the picture of the town's history. While the castle, Cleveholm Manor, was the palatial residence of industrialist John Osgood, the coke ovens were the industrial heart of town, where coal from Coal Basin was burned and distilled into coke, which fueled the nation's burgeoning steel mills.

Colorado Fuel & Iron Co. mined a million tons of coal from 1900 to 1909. Mid Continent arrived 45 years later, shipping 28 million tons of coal to steel mills in Utah, California, Texas and South Korea.

The property contains not just the coke ovens but the site where the coal was dropped off before being loaded into the ovens. It also contains a monument erected by Mid Continent several years ago in honor of fallen miners. A pair of mine roof support shields form an arch like giant arms.

"I don't think we know who we are unless we recognize where we've come from," said Pitkin County Commissioner Dorothea Farris, of Carbondale, who praised the deal to preserve the coke ovens.

"Certainly there were drawbacks to mining, but it was a period of history, and a lot of young men give their lives up to that," she said. "People I taught in school in Carbondale gave their lives up to that.

"People have become so gentrified that the working man doesn't exist here. This village was the working man."

Some residents also praised the agreement. With so many issues dividing communities, the drive to protect the coke ovens was one that united Redstone, said Doris Downey.

"With the pressure on growth that's occurring all over Colorado, our window of opportunity is now," she said. "The things we don't preserve now are going to be much more difficult tomorrow."