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a colorado life

Outdoorsman secured abandoned mines

Outside his reclamation job, David Bucknam enjoyed exploring the history of rock formations and land reshaped by ghost towns and old roads.

By Claire Martin
Denver Post Staff Writer

David Lee Bucknam, who was 60 when he died Nov. 22, spent 24 years directing Colorado's inactive-mine reclamation program, sealing abandoned mines and restoring the soil and water they contaminated.

A memorial service will be from 5 to 8 p.m. Dec. 15 at the Wheat Ridge Recreation Center.

Bucknam was 10 when his family moved from New York state to Lakewood. He threw himself into mountaineering and skiing. As a teenager, he led climbing trips and taught mountaineering skills through the Denver Juniors group of the Colorado Mountain Club.

He firmly believed in the Leave No Trace ethic. He taught neophyte campers and hikers to pack out their trash, dismantle temporary fire rings, and pick up litter left by more careless backcountry users.

"Being a good steward of the environment was important to him," said his son, Alan Bucknam.

"He had a gas spending summers in the mountains, surveying inactive mines, doing lots of water sampling and soil testing," he said. "His job was more than keeping mine holes inaccessible. There's nasty chemistry inside a mine. You want to neutralize bad things that come out of mines or keep them from coming out altogether."

Besides securing access to abandoned mines - about 400 a year out of an estimated 20,000 in the state - and reclaiming the surrounding land and water, his work included coping with the endless problem of underground coal fires.

At least 29 subterranean fires still smolder in coal

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seams throughout Colorado. Those fires, nearly impossible to extinguish, often burn for decades. Because scores of vents puncture coal veins, occasionally a burst of pressure causes an explosion like the one resulting in the 2002 Coal Seam fire, which burned more than 12,000 acres near Glenwood Springs.

On and off the job, he enjoyed deciphering the history encrypted in rock formations and land reshaped by ghost towns and old mining roads.

He relished recounting stories about the roadside geology and geography of the three-day driving tours he arranged for the Rocky Mountain region of the Porsche Club of America, which he joined in 1990.

Bucknam's first Porsche was a red 1971 911 that he learned to handle on tracks as well as on a frozen-lake auto-cross course on Georgetown Lake. Those rallies often drew double takes from drivers on Interstate 70 incredulous at seeing dozens of expensive Porsches gathered on the ice.

In addition to his son, Alan, of Wheat Ridge, survivors include his wife, Susan, of Lakewood; another son, Peter, of Denver; brothers Bob Bucknam of Arvada and John Bucknam of Lakewood; and two grandchildren.

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