

Pyrite mine uncaps future

Fools gold shafts capped 78 years ago may gain new life in park

By ERIC D. LAWRENCE
Staff Writer

Though it's been closed to the public for the past three years, an abandoned pyrite mine may again become an active part of Prince William Forest Park.

The mine, which operated between 1889 and 1920, produced pyrite, or fools gold. The sulfur from pyrite is used to make glass, soap and gunpowder.

The mine lay abandoned until the park service decided the dangers posed by the mine warranted closure, and its shafts were capped.

The National Park Service is taking public comment until the first week of July on five proposals to make the Cabin Branch Mine area accessible. The area where mine buildings once stood above Quantico Creek is now covered with tree seedlings.

The mine section of the North Valley Trail was closed in the fall of 1995. The area is off-limits to visitors because of the delicate condition of the seedlings and the possibility of erosion along the hillside and creek bed.

"This is such a fragile area still. We don't want the trees to be trampled," said park Ranger Art Webster.

Officials developed an environmental assessment that considers the impact of five courses of action, such as building bridges, doing nothing or installing a boardwalk.

Webster said the boardwalk is the preferred avenue because it allows visitors to see the area without damaging it, and bridges to other trail areas can wash out during flooding.

If the plans are approved, a boardwalk could be in place as early as mid-winter, Webster said. The boardwalk would be about 800 feet in

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length with a viewing platform and would connect with a trail to the Pyrite Mine Road.

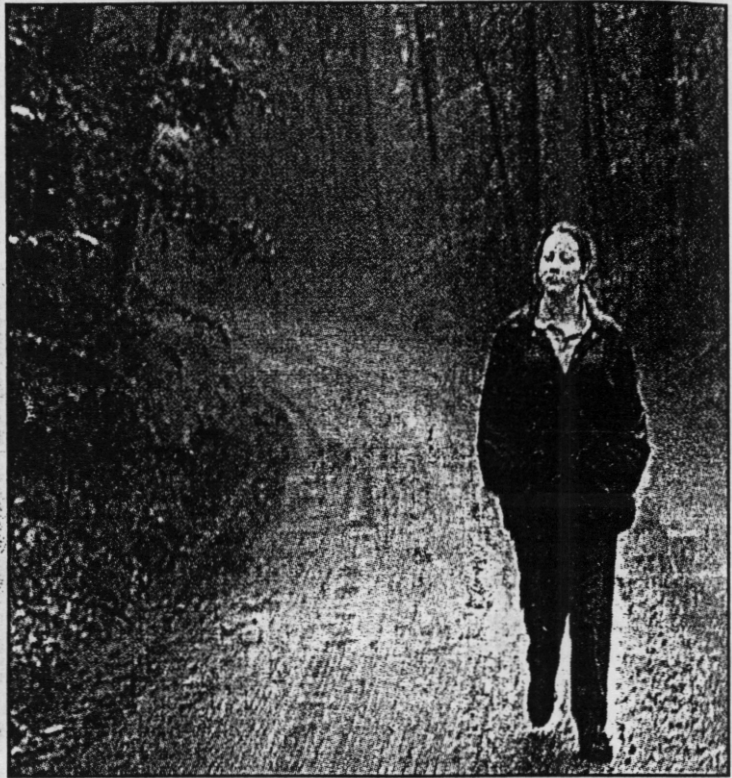
Officials say the mine regularly draws inquiries from park visitors, especially since its closure.

Marilyn Hochmuth, curator of the Weems-Botts Museum in Dumfries, said that much of that interest comes from the important role the mine played during its heyday.

"This was a wild mining town," she said. "It was quite a mine. It made a lot of money."

The mine typically

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Photos by Stephen M. Katz—Potomac News

Prince William Forest Park volunteer Ann Marie Salewski walks the Pyrite Mine Trail where she will give a public tour Sunday.



Ann Marie Salewski, a volunteer at Prince William Forest Park, points out the grave site of a man who died while working in the pyrite mines.

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Photos by Stephen M. Katz—Potomac News

The remnants of the boiler room, engine room and machine shop of the Pyrite mine are seen at Prince William Forest Park.

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employed 200 to 300 men, some of whom walked daily from as far away as Stafford County to work long shifts. Children worked for about \$.50 a day sorting pyrite, which was transported by rail to the Potomac and out to sea. There were about 70 buildings on the premises.

The mine operated 24-hours a day until a miners strike in 1920 over pay, according to Hochmuth. Miners demanded a \$.25 a day increase, and the superintendent responded by shutting down the mine.

In 1995, the area was

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reclaimed. Volunteers and staff planted 5,000 tree seedlings, drainage channels were installed and pyrite remnants were pulled away from Quantico Creek and limed to lower the acidity of runoff.

Webster said the creek water prior to the reclamation was as acidic as vinegar but is now acceptable.

Copies of the park's environmental assessment are available at the Visitor Center or by calling 221-2366.



A Prince William Forest Park volunteer demonstrates a safety precaution of one of the capped mine shafts on the Pyrite mine trail.

Clinton plan for lower airfares blocked

WASHINGTON (GNS) — Rep. Louise Slaughter, D-N.Y., moved Friday to head off major airlines and House Republican leaders from blocking a Clinton administration plan to bring lower airfares to mid-sized cities.

"First it was health care, then it was tobacco, now it's air fares. The House lead-

A bipartisan group of House members representing mid-sized cities in the Northeast, South and Midwest fear that House GOP leaders will try to pass legislation next week to delay DOT action.

Executives of major airlines met last week with House Speaker Newt Gingrich, R-Ga., and other GOP leaders to add lan-

posals by Slaughter and others. Her bill incorporates most of DOT's proposed guidelines.

The guidelines, unveiled last April, are aimed at preventing major carriers from using temporary price cuts to drive start-up carriers from markets the major carriers dominate.