

Colorado resort has old west history

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Contributor

DUNTON, Colo. — A German's and an Austrian's fascination with the American West has put a ghost town back on the map in the mountains of southwest Colorado.

And you can rent the 100-year-old mining town of Dunton, turned exclusive resort, beginning at \$7,500 a day.

Business moguls on corporate retreats, Hollywood stars and lavish wedding planners with money to burn are the new inhabitants of the once near-worthless property.

“The cabins were falling apart, which was all right for us, because we wanted to start from scratch anyway,” said Dunton Hot Springs proprietor Bernt Kuhlmann, recalling the first time he set foot in the town on Jan. 4, 1993. The natural hot springs resort gets its name from the town, built around the hot springs in the late 1800s. The Emma Mine closed in the 1940s.

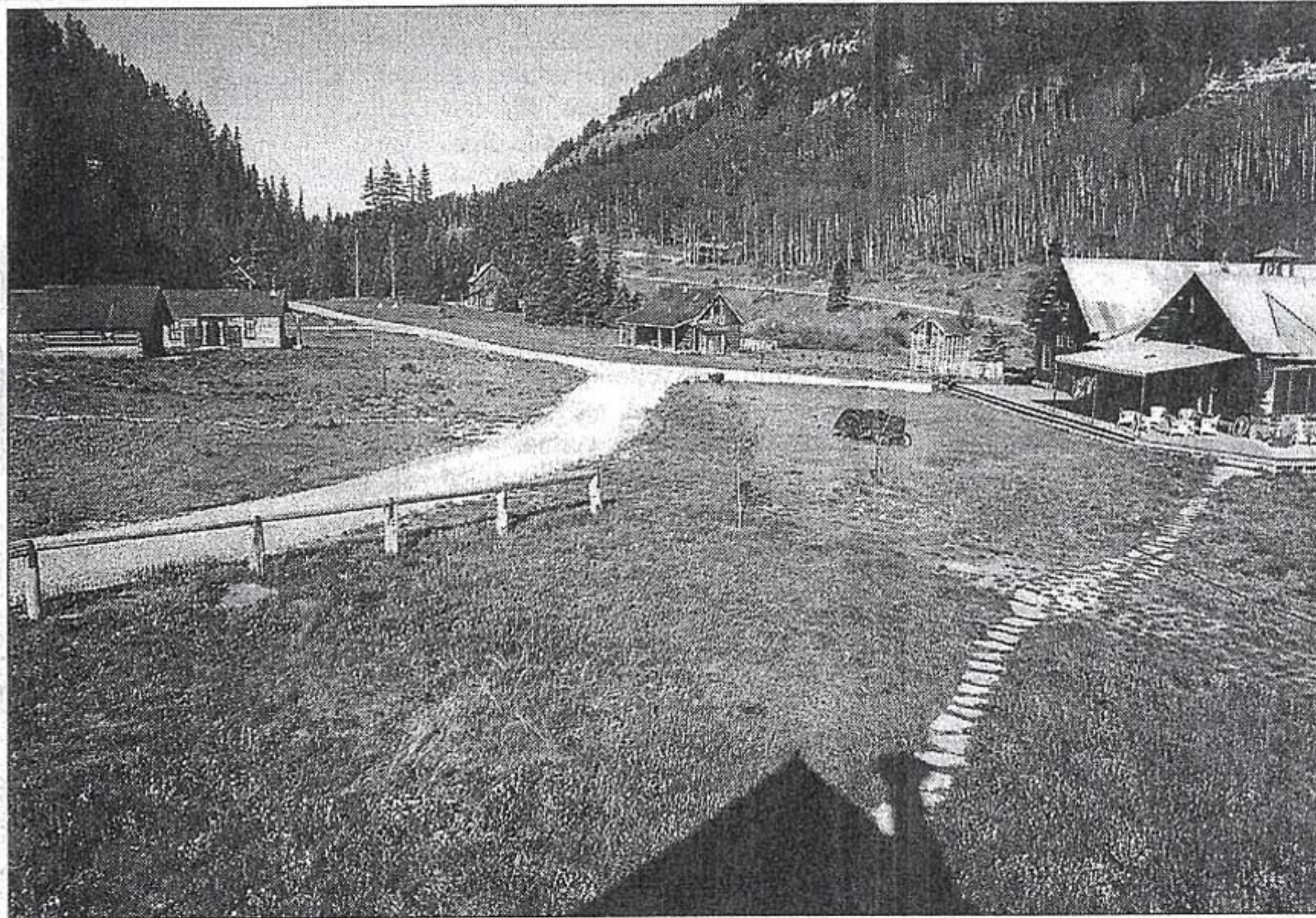
Mr. Kuhlmann, an Austrian, and his German partner Christoph Henkel, businessmen and investors who have backgrounds in Hollywood film production, came to Dunton because they heard the entire town of 20 surviving structures was for sale.

Mr. Kuhlmann said they experienced a giddy excitement in the crisp mountain air at 8,900 feet, plodding around on snowshoes from one dilapidated building to another.

“We found the old bar tucked away under a bunch of debris, a tarp over it,” Mr. Kuhlmann said. “We realized we had a great opportunity here to create an interpretation of the American West. It was more than just a bunch of old buildings.” Since 1994, they have invested \$6 million in Dunton.

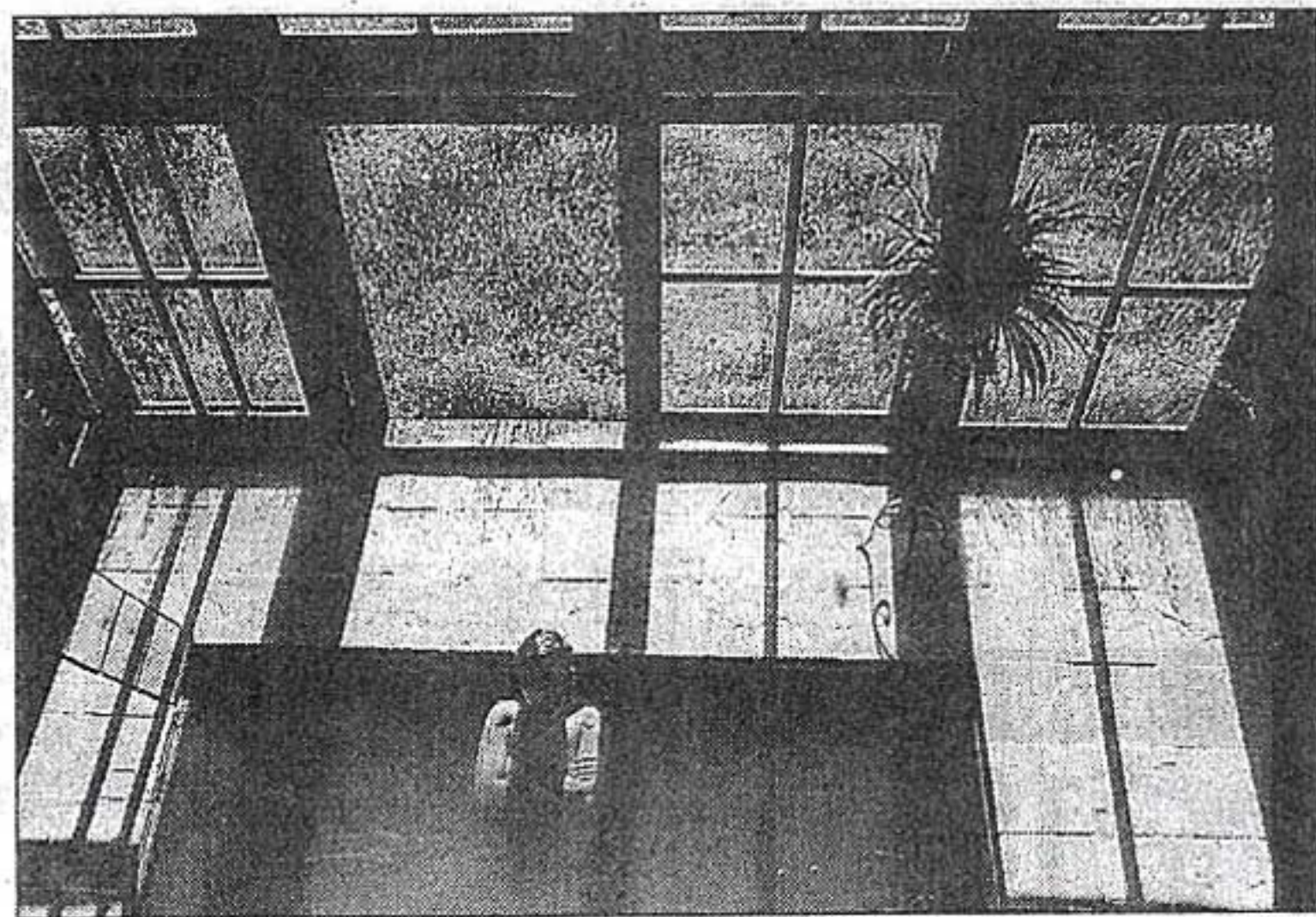
The top of the bar, back in service at the refurbished Dunton Saloon, is a mosaic of names carved in the wood, “Butch and Sundance” among them. It may not be a fake. Dunton was around in the late 1800s when the Hollywood-glorified outlaws Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid robbed a bank at Telluride 25 miles away.

“Dunton just drips with history,” says Telluride architect George Greenbank, who grew up there in the 1960s and 1970s. He knows the area's history and puts Dunton



JONATHAN DOWNEY

The open space at Dunton is sometimes used as a landing pad for a helicopter taxi service.



Togo Bungton of Mongolia relaxes at one of the indoor natural hot springs at Dunton.

along Butch and Sundance's escape route through the San Juan Mountains.

Mr. Greenbank helped Mr. Kuhlmann dismantle 100-year-old log cabins throughout southwest Colorado, numbering logs and hauling truckloads up mountain roads for reassembly at Dunton to replace cabins beyond repair.

The restored cabins look just as they did a hundred years ago, but the insides have changed. There is

hot-water heat from pipes under wooden floors, spacious modern bathrooms, European antique furnishings and telephone jacks linked to a fiberoptic cable for high speed Internet videoconferencing.

Meals are by a European master chef whose entrees span the culinary spectrum. In addition to local fare, dinner may be sushi and sashimi, an Italian dish, French cuisine, Latin American food or Austrian Alpine venison flown in by heli-

copter.

The guest book at Dunton is signed by a lot of Europeans.

Mr. Greenbank said Dunton's renaissance is intended to replicate the “high style” of Telluride during the boom town gold mining years of the late 1800s.

“Dunton had the same kind of high times, when a poor immigrant could come to town, go out on the hillside and find a lode of gold, make a claim and sell it to some corporation and be set for life,” Mr. Greenbank said. “They would have a nice house and entertain people and live in a high style.”

Dunton has a 35-foot waterfall cascading off the San Juan Mountains, hot springs downtown and a trout stream running through it. It also is close to Telluride, playground of the rich and famous. But the town had been for sale for 12 years when Mr. Kuhlmann and Mr. Henkel arrived.

Abandoned those years with roofs and walls caving in everywhere, Dunton became a party place for the free-spirited, among them motorcycle gangs that shot up the place and, on peaceful days, back-to-nature volleyball players performing in the nude.

In the 1970s Dunton had a burly

caretaker people knew as Kenny, who would pick and choose who came to town, Mr. Greenbank said.

“Pretty much if you wanted to go to Dunton you had to get along with Kenny. I always found that a good icebreaker was to always take him a 12-pack of beer.”

Today, the double-occupancy admission price is \$750-a-day from December through March and June through September for a cabin, dance hall with good acoustics for a band, indoor/outdoor hot springs and meals in the saloon. The price drops to \$500 a day in the off-seasons of April through May and October through November.

A group of 24 that takes over the whole town can rack up a daily tab of \$7,500 to \$12,000, the price depending on the food served and whether alcoholic beverages and other services are included.

Dunton's chef is Eamonn O'Hara, an Irish expatriate and former executive sous-chef at the Bel-Air Hotel in Beverly Hills, Calif., and former executive chef at Telluride's upper crust Peaks Resort.

Mr. O'Hara, who with his wife also manages Dunton Hot Springs, says he never expected to be pampering the rich and famous in a Colorado ghost town.

“My wife saw the newspaper ad,” Mr. O'Hara said. “For 20 years, I've been in a kitchen with a pair of white checks on, and this gave me so many different things to do besides the cooking.” For additional cost, Dunton offers European wines, microbrewed beer, horseback riding, fly fishing, massage therapy, mountain biking, hiking and heli-skiing.

Telluride working people who in the 1970s went to Dunton on their days off, long for the days when Kenny the caretaker rented cabins, with pails, for \$10 and \$20 a night.

“We bathed naked on the waterfalls,” said Christel Leimgruber, owner of a Telluride restaurant of the same name. “I just wish people still had access to Dunton. But they [Mr. Kuhlmann and Mr. Henkel] did a great job with it. Otherwise, it would have just been demolished, and nobody would ever have a clue that there was something wonderful there.”

Dunton Hot Springs can be reached at 970-882-4800; www.duntonhotsprings.com.