

Way We Were

July 20, 2016

A landslide brought it down

Mahala Ruddell, Research coordinator

We had a lot of rain this past spring. It made for lush and beautiful greenery all over this mountain region, but there are dangers that come with so much precipitation. In May 1969, the danger became all too real.

“The earth gave way and came roaring down from a height of 1,000 feet, crushing trees and moving house-sized boulders,” the *Park Record* reported. The landslide ripped up power lines and blocked roads. The mud and debris eventually came to a stop in Empire Canyon, creating a 400-foot wide by 100-foot high earthen dam. Though threatening enough, one of the most dangerous aspects of the slide was not the dam itself but what it trapped: a lake of snowmelt and rain runoff estimated to be 100 feet wide and 60 feet deep.

The water trapped behind the dam threatened the homes and lives of twenty-five families who lived in Empire Canyon. They waited on tenterhooks for the word to evacuate as the dam and lake were monitored twenty-four hours a day. While water steadily leaked out the bottom and sides of the dam, the worry was that snowmelt filled the lake faster than it could safely drain.

The family most affected by the slide was that of the manager of United Park City Mines Company. Niles Andrus and his family lived in the Judge Mine superintendent’s house in Empire Canyon right next to the old Judge Mine facilities. Their home was less than 500 feet from the dam. While the families further down the canyon were safe enough to stay put while the landslide was monitored and evacuate only in case of a breach in the dam, the Andrus family faced a more present danger. They were immediately evacuated on the same night as the slide. Forced to leave behind their personal effects, they were anxious for the opportunity to return home for furniture, clothes, and more.

The 1969 slide marked the third time that the Andrus family was forced to evacuate. Almost exactly two years earlier, a previous landslide necessitated their first hasty departure. The second time was in the winter of 1968-1969 when snow depth made the canyon road impassible. The third evacuation was the final straw.

The United Park City Mines Company made the decision to move the house “to a more secure lot.” In late July 1969, the house was loaded onto a truck and began its long journey down the canyon. The feat spanned seven days and included overnight stops at the top of Main Street, the old Union Pacific Depot on Park Avenue (now Zoom Restaurant), and along Highway 248. Minor damage was sustained on the back porch, but the house was otherwise unharmed. It was settled in Thaynes Canyon and the Andrus family moved back in that fall.



Image ID: digi.2.4323

Credit: Park City Historical Society and Museum, Himes-Buck Digital Collection

Caption: Evidence of the damage at the old Judge Mine is front and center in this picture taken after a huge landslide in 1969.



(Inset)

Image ID: digi.2.4337

Credit: Park City Historical Society and Museum, Himes-Buck Digital Collection

Caption: Some power lines had to be moved in order to get the old Judge superintendent's home down narrow parts of Daly Avenue when it was moved in July 1969.