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IN DEFENSE OF THE MODERN COMPANY TOWN:

WYOMING'S URANIUM COMMUNITIES

by

Zachary R. Larsen

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

History

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ABSTRACT

In Defense of the Modern Company Town:

Wyoming's Uranium Communities

by

Zachary R. Larsen, Master of Arts

Utah State University, 2019

Major Professor: Dr. Lawrence Culver
Department: History

A common theme in industrial history is the company town. Such towns existed for a variety of reasons, but especially in the Western United States, they appeared in conjunction with labor-intensive industries that sprang up in isolated regions. Companies in such industries as mining and logging had little choice but to provide towns complete with housing, recreation opportunities and stores for basic necessities. Such towns developed a reputation of poor living conditions, paternalism, discrimination, and general exploitation. However, company towns improved over time, and later towns, especially in the West were generally more free and pleasant places to live than their older, Eastern counterparts.

Historians generally assume that company towns generally died out in the immediate post-war period. Indeed, James Allen, the pioneer of company town historical

scholarship argued in the 1960s that modern transportation networks had all-but eliminated the necessity for the company town.¹

Despite the growth of such networks in the West, Wyoming continued to build and support company towns that, in one case, survived into the early 2000s. Using two such towns supported by Wyoming's uranium industry supported from the mid-1950s to the mid-1980s, this thesis argues that these modern company towns were not only largely undeserving of the sordid company town reputation, but actually had very tangible advantages for residents, the company, and especially for the local economy. Furthermore, it argues that since companies responsible for these towns financed their growth, they had characteristics that set them apart from company towns of previous generations, and that they represent a new, largely unstudied era in western, urban, and industrial history.

(129 pages)

1 James B. Allen, *The Company Town in the American West* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966).

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

In Defense of the Modern Company Town:

Wyoming's Uranium Communities

Zachary Larsen

Most people are at least aware that, in the past, companies that owned mines, lumber mills, and other large-scale industrial projects in isolated areas also ran company towns. For many people, such towns conjure up images miserable working conditions, exploitative company stores, and inadequate shacks for most workers, while managers live in relative luxury up on “snob knob.” Most people are also fairly certain that such towns, at least in the United States, died out about the same time as the horse and buggy. Several industries in Wyoming, however, continued to support company towns through the end of the 20th century, with one such town surviving into the early 2000s.

This project looks at two of these towns supported by the uranium mining and milling industry that dominated central Wyoming's economy for about 30 years starting in the mid-1950s. These towns, Gas Hills and Jeffrey City, along with Wyoming's other modern company towns represent a new era in the history of these communities. Furthermore, they actually had many advantages for inhabitants, companies, and the local economy, especially compared to a small conventional community located near a resource boom. Often, and in contrast to the towns in this thesis, conventional towns must scramble to meet the demands of a massive migration, only to be left with unpaid bonds when the resource dries up or becomes no longer profitable.

DEDICATION

To Alyssa, my incredible wife, partner, and companion.
You gave me the two sweetest boys in the world, and all you got in exchange was this
crappy thesis.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The number of people who have influenced me, guided me, supported me, and otherwise helped me keep my sanity as I've completed this project are too numerous to mention, and undoubtedly some will be forgotten, for which I apologize in advance. I would like to thank Dr. Lawrence Culver for his constant effort, feedback, and advice. I can't imagine having had a more dedicated advisor. Dr. Susan Neel, an original committee member, offered me ample enthusiasm and excitement during the research phases of this thesis, and was extremely generous with her time. To my final committee members, Dr. Rebecca Andersen and Dr. Lisa Gabbert, I am extremely grateful for their willingness to take on yet another short-notice project. Additionally, Dr. Daniel McInerney and Dr. Kyle Bulthuis mentored me more than they know, and I was extremely lucky to work for them in their teaching and grading. Furthermore, passive voice is no longer used in my writing, thanks to Kyle.

To my cohort, I wish to express my gratitude. The courses we took together, and the time we spent chatting in the Graduate Assistant office were some of the most enjoyable, challenging, and intellectually stimulating experiences of my life. Each of you helped make me a better historian.

My parents, Lloyd and Rebecca Larsen have taken a deep interest in this project and have always been willing to listen to frustrations and offer valuable suggestions. Their help, encouragement, and support means the world to me! My in-laws, John and Mary Wright have also bent over backwards to support me and my little family as I've worked to complete this project. Thank you to all of them.

Aside from my parents, nobody has been a better mentor for me than Dr. Brent Bills. I am forever indebted to him for the many afternoons and evenings turned late nights we spent talking about life, history, politics, and faith. His example of generosity, love of learning, friendship, and kindness will be an inspiration for me for the rest of my life. Rest in Peace, Brent!

Finally, and most importantly, my wife Alyssa, and my two sweet boys Theodore and Frederick have supported me, dealt with my frustration, and been the most important link to fragile sanity on many occasions. I love you all!

Zachary Larsen

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

A large portion of central Wyoming is dominated by a mostly uninhabited high altitude sagebrush desert. The western edge of the desert consists the towns of Lander, Riverton, and Shoshoni. Wyoming's second-largest city, Casper, bookends the east. Only a few cattle ranches inhabit the area, intermixed with tiny settlements with names like Hiland (population 10), Waltman, Lysite, Muddy Gap, Powder River (population 42), or Alcova – easily the largest with a population of 76.

In spite of its desolation, portions of this desert roughly halfway between the size of Rhode Island and Delaware has been the setting for important events. Sometime around a millennium ago, Athabaskan Indians – relatives of modern Navajo and Apache people – carved hundreds of petroglyphs into sandstone cliffs in the middle of this desert at a place now called Castle Gardens. In the middle-1800s, European immigrants crossed this sagebrush desert on their way to Oregon, California, or Utah, leaving their mark on Independence Rock. At a place called Martin's Cove, hundreds of Mormon immigrants took shelter when they became stranded on the trail by an October 1847 snowstorm. One and a half centuries years later, a portion of this desert called Hell's Half Acre assumed the name Planet Klendathu for the 1997 movie *Starship Troopers*.

For about 30 years starting in the mid-1950s, things in the desert were very different. It all started on a warm Sunday, Sept. 13, 1953. Riverton, Wyoming residents Neil and Maxine McNeice – a machine shop owner and a school nurse – loaded up their Dodge Power Wagon pickup truck with a picnic, hunting equipment, and the Geiger

counter that Maxine got for Neil as the previous year's Christmas present. It was a perfect day for antelope hunting. It was an even better day for uranium prospecting. A company newspaper would later describe the outing as follows:

Their immediate objective for the day was an isolated area marked on the sketchy map as the "Gas Hills" – a desolate, barren jumble of rolling sagebrush hills and eroded rocks[.] ... Approaching the Gas Hills from the west, Neil tried out the Geiger counter on many of the eroded exposures but no rewarding "clicks" came through. After eating their lunch on what is now known as Picnic Hill,[...] Neil idly swept the surrounding country for antelope signs, meanwhile studying through his field glasses each rock exposure coming into his field of vision. He noted one particular spot, about one-half a mile away, near the base of another small erosional remnant, whose color appeared to be somewhat different than the surrounding area. He and Maxine strolled over, looked at the oddly colored sandstone, placed the Geiger counter on it – and the needle went off the dial! The seed was planted for the great Gas Hills industrial complex.¹

The McNeice discovery would spark other discoveries in the region. Just over four years later, a restaurant owner turned uranium tycoon from Rawlins named Robert "Bob Adams inaugurated the state's first uranium mill in Crook's Gap– about 30 miles to the south. Soon thereafter, Gas Hills would be home to three additional uranium mills.

Uranium mining and milling operations in central Wyoming grew to employ thousands of people. Drove of these workers moved to the region with their families where Jeffrey City, and Gas Hills grew to sizable populations. Each of these company towns spent time as Fremont County's third largest town.² Jeffrey City peaked in 1980 with an estimated population of 5,000 people, making it one of the 20 largest towns in the

1 Lucky Mc Newspaper, "The Story of Lucky MC," *Lucky Mc Newspaper*, February 1962, 1.

2 "Riverton Population Hits 6,784; Gas Hills Third Largest, Has 1,129," *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, May 17, 1960), Vol. 54, No. 22 edition, sec. A.

state.³ At its peak in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Gas Hills housed more than 1,000 residents.⁴

Historiography

The company town's reputation is a sordid one. Just the term – company town – conjures up stereotypical images of what historian Margaret Crawford describes as “dusk to dawn labor; tarpapered shanties; trainloads of strikebreakers imported at any hint of labor unrest; [and] wages paid in scrip good only at a monopolistic store.”⁵ Musician Tennessee Ernie Ford played on these stereotypes in his 1955 hit where the song's protagonist claimed to be ineligible for heaven because “I sold my soul to the company store.”⁶ Though Crawford herself recognizes that these stereotypes themselves are outdated, they prevail. However, historians of company towns have recognized that in general, company towns improved with time, and such towns in the West, which came later, were often much more free and pleasant places to live than their earlier counterparts. Her work generally agrees with the pioneering study of the western

3 Population figures for these towns are difficult to estimate accurately. The generally agreed upon 4,000-5,000 places it at about 17th based on the 1980 census data found at State of Wyoming Economic Analysis Division, “HISTORICAL DECENNIAL CENSUS POPULATION FOR WYOMING COUNTIES, CITIES, AND TOWNS,” accessed January 31, 2017, http://eadiv.state.wy.us/demog_data/cnty_city_hist.htm.

4 Ibid.

5 Margaret Crawford, *Building the Workingman's Paradise: The Design of American Company Towns*, Haymarket series (London; New York: Verso, 1995), 8.

6 Tennessee Ernie Ford, *Sixteen Tons*, 1955.

American company town, James Allen's *Company Town in the American West*, which is an extensive study including nearly two hundred of these towns from a variety of time periods and industries. Allen states that in the west, "owners of many company towns actually had the interests of their employees at heart in the operation of company houses, company stores, and other economic activities."⁷ Especially after the Pullman Strike of 1894, company town managers stopped trying to exercise strict social control over their residents, and instead, writes Margaret Crawford, "attempted to attract workers by providing significantly better working and living conditions."⁸

The historiography of the company town as a topic is incomplete. Allen and later historians of the topic largely ignore more modern, post-1940s towns, and focus mostly either on specific attributes of these towns, or on towns located in a specific location or managed by a specific company.⁹

Like company towns of previous generations, the isolated location of Wyoming's uranium deposits made the creation Gas Hills and Jeffrey City advantageous, if not an outright necessity. However, unlike previous towns, this isolation was on a much smaller scale. Modern transportation ensured that residents were at most hours, instead of days

7 Allen, *The Company Town in the American West*, x.

8 Crawford, *Building the Workingman's Paradise*, 3.

9 For example, Linda Carlson, *Company Towns of the Pacific Northwest* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003) talks about the layout, planning, and design of mostly lumber towns of the Pacific Northwest from an architectural history standpoint while Keith Petersen, *Company Town: Potlatch, Idaho, and the Potlatch Lumber Company* (Pullman, Wash.: Moscow, Idaho: Washington State University Press; Latah County Historical Society, 1987). gives a scholarly community history of one town built and operated by the Weierhauser Syndicate.

away from large conventional towns. Additionally, modern communication technologies ensured that residents were far less emotionally and culturally isolated than previous company town residents.

Historians have performed very little research about on modern company towns. Most exceptions focus on specific towns or towns in specific industries. The Atlantic Richfield Company (ARCO), established a town in northeastern Wyoming called Wright in 1976, to house workers for its newly-created Thunder Basin coal mine. ARCO hired historian Robert Righter to write the history of its town. The result was the 1985 book, *The Making of a Town, Wright, Wyoming*.¹⁰ Though Wright shares many attributes with the state's uranium towns, especially in terms of housing, Wright differs significantly in its contemporaries in that ARCO hoped to incorporate and relinquish its company town as soon as feasible to do so. As such, neither Righter nor ARCO refer to the town as a company town. Wright incorporated in 1985.

Additionally, some scholarship exists on Wyoming's uranium mining towns and uranium industry. Michael Amundson's article *Home on the Range No More* gives a brief history of Jeffrey City and talks about its ultimate decline.¹¹ Jeffrey City also features prominently in his 2001 book, *Yellowcake Towns: Uranium Mining Communities in the American West*. In *Yellowcake Towns*, Amundson focuses on the effects of federal uranium mining policies and their effects on towns whose economies were substantially influenced by the uranium market. Amundson chose Jeffrey City as well as Uravan,

10 Robert W. Righter, *The Making of a Town: Wright, Wyoming* (Boulder, Colo: R. Rinehart, 1985).

11 Michael A. Amundson, "Home on the Range No More: The Boom and Bust of a Wyoming Uranium Mining Town, 1957-1988," *Western Historical Quarterly*, no. Winter 1995 (1995).

Colorado because they were company towns, and served as a good comparison to the two uranium dominated incorporated towns in his study: Moab, Utah and Grants, New Mexico. Amundson does offer some discussion on the company town and atomic age aspects of these towns, but his main focus is the effects of the federal policies on the single-industry towns.

Most recently, Charles “Don” Snow, a retired geologist for Lucky Mc, one of Wyoming’s major uranium companies wrote a largely autobiographical but well-sourced account of the area’s uranium industry. His book, *Chasing Gas Hills Yellowcake* is certainly written from a geologist perspective, as there is no shortage of technical details. It also lacks substantial discussion on the communities that the companies built to support the industry, and is understandably, but unfortunately primarily focused on Lucky Mc, at the expense of other uranium companies. It is however a valuable contribution to Wyoming’s uranium history, and I gained many valuable insights into the industry from Snow’s effort.

Finally, one prominent atomic town has received significant interest from historians. Richland, Washington was essentially a government-run company town that supplied employees to the Hanford nuclear site. In 2011, Bruce William Hevley and John M. Findlay published *Atomic Frontier Days: Hanford in the American West*.¹² Their book is the pioneering study on the atomic history of the Tri-cities area, its selection as the site for America’s first plutonium plant, its history, and the continuing issues with the area’s

12 John M. Findlay and Bruce William Hevly, *Atomic Frontier Days: Hanford and the American West*, Emil & Kathleen Sick series in Western history and biography (Seattle: Center for the Study of the Pacific Northwest in association with University of Washington Press, 2011).

contamination with radiation. More recently, in 2015, Kate Brown published *Plutopia: Nuclear Families, Atomic Cities, and the Great Soviet and American Plutonium Disasters*.¹³ Her groundbreaking study compares the life of Hanford plant workers with those in the Soviet Union's first plutonium plant in Ozersk, Russia. Essentially, she finds that despite the distance, the difference in the host countries' economic systems, and all other social, economic, and political differences, these two towns have a great deal in common. Both experienced an abundance of availability of food, drink, and consumer goods during times of economic difficulty of their host countries. She argues, in essence, that the governments responsible for managing these plants essentially exchanged a high standard of living for likely knowingly exposing their workers to toxic substances. Above all, she argues that both plants were responsible for a level of environmental pollution and degradation on a greater scale than any nuclear disaster before or since. Her insight into why people would knowingly expose themselves and their families to radiation is insightful, as is her documentation of the effects of plutonium production on 'downwinders' – those who suffered unknowingly from the effects of radioactive air, water, and land contamination.

Thesis

In this thesis, I hope to argue that despite some drawbacks, the model of modern company towns – like Jeffrey City and Gas Hills – had significant advantages for addressing problems that come from boom and bust industries. Without a company town,

13 Kate Brown, *Plutopia: Nuclear Families, Atomic Cities, and the Great Soviet and American Plutonium Disasters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

the boom-bust cycle places the strain of rapid expansion and the pain of rapid contraction on local government budgets and local infrastructure. While such towns don't make rapid expansion and contraction painless for the company towns, local incorporated towns, or their residents, the isolated, largely temporary nature of a goes a long way to relieve the strain.

Furthermore, I hope to demonstrate that this generation of company town represents a new, largely unstudied time period in the company town's history. James Allen expressed belief that new company towns would be "well-planned model communities" where "[d]evelopment firms are hired to design and build the towns, homes are sold to workers, companies operate no local businesses, and shopping centers are leased or sold to local, independent merchants."¹⁴

This new generation of company town has two defining features, apparently unanticipated by Allen. First is the reliance on manufactured housing. Every Wyoming company town built around or after 1950 used mobile homes, modular houses, or both extensively. The second feature of modern company towns – a feature unique to the towns in this thesis – is that multiple mining companies cooperated in their management, and operation. Neither town in this thesis was owned and operated by one sole uranium company during its entire existence.

Scope

I originally began this project as an attempt to more-or-less write a narrative history of Wyoming's uranium industry and the towns that the industry created to support

14 Allen, *The Company Town in the American West*, 144.

it. It turns out that such a history, while important and still on my to-do list, is far too complicated for a paper as short and structured as a Master's thesis. This thesis then is just narrowly focused on the two towns of Jeffrey City and Gas Hills – their creation, management, infrastructure, and ultimate demise, as well as their advantages and pitfalls.

A theme in this thesis is the role that the frequent boom and bust cycles of the American West play in its urbanization and settlement patterns. In regions that rely heavily on the exploitation of natural resources with volatile prices, mineral booms can bring large sums of money into local and state economies and bring employment rates to near zero, especially when these booms occur during periods of nationwide economic recession. Booms can alter or completely change the identity of such towns. Often, these booms can also create a myriad of problems for cities and towns located near that resource. Violence and other social problems can follow an influx of (often single) workers with no roots in the new boom town. Prices of goods and services skyrocket, pricing many historic residents out of the market.

Overall, I hope to demonstrate that company towns in Wyoming continued to develop and provide compelling alternatives to the rapid growth and decline of traditional communities during booms and busts. The focus of this thesis are Wyoming's uranium company towns of Jeffrey City, and Gas Hills. As the most prominent town in this thesis, with the most sources available, Jeffrey City receives most of the attention. Other company towns are mentioned and discussed in passing throughout this thesis, but fall outside the scope of this study, so they are not given extensive attention. It is noteworthy

that companies in Wyoming continued to operate towns through the end of the 20th century, long after most studies of company towns conclude.

The topic of this thesis is tangentially related to many other important topics in labor, urban, mining, atomic, and western history. However important these topics are, I want to make the company towns themselves the primary focus of this thesis. Therefore, I will cover topics such as labor relations and union activity, and the health risks and problems associated with uranium production, and other themes only inasmuch as they directly relate to the towns themselves.

Outline

After this introductory chapter, the second chapter explores the historical context in which Wyoming's uranium company towns grew. The first portion looks at five distinct periods of the atomic age in the United States, and the characteristics of the uranium production industry during each of those specific periods. Later, this chapter looks at the company town generally in the American west. More specifically, this section discusses why the company town lived on in Wyoming, and how these new Wyoming company towns represent a new generation of such towns.

Chapter three uses one of Wyoming's uranium towns – Gas Hills – as a case study on the role of transportation networks in the growth and decline of the company town in the American West. This town was not located particularly far from other, more established towns in Wyoming, but at its creation it was served only by extremely rudimentary transportation infrastructure. As infrastructure improved, culminating in a paved secondary state highway to the region, the town changed significantly.

Chapter four is about the community identity of Wyoming's most well-known uranium company town, Jeffrey City. Located too far from other population centers for easy commuting, and headed by people who were interested in providing their employees with a comfortable experience similar to contemporary conventional towns, Jeffrey City blossomed into one of the most important towns in Central Wyoming. Unlike Wyoming's other uranium towns, a few people still call Jeffrey City home, though its current population is roughly one percent of its peak nearly four decades ago.

The final chapter discusses the cataclysmic decline of the United States' domestic uranium industry following the Three Mile Island incident in 1979. Though this event and the accompanying industry decline ultimately meant the demise of these towns, the local economy would likely have experienced an even greater amount of suffering had these towns been more conventional preexisting incorporated towns. Following this chapter, a brief epilogue compares the boom and bust of these uranium towns to the more contemporary fracking oil boom in northwestern North Dakota.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Uranium Mining and the Atomic Age

This thesis has as its background the themes of uranium mining and the Atomic Age.¹ These two themes correlate in similar time periods, as demonstrated on Table 1. I've included the 1970s partly because it is an important sub-period of Late Atomic Culture, but mostly because it is a complex and important decade in its own right, and one whose study provides important historical context for the study of Jeffrey City, especially. Even though these towns existed for more than a decade by 1970, this decade represented the best of times for Wyoming's uranium. High prices led to large scale mining, and Jeffrey City reached its peak in population, culture, and identity in this decade. To this day, people who still remember Jeffrey City, mostly remember it as it was in the 1970s. The rest of this section looks at each of the periods in uranium mining history along with their corresponding period in the Atomic Age.

1 Scott C. Zeman and Michael A. Amundson, eds., *Atomic Culture: How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, Atomic history and culture (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2004).

<u>Periods in uranium mining history</u>	<u>Periods in the Atomic Age</u>
<u>Late 1800s -1948</u> –Early Uranium	<u>1945-1949</u> – Early Atomic Culture
<u>1949-1963</u> – AEC Supported Mining Boom	<u>1949-1963</u> – High Atomic Culture
<u>1963-1970</u> – Allotment Period	<u>1963-1989</u> – Late Atomic Culture
<u>1968-1979</u> – Private Market Expansion	<u>1970-1979</u> – <i>The Seventies</i>
<u>1979-Present</u> – Uranium Crash / Stagnation	<u>1990-Present</u> – Post-Atomic Culture

Table 1: Correlating Periods in Uranium Mining History and the Atomic Age

Late 1800s-1948:Early Uranium Mining

Compared to the rest of mining history, uranium mining is a very recent development. Carnotite, an ore that contains uranium, started to gain importance in the late 19th century, but because it also contains radium.² Due to the energy that radium emitted, scientists believed that it could be used to cure cancer and other illnesses. It also glows in the dark, and was used on watch and instrument dials for easier night visibility. Radium was extremely rare and valuable; a single gram could fetch as much as \$120,000.³ In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, less than 225 grams of radium were mined from more than 67,000 tons of ore processed on the Colorado Plateau.⁴ Uranium saw some use as a coloring agent in glass and clay, but it, along with vanadium were generally considered waste products of radium mining up through the 1940s.

2 Michael A. Amundson, *Yellowcake Towns: Uranium Mining Communities in the American West*, Mining the American West (Boulder, Colo: University of Colorado, 2004), 2.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., 5.

During World War II, uranium and vanadium surpassed radium in importance. Vanadium found use as a hardening component in steel alloys that the military used for armor plating⁵. More importantly, the Manhattan Project – the covert operation by the United States government during World War II to build the world’s first atomic weapon – created huge demand for uranium. This demand was kept secret, however, and one source of uranium came from covertly processing waste ore from vanadium mining into yellowcake uranium. On the Navajo Nation, the government only compensated the tribe for the exploitation of vanadium, and kept the removal and use of uranium ore secret.⁶

Early Atomic Culture: 1945-1949

Paul Boyer writes that with the atomic bombing of Japan in 1945, the Atomic Age “burst upon the world with terrifying suddenness.” He continues, “From the earliest moments, the American people recognized that things would never be the same again.”⁷ The period of early atomic culture is marked by the unprecedented anxiety that people in the United States felt when they were faced with the new, destructive power of the atom bomb. Americans were unsure of what long-term ramifications the development of atomic weapons would bring, but for a few years, they could at least be assured that the United States was the world’s sole nuclear power.

5 Ibid., 7.

6 Ibid., 5.

7 Paul S. Boyer, *By the Bomb’s Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 4.

As the period of early atomic culture continued, Boyer writes that Americans began to cope with the bombing of Japan, and the potential nuclear threat that they faced by creating fantasies of a “Techno-Atomic Utopia” He argues that “speculation about atomic energy's glorious promise enabled Americans to turn from the immediate reality of its military use, and even to view that use as a necessary stage in a larger, beneficent process.”⁸ Such visions for an atomic future included cars that could run for a lifetime without ever needing to be refueled, and a world that was engineered and subdued by atomic power. In this new world, according to a 1946 Socialist Party pamphlet, it was possible “to transform nature into the servant of man, giving him food infinitely beyond the capacity of the human appetite, clothing far more abundant than he can wear, homes for all to fill our streets with palaces.”⁹

“America,” writes Howard Ball, “ruled briefly in a semi-Pax Americana.”¹⁰ Military strategists believed that the atomic bomb eliminated the need for large armies, and that the world was secured simply because America was the sole nuclear power. This hegemony ended in August of 1949 when the Soviet Union detonated its first atomic test weapon, named Joe One, which kicked off a decades-long cold war and nuclear arms race.¹¹ The loss of America’s monopoly on atomic weaponry also ended the period of early atomic culture and launched the high atomic culture period.

8 Ibid., 124.

9 Ibid., 114.

10 Howard Ball, *Cancer Factories: America’s Tragic Quest for Uranium Self-Sufficiency*, Contributions in medical studies no. 37 (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1993), 2.

11 Ibid.

1949-1963: AEC Uranium Mining Boom and High Atomic Culture

The nuclear arms race coupled with aforementioned techno-utopic hopes that nuclear power could create peaceful, abundant, safe, and inexpensive energy created a massive appetite for uranium by the United States Government, which it consumed in building a nuclear arsenal, in research and development of nuclear power, and in other nuclear research. The Government established a civilian organization, The Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), to promote and oversee uranium mining and the development of nuclear technologies. The AEC set itself up as the sole legal purchaser of processed yellowcake uranium, promised a healthy price for uranium, and even offered a \$10,000 bonus on initial delivery of “20 tons of ore or concentrates that assay 20 percent or more in uranium oxide, provided that the material comes from a new, previously unworked deposit”.^{12 13}

The AEC incentives set off the first large uranium prospecting and mining boom in the country and led to discoveries of uranium deposits all over the western United States. Charlie Steen’s Mi Vida mine near Moab, Utah is probably the most well-known of these discoveries. Steen, a trained geologist, began searching for uranium in the late 1940s in Southern Utah, after hearing about the AEC incentives. He searched unsuccessfully for years, housing his family in a tar-paper shack and relying on occasional financial help from his mother. On July 6, 1952, while drilling core samples on some of his claims, his drill broke. He saw no sign of the bright yellow rock that

¹² “Uranium Changes Economy of West, AEC Man Declares,” *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, June 1, 1954), sec. 1.

¹³ “’49 Uranium Rush,” *Popular Mechanics*, February 1949.

indicated the presence of uranium. Frustrated, he threw the core samples in his beat up Willys jeep, drove to town, where a gas station attendant with a Geiger counter tested the samples. The Geiger counter clicked wildly on one specific core, which contained pitchblende, a dark, sticky substance that contains a very high concentration of uranium. Near Moab Utah, Steen opened up his Mi Vida mine, which became one of the most wealthy uranium mines in the country.¹⁴ After Steen made a massive fortune, he would win a seat in the U.S. Senate from the State of Utah, resign and move to Nevada, build a mansion, go bankrupt, and live the rest of his life in relative obscurity.¹⁵

Meanwhile, in Wyoming, these same incentives led to a similar discovery by Neil McNeice – a machine shop owner/operator, his wife Maxine – a school nurse, and their friend, Lowell Morfeld – an oilfield worker. “We both [McNeice and Morfeld] were reading about uranium and geology.” explained Neil McNeice. “[W]e talked about about uranium prospecting and made a verbal agreement to be partners in uranium prospecting. Our agreement was simple, if one of us found it, we were both there.”¹⁶ On Sept. 13, 1953, The McNeices embarked on the prospecting trip that would burst the uranium industry open in central Wyoming. As soon as they returned, the McNeices filed eight mining claims, with more the following week. Morfeld and the McNeices named their company Lucky Mc (pronounced “Lucky Mack”), because of the Lucky McNeices.

14 Raye Carleson Ringholz, *Uranium Frenzy: Saga of the Nuclear West*, Rev. and expanded ed. (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 2002), 57–70.

15 Ibid., 215–234.

16 “Morfeld-McNeice Made Big Find That Started Gas Hills Uranium,” *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, June 19, 1980).

As Lucky Mc continued to expand their claims portfolio, they sought a business interest with the experience and equipment necessary to develop the claims. They soon attracted the interest of Utah Construction Company, a well-established and successful construction firm known for its work in such projects as the Hoover Dam and the Alaska Highway. Utah Construction was looking to branch out into mining. Utah agreed to spend at least \$300,000 to develop Lucky Mc uranium assets, and the two companies eventually merged.¹⁷ Lucky Mc built a camp in Gas Hills, and would continue to expand its uranium mining operations, opening a mine, mill, and a company town in the Shirley Basin area of Wyoming in the late 1950s, and a large mine near Crook's Gap in the mid-1970s.

The uranium operations controlled by the Lucky Mc division of the newly-renamed Utah Construction & Mining Company were so successful that the company went public on the New York Stock Exchange in 1969, and in the largest corporate merger in US history up to the time, merged with General Electric in 1976.^{18 19} The uranium assets in Wyoming were instrumental in this merger because they gave GE a direct source of fuel for the nuclear power plants that they were developing. In June of 1978, as the company developed uranium assets further away from McNeil's original

17 Charles Snow, *Chasing Gas Hills Yellowcake*, 1st edition. (Reno, NV: LeRue Press under imprint LeRue Books, 2013), 65–66.

18 “Lucky Mc, GE, Utah International: Largest Corporate Merger,” *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, June 16, 1977).

19 Herbert Koshetz, “G.E.-Utah International Merger, A \$2.17 Billion Deal, Is Approved,” *New York Times* (New York, NY, December 16, 1976).

discovery, Lucky Mc, now a division of GE, changed their name to Pathfinder Mines Corporation.²⁰

The McNeices and Morfelds stayed heavily involved in Wyoming's uranium industry for several years. By 1955, the Neil McNeice still operated his machine shop and he and Maxine had their first child. Maxine no longer worked as a school nurse. She and Mary Morfeld described themselves as "uranium widows" as their husbands began spending more and more time with their growing mining juggernaut. Lowell Morfeld took over supervising mining operations.²¹ As the company grew, both the McNeices and the Morfelds stepped back from the daily operation of the company while remaining financially invested; they enjoyed a substantial windfall, and donated generously. Lowell Morfeld, especially, was a major benefactor to Central Wyoming College, whose student center bears his name.²²

Meanwhile, a restaurant owner in Rawlins, Wyoming, Robert W. "Bob" Adams, became fascinated by uranium when he read about Charlie Steen in a 1952 edition of the *Saturday Evening Post*. When he heard about the Lucky Mc Discovery in 1953, he decided to start looking. As he searched for uranium, he quickly burned through the \$5,000 he had saved for that purpose, as well as an additional \$70,000. Finding uranium had become an obsession. "A doctor's specimen, I'm sure, would have sat a Geiger

20 Jeffrey City News, "Lucky Mc Changes Name to Pathfinder," *Jeffrey City News* (Jeffrey City, Wyoming, June 22, 1978).

21 "Maxine McNeice, Mary Morfeld Are Typical Uranium Widows," *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, March 1, 1955).

22 "Morfeld | MiningHallOfFame.Org," accessed April 23, 2019, <https://mininghalloffame.org/inductee/morfeld>.

counter to ticking,” he said.²³ In March, 1955, he founded a stock company called Lost Creek Oil and Uranium. Selling shares at 10 cents a piece, he raised nearly \$300,000, which allowed him to continue his search. He located viable deposits of uranium about 30 miles south of Gas Hills in the Crooks gap area, and felt that the surest way to be profitable in the uranium business was to mill as well as mine the metal.

In August 1956, Adams acquired a contract with the AEC to build Wyoming’s first uranium mill, and found financial backing to the tune of roughly \$5,000,000.²⁴ These backers included a prominent Rawlins physician, Dr. C. W. Jeffreys, who had made a small fortune investing in oil. The backers suggested that he change the name of his company to Western Nuclear, Inc., which occurred in December, 1959.²⁵

Prior to Adams’ discovery, almost nothing besides ranches dotted highway 287, between Lander and Muddy Gap, Wyoming. Beulah and Samuel Peterson had acquired a homestead near Crook’s Gap in 1930, which they named Home on the Range. They moved to Wyoming on the advice that the high and dry air would prolong the life Samuel, who had been gassed in World War I.²⁶ The highway came through the area in 1937, and the Petersons began selling gasoline and snacks to passers-by. When the Split Rock post office closed, Beulah began taking mail for nearby ranchers. By the 1950s, Home on the

23 “Western Nuclear Corporation Has Adventure, Daring Filled History,” *Wyoming State Tribune and Eagle* (Casper, WY, July 26, 1957).

24 William Anthony Romek, “Anthony Romek Reminisces” (Montana Historical Society Research Center, 1979).

25 Ibid.

26 Beulah Walker, interview by Mark Unge, Cassette, May 3, 1989, Wyoming State Archives.

Range had grown in importance, and the Petersons even occasionally provided lodging and meals in addition to fuel, snacks, and other necessities to travelers.

On September 12, 1957, Adams dedicated Wyoming's first uranium processing mill, and the town his company built just west of Home on the Range to support its mining and milling operations. Much to the chagrin of the Petersons, Adams named the town Jeffrey City, in honor of Dr. Jeffreys instead of "Home on the Range." As postmistress, she took mail for early Jeffrey City residents, but returned them to sender if the town's name was Jeffrey City instead of Home on the Range. Peterson later relinquished her postmistress duties, which she had been performing free of charge, and turned them over to the company.²⁷ Peterson and Home on the Range remained an important fixture in the area, but Jeffrey City quickly overshadowed her beloved homestead as hundreds of workers and their families moved into the area. Mrs. Peterson eventually grew to enjoy having necessary services close by, and even sold some of her original homestead to Western Nuclear as they expanded.²⁸

Jeffrey City would grow to become Fremont County's third largest city, with a population of somewhere between 3,500 and 5,000. It would boast bars and restaurants, grocery stores, a bowling alley, Olympic-sized pool, and a high school. Adams stayed involved in both the town and the company for its lifetime. He would later spin off Western Nuclear to a company called Energy Fuels, which branched out into coal and gold mining. He also ran a sundry of other businesses. His business interests kept his

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

personal life turbulent. He “married four times, but to only two women. ‘I guess I was just too busy. But they are both lovely girls.’”²⁹

A machinist, oil worker, and restaurateur were not the only unlikely prospectors to strike it rich in Wyoming’s uranium rush. Cotter Ferguson, a traveling clothing salesman, and Irv Marshak, a clothing dealer also founded what would become a massive uranium-based empire in the Gas Hills. Ferguson’s wife sent Mr. Ferguson newspaper clippings about uranium while he was working in Washington State. He and Marshak returned to Wyoming with a Geiger counter and, with the help of some friends from Illinois, they staked claims and formed the Gas Hills Uranium Company, Inc.³⁰ In 1957, Gas Hills Uranium began a partnership with a subsidiary of Federal Uranium. Together, Federal Gas Hills Partners contracted with the AEC and built a uranium processing mill in 1959. They built some site-built cinder block homes and provided mobile home spaces for their employees. Later, in 1967, Gas Hills Uranium changed their name to American Uranium, and the partnership became Federal American Partners. Throughout the history of uranium production in Wyoming, Federal Gas Hills Partners (later called Federal American Partners) was one of the most prominent companies, falling only behind Lucky Mc and Western Nuclear in production and importance. Federal American was the principal supplier for the Tennessee Valley Authority’s nuclear power plants.

Uranium mining and milling occurred at a feverish pace in central Wyoming, but due to the area’s isolation and lack of infrastructure, workers and their families had little choice but to form communities with others in the same circumstance. As a result,

29 Bob Peck, “Bob Adams: Mining Man of Action,” *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, June 19, 1980).

30 Snow, *Chasing Gas Hills Yellowcake*, 149.

population numbers in Jeffrey City and the Gas Hills swelled in the 1950s and early 1960s. At least six companies built housing camps of some kind in the Gas Hills prior to 1963.³¹ The most notable town sites, or camps in the Gas Hills (and the two most discussed in this thesis) were the Lucky Mc camp and the Federal camp.

The importance of uranium for central Wyoming was apparent, even from the very beginning. Less than a year after the McNeice discovery, the June 29, 1954, *Riverton Ranger* editorialized,

People who have become interested in the Fremont county uranium boom are playing a part in one chapter of the great story called the Atomic Age. [...] The excitement found in the discovery and conquest of uranium is just as thrilling as the Gold Rush fever of a century ago, and the rewards may be just as lucrative for the successful, the heartaches as real for the disappointed.³²

Within a very short time, the uranium industry would dominate central Wyoming. By January of 1956, Riverton had an AEC buying station.³³ By the late 1957, Western Nuclear's uranium processing mill became Wyoming's first. By 1962, the state would have six mills.³⁴ The state quickly became one of the major uranium producers in the country and dozens of companies, both established firms and hopeful startups, muscled in

31 Floyd Davis Everett and Harold J. Bennet, *Mining Practices at Four Uranium Properties in the Gas Hills, Wyoming* (Washington DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Mines, 1963), 4.

32 "Front Stage of Act One on the Atomic Stage," *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, June 29, 1954), sec. A.

33 "Wyoming's First Uranium Ore-Buying Station Is Now Complete At Riverton," *Riverton Ranger*, January 6, 1955.

34 "Nuclear Age Lives On in Fremont County," *Riverton Ranger Mining Edition* (Riverton, WY, December 4, 1962).

for a portion of the country's newest promising uranium market. These companies brought thousands of people to these once isolated areas in search of employment.

High Atomic Culture: 1949-1963

The omnipresence of the atom in American culture was not limited to mining activities, or in uranium producing regions. Atomic imagery thrived in popular culture nationwide. This period of high atomic culture is marked with an explosion of atomic-themed movies, television, and music, even children's games and toys.³⁵ For example, an episode of the Lucy-Desi Comedy Hour had Lucy, Fred, and Ethyl prospecting for uranium near Las Vegas, where Ricky was playing a concert. In order to get Ricky's approval, Lucy has a novelty newspaper printed up with a headline about a discovery of uranium near Las Vegas. When a hotel housekeeper finds the discarded novelty paper, a rush of people go searching for uranium, managing only to locate the small piece of uranium ore used to calibrate the just-purchased Geiger counter.³⁶ In a 1960 episode of the television program *Lassie*, Timmy manages to avoid becoming trapped under a tractor long enough to find a radioactive army experiment – the nosecone from an Army rocket containing a guinea pig. When questioned about tampering with the experiment, and upon being informed about the danger of radiation, Timmy responds, "I haven't seen any ray-day-ay-shun! Honest!"³⁷

35 Zeman and Amundson, *Atomic Culture*, 2.

36 Jeffrey Thorpe, "Lucy Hunts Uranium," *The Lucy Desi Comedy Hour*, January 3, 1958.

37 "The Space Traveler," *Lassie*, January 10, 1960.

The previously mentioned techno-utopic dreams for uranium's promise reached their absolute peak during the period of High Atomic Culture. It's almost impossible to exaggerate just how much promise the power of the atom held in the collective American conscious. Contemporary writer, Al Look writes that "Atomic Power is no respecter of time or place. It can be used on the seashore or desert, mountain top or ocean bottom."³⁸ Look and other people of this time period even believed that the time would soon come when "man will be able to control the weather. This means that in time of war, lightning and hurricanes can be guided to the enemy stronghold, and drought or floods can be delivered to those we hate."³⁹

1963-1970 – Allotment Period, Late Atomic Culture Begins

Between 1953 and 1962, the AEC, which purchased refined yellowcake from privately owned mills, periodically renegotiated contracts with mills to ensure an adequate supply. In 1959, they had negotiated contracts that kept uranium producers working through 1967. However, the AEC shortly realized that their stockpiles would soon become too large. In November, 1960, the AEC announced a policy that would enable producers to "stretch out" their production. Generally, companies had the option to either produce up to 50% more total uranium, but at a reduced price, and with production stretched out until 1970, or to maintain their current contracts with no guarantee of price or market after 1967. Most companies took advantage of the stretch-out program, but some companies that had continued to produce at high levels, hoping for a private market

38 Al Look, *U-Boom: Uranium on the Colorado Plateau* (Colorado: Bell Press, 1956), 189.

39 Ibid., 191.

that did not materialize soon enough either went bankrupt or had to suddenly and severely scale back activity when their AEC contracts expired. By the end of the allotment period, many uranium companies had either gone out of business, or had been absorbed by larger firms. Four major uranium producers remained in Wyoming, and three of them operated towns of some kind. Western Nuclear ran Jeffrey City. Lucky Mc and Federal American Partners ran camps in the Gas Hills. Lucky Mc also ran a town in Shirley Basin. Finally Globe / Union Carbide ran a mill in the Gas Hills, and at least in 1963, operated a small camp, but I have seen very little information about it.⁴⁰ The allotment period represents a low point in the population and culture of Wyoming's uranium towns, as well as in the market generally. Wyoming's uranium towns languished in the stretch-out period with less prominence in the State's economy and politics. As a result, Wyoming's uranium towns saw decreases in population as uranium workers left to find work in other places and industries.

Late Atomic Culture

By the end of the 1960s, the AEC began moving toward a private uranium market so that utility companies could pursue nuclear power. The end of a government-monopolized uranium market also coincided with the end of high atomic culture, the beginning of late atomic culture, which lasted until the end of the cold war. This period in the history of the atomic age comes at a time when Americans began to more openly criticize and distrust government policy on a variety of fronts. Events such as the growing disaster in the Vietnam War, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Watergate Scandal, and the

40 Everett and Bennet, *Mining Practices at Four Uranium Properties in the Gas Hills, Wyoming*, 4.

Three Mile Island incident only fed this mistrust. Increasing tensions with the Soviet Union created a push for programs of nuclear disarmament. Along with many other aspects of government policy, the general public was no longer sold on the unlimited promise that the atom had previously given, nor was it confident in the ability of their Government to make effective policies to temper the dangers of atomic power. Despite all of this, uranium mining hit its absolute peak in the mid-to-late 1970s..

1968-1979: Private Boom in Uranium Mining, and the 1970s

The 1970s fuel crisis combined with several other factors to create a second uranium boom in the United States. When the AEC announced that it would allow private companies to operate nuclear power plants, many companies set goals to open them. Despite the growing distrust of nuclear power from the general public, utility companies recognized that nuclear power could play a major role in their electricity production portfolio and invested heavily in developing it. Industry experts, like Dr. Phil Merritt, a consulting geologist, predicted that the proliferation of nuclear power plants would increase from about 2% of all power plants in 1972 to 20% by 1980, and 40% by 1990.⁴¹ This developing private market pushed the price of uranium sharply upward and created a demand for uranium that was more voracious than ever; and in response, uranium mining and production expanded.⁴² Jeffrey City in particular, grew to resemble a conventional town. Other uranium companies moved to the area, and Wyoming's uranium industry prepared for a long-term and prosperous future. Jeffrey City's

41 "Uranium Boom in 1970s," *Riverton Ranger Mining Edition* (Riverton, WY, June 15, 1972), sec. E.

42 Amundson, *Yellowcake Towns*, 135–142.

population of 750 in 1970 would increase rapidly, hitting around 5,000 a decade later. The town would have its own school district, several important businesses, and a strong sense of community identity. Uranium mining and milling also accelerated in the Gas Hills area, but the camps in the region stayed small due to the area's improved transportation infrastructure.

The economic situation that the uranium industry brought to central Wyoming was an economic bright spot in a country plagued with high unemployment and high price inflation. Between 1976 and 1982, Wyoming's unemployment rate averaged about half of the national rate, and even dropped as low as 2.7% in 1979. Furthermore, those willing and able to perform difficult manual labor, especially in mining and petroleum could make a substantial amount of money.⁴³

1979-Present – Market Crash and Stagnation, Post Atomic Culture

The uranium boom of the 1970s came to an abrupt close primarily due to the Three Mile Island meltdown of 1979. In the wake of Three Mile, power companies canceled planned nuclear power plants, regulations tightened, and the bottom fell out of the uranium market. The second bust in the uranium market was more severe than the decline in the industry during the allotment period, and was not mitigated by any

43 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Unemployment Rate in Wyoming," *FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis*, last modified January 1, 1976, accessed February 13, 2019, <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/WYUR>; Kimberly Amadeo, "Compare Today's Unemployment with the Past," *The Balance*, accessed February 13, 2019, <https://www.thebalance.com/unemployment-rate-by-year-3305506>.

government policy. This led to the almost complete death of the uranium industry in the United States. I discuss this decline in greater detail in chapter 5.

Post-Atomic Culture

Some ten years after Three Mile Island, the Berlin Wall fell and the Cold War ended, largely ending the Soviet nuclear threat. As a result, Atomic Culture in the United States experienced yet another shift, to what Zeman and Amundson call Post-Atomic Culture. This period, which continues to the present day, is one in which American popular culture, when it mentions atomic themes at all, it is with fondness and nostalgia for and parody of high atomic culture. A prominent example is the animated television sitcom *The Simpsons*. Homer Simpson, the dimwitted patriarch of the Simpson family, works as a safety inspector for the Springfield Nuclear Power Plant, which sits prominently above the town in the title sequence. The plant experiences frequent health and safety violations, even meltdowns, which never seem to disrupt life in the town substantially.

Another excellent less-well-known example comes from an early 1990's live-action Nickelodeon children sit-com, *Pete and Pete*. The show makes numerous references to the history of the Atomic age. One episode features a Slush-Shack, where "slushmaster" Robert "Bob" Oppenheimer has developed a slushie – the Orange Lazarus – that is far too cold, delicious and powerful; it instigates brain-freeze in a matter of seconds. Oppenheimer created the Lazarus for good, hoping for world peace, but sees his creation used to reward unsportsmanlike behavior by one little league team, and regrets

its creation. After one episode of brain freeze, he exclaims, “I have become Slushmaster, destroyer of brains!”⁴⁴

The Company Town

Some historians maintain that industrial domination of a town by one company is sufficient for it to be considered a company town. For example, Carol Andreas, in her book *Meat Packers and Beef Barons: Company Town in a Global Economy* argued that the domination of the Greeley, Colorado’s ConAgra meat packing plant classify that town as a company town.⁴⁵ Certainly such towns share many attributes with conventional company towns. However a town that comes to be dominated by an industry or even a single company will have substantial differences compared to a town that is owned and operated outright by a single company. Such a definition might be used to classify Bentonville, Arkansas or Cupertino, California as company towns for Walmart and Apple respectively.

This expansive definition of a company town is not shared by most historians of the topic, who tend to have a more conventional view of the term. James Allen describes a company town as “any community which is owned and controlled by a particular company.”⁴⁶ For the purposes of this thesis, I basically agree with Allen’s conventional definition, with one substantial difference: Neither Jeffrey City nor Gas Hills was owned

44 Chris Koch, “Field of Pete,” *Pete and Pete* (Nickelodeon, September 11, 1994).

45 Carol Andreas, *Meatpackers and Beef Barons: Company Town in a Global Economy* (Niwot, Colo: University Press of Colorado, 1994).

46 James B. Allen, *The Company Town in the American West* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966), 6.

and operated by just one company during its whole existence as a company town. Jeffrey City started as a town owned by a single company, but later other mining companies built subdivisions for their employees, and shared in the town's government. In Gas Hills, by contrast, several companies arrived and built "camps" or "villages" at roughly the same time. Over the course of a few years, these camps cooperated and functioned more or less as a single town.

Why-oming – Why the Company Town

Lived On in the Cowboy State

In 2006, Wyoming's tourism bureau began using the slogan "Forever West."⁴⁷ The idea underpinning this slogan is that the state's visitors "think of the Western adventure and authentic experience when they think Wyoming," explained Alan Dubberly, deputy director of travel and tourism.⁴⁸ Even though Wyoming lacks virtually no modern conveniences, the Forever West slogan has merit, and the state continues to exhibit many attributes of the traditional American West. It has the smallest population in the country, and only Alaska is less densely populated. Wyoming's economy continues to rely heavily on mining, petroleum, and agriculture. Many of the state's natural resources are located in isolated regions. Because of these attributes, Wyoming industries continued to develop

47 Associated Press, "Wyoming Tourism Campaign Goes on Offensive," *Billings Gazette* (Billings, MT, March 31, 2006), accessed October 31, 2016, http://billingsgazette.com/news/state-and-regional/wyoming/wyoming-tourism-campaign-goes-on-offensive/article_d058b246-5a48-5f2d-a8b5-b56875709302.html.

48 Ibid.

and support company towns that, in at least one case, survived into the 2000s. Finally, like many of the settlement patterns of the American West, the industries that created these towns are deeply influenced by federal policies. Several Wyoming modern company towns can trace their origin to specific government policies that made the industry they supported suddenly profitable, and many can trace their demise to policies that made their industry economically unfeasible. This section gives an overview of several such policies and the towns that they contributed in creating.

Today, mining and petroleum industries are the largest contributors to Wyoming's economy. Between the 1950s and the 1970s, a variety of political and economic factors combined to make the extraction of several of these natural resources profitable.

Wyoming became a central player in the atomic starting in 1953. Motivated by Atomic Energy Commission incentives, Neil McNeice and his wife Maxine, prospected for and discovered uranium in central Wyoming in 1953. Wyoming became a major uranium producer in the United States, producing around 20 percent of all domestic uranium from 1962-1966.⁴⁹ Today, it is the nation's top uranium producer. More than probably any other mined material, uranium has always been strictly controlled by various governmental institutions.

The 1970 Clean Air Act, which among other things, restricted sulfur emissions in coal-fired power plants in order to reduce acid rain, created a market for Wyoming's coal. Even though Wyoming coal has a lower energy density than Appalachian coal, it also has a fraction of the sulfur content. Wyoming's low-sulfur coal allowed power plants all over the United States to continue to operate under the Clean Air Act with fewer expensive

49 "1.5 Billion U-Contrats Confirmed," *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, November 21, 1960), sec. A.

sulfur-reducing modifications. As a result, Wyoming's presence in the coal market would grow from a tiny fraction of nationwide production to overtake all other states.⁵⁰ As of 2014, Wyoming is the United States' largest coal producer. With a 40% market share, it out-produces its next nearest competitor by over three times⁵¹. In addition to uranium and coal, Southwest Wyoming's petroleum industry enjoyed a similar boom. Petroleum prices rose as a result of price inflation and the 1973 OPEC oil embargo. In response America's domestic petroleum industry ramped up production. This resulted in an oil and natural gas boom in many oil-rich regions of the country, including southwest Wyoming.

All of these mineral booms brought economic activity to desolate areas of the state. The uranium industry in the 1950s was a newborn industry, and uranium deposits were located far away from population centers because the economic motive for large-scale economic activity had never previously existed in these areas. These regions include the Gas Hills, Crooks Gap, and Shirley Basin regions of Central Wyoming. Even though Wyoming had a long history of coal and petroleum production, the coal and oil boom that began in the 1970s brought extractive industries to isolated areas because the market price of coal and petroleum had not previously permitted their profitable exploitation in those regions. As prices rose in the 1970s, producers went further and further from population centers. Thunder Basin, a previously desolate area about 40 miles south of

50 "Federal Regulations Drive The Past And Future Of Coal," *Inside Energy*, accessed April 6, 2017, <http://insideenergy.org/2015/04/18/federal-regulations-drive-the-past-and-future-of-coal/>.

51 U.S. Energy Information Administration, "Which States Produce the Most Coal? - FAQ - U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA)," accessed November 1, 2016, <https://www.eia.gov/tools/faqs/faq.cfm?id=69&t=2>.

Gillette became the state's major coal area. The empty stretch of Interstate 80 between Rock Springs and Rawlins, meanwhile, became one of the State's hottest oil regions.

Companies that exploited these isolated resources found themselves in a similar situation to earlier companies in the west, and had little choice but to provide housing and other necessary services for their employees. Between 1950 and 1960, the uranium industry created three company towns: Gas Hills, Jeffrey City (near Crooks Gap), and Shirley Basin. These towns experienced sizable populations through the early 1980s. In addition to the uranium company towns, the coal industry, specifically the Atlantic Richfield Company (ARCO) established the town of Wright to support its Black Thunder Mine in Thunder Basin. Finally, Colorado Interstate Gas (CIG) built the small town of Table Rock, located about 40 miles east of Rock Springs, to support its large natural gas processing plant. CIG operated Table Rock until 2003.⁵²

Mobile Housing

Allen writes that, due to its physical characteristics, "if a person suddenly found himself in the middle of a company-owned town, he would have little difficulty identifying it as such."⁵³ Likewise, Wyoming's uranium company towns would not be mistaken for contemporary, incorporated towns. Some company town characteristics, such as the large processing mills near the towns, bachelor dormitories and community

52 Jeff Gearino, "Clearing the Table," *Casper Star-Tribune Online*, accessed November 1, 2016, http://trib.com/news/state-and-regional/clearing-the-table/article_9346f8e1-ad12-5d8b-84f8-218bd4544cdb.html.

53 Allen, *The Company Town in the American West*, 89.

recreation halls did distinguish the towns. Company managers and some other key personnel also had nicer, company owned homes. But Wyoming's uranium towns did not have many of the traditional company town components. Gone were the company stores, the scrip wages, and the isolation from the broader job market.

More obviously, in Gas Hills and Jeffrey City, most residents lived in housing that was unlike that of previous company towns. Earlier companies built housing for their wage-earning employees using materials that "were the most readily available and least expensive."⁵⁴ Such homes ranged in quality, but were commonly small, simple wood or cement structures. In Wyoming's uranium company towns, companies and residents had at their disposal a new form of housing that developed as a result of improved manufacturing and production processes. As a result, most housing in these towns more closely resembled other quickly-growing areas in post-war America than the company towns that preceded them.

"The Gas Hills is a community with a population of over 2,000," writes the *Riverton Ranger* in 1959. "That's a lot of people for a town with only about 15 houses."⁵⁵ Most residents of Wyoming's uranium towns – 97% in the case of the Gas Hills in 1959 – were "members of the great fraternity of mobile home owners."⁵⁶ Throughout uranium's history in Wyoming, mobile homes housed the majority of Wyoming's uranium company town residents.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 84.

⁵⁵ "Home on Wheels Standard Dwelling in Gas Hills Area," *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, October 29, 1959), sec. 1.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

In the immediate post-World War II period, returning veterans and others returned to a booming but turbulent economy. The United States found housing in short supply, and many individuals and families sought temporary residence in small car-towable camping trailers. Manufacturers of such trailers saw a niche market and began to make larger models, focused on comfort and livability instead of mobility. Camper trailers and mobile homes soon became two distinct industries: the former focused on mobility, leisure, and temporary occupancy, and the latter became one of the most important sources of low-cost housing in the country.⁵⁷ As the market grew for mobile home, the homes themselves grew also. Mobile homes, like campers, initially measured 8 feet wide, but these homes grew to ten, twelve, fourteen, and even sixteen feet wide. They also increased in length, and soon required heavy duty trucks and special skills to move. By the 1970s, the mobile home industry had advanced to the point that it manufactured double-wides and even triple-wides – homes manufactured in two or three sections and joined widthwise when they arrived on site. A few residents had multi-section mobile homes in Wyoming's uranium towns, but cost and simplicity concerns meant that conventional single-wides made up the vast majority of the towns' housing.

Mobile homes presented their own unique set of challenges to the towns and their residents. Hauling these large trailers to their destinations, especially to isolated regions in Wyoming's winters over icy or muddy roads could be perilous. Once the mobile home was parked at its destination it needed to be properly connected to utilities, skirted and

57 Allan D. Wallis, *Wheel Estate: The Rise and Decline of Mobile Homes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). is an excellent look at the development of the mobile home industry and its important role in industrial post-war housing.

insulated to ensure that pipes wouldn't freeze and that the house would stay warm and comfortable. Another major problem with mobile homes is inherent in their mobile nature:

[D]espite lengthening, widening, heightening, and dozens of clever space-saving devices, is space in general, and storage space in particular. Until they can build a trailer with a basement and a garage, this drawback will probably remain Number One.⁵⁸

Owners mitigated this problem as follows:

Almost as soon as a trailer is unhitched in the Gas Hills, the man of the house begins building a "lean-to," or entryway, into the trailer, which serves the storage room-front hall-utility room need. Hardly a trailer in any of the big camps lacks some sort of a lean-to, and the smaller the trailer the larger the entry to the extent that some lean-tos are nearly as big as the trailer houses they lean into.⁵⁹

When it came time to move the trailers, these lean-tos, which had been constructed of relatively inexpensive materials like painted plywood, would be disassembled and moved with the house, or discarded.

Despite the drawbacks of mobile homes, their novelty meant that, especially when a new, especially luxurious model arrived in one of the towns, it was almost a cause for celebration.

Their long delayed trailer house was finally delivered to Mr. and Mrs. Stuart Hurdle, and it's a beauty, with two large picture windows in the living room – lemon colored stove and refrigerator, and mahogany paneling in both bedrooms.⁶⁰

58 "Home on Wheels Standard Dwelling in Gas Hills Area."

59 Ibid.

60 Ruth Hillger, "Trailers and Pupils Deluge Jeffrey City at Home-on-the-Range," *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, March 28, 1957).

This unique and timely housing option suited the companies and workers well. In most cases in Gas Hills and Jeffrey City, mobile homes were privately owned by the occupants. This afforded tenants a greater sense of privacy and autonomy compared to previous generations of company town residents. Even when parked on company property, the company had a diminished ability to exercise social control since they didn't own the homes themselves.⁶¹ Compared to conventional homes, workers benefited from the lower up-front cost of purchasing a mobile home, the lower payments, and from the ability to bring their home and their possessions with them as they relocated, as they often needed to in an industry that has always been prone to booms and busts. Workers could relocate at a minimal cost and with less time spent preparing to move. Moves could even be temporary, as was the case with Neal Goodfellow and his family. Neal took a six week job near Moab, Utah in 1957. The *Riverton Ranger* reported that:

A most amazing woman, Mrs. Don Gordon of Moab's trailer Sales Company, appeared out of Thursday's snowstorm after less than 24 hours notice and hauled away the Goodfellow's huge trailer house in this same snowstorm with as much confidence and skill as if it had been a summer day.⁶²

In the event of a bust, the mobile nature of these homes helped them retain more of their value compared to conventional homes in an area suffering market decline. Mobile homes were less expensive to purchase, and easier to finance than site-built homes, and relatively easy to liquidate if needed; a robust new and used market existed in the country. In Wyoming's uranium towns, companies charged rent and utilities on mobile

61 "Sparling Clarifies Proposed Lease," *Jeffrey City News* (Jeffrey City, Wyoming, n.d.).

62 Ruth Hillger, "Jeffrey City School In State of Expansion," *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, April 23, 1957).

home spots that were below market value, as evidenced by the waiting lists to get into trailer spots.⁶³ On the down side, some earlier company towns allowed residents to live in site-built company housing either rent free or very inexpensively. Though some uranium companies – Western Nuclear in particular – occasionally sold or rented mobile homes to workers, most people who brought their families to these towns were expected to bring a home as well.

Companies benefited from mobile homes because they made management of a company town much less expensive. Providing parking spaces with utility hookups is much cheaper than building site-built homes. They aided in the flexibility of the towns. Mobile homes could move more easily to accommodate the towns as they changed. Finally, mobile housing could help alleviate housing shortages. Landowners and entrepreneurs in both Jeffrey City and the Gas Hills areas built non-company affiliated mobile home spaces for people who worked out there, but who could not yet be accommodated by the spaces owned by the company they worked for. Unless companies arranged to subsidize rent, these entrepreneurs charged market value for their spaces, so employees had an incentive to get into the company-owned spaces as soon as possible.

63 “Sparling Clarifies Proposed Lease,” *Jeffrey City News* (Jeffrey City, Wyoming, n.d.).

CHAPTER 3

THE GAS HILLS AND TRANSPORTATION NETWORKS

A major argument in *The Company Town in the American West* is that the growth of modern transportation networks has eliminated the necessity of such towns.¹ Perhaps no company town in the Western United States serves as a better case study than Gas Hills for the role that the improvement of transportation infrastructure had in the operation of a company town. Transportation infrastructure improved dramatically between the town's birth as an industrial village that was almost completely isolated from the rest of the state, and the peak of the uranium industry in the 1970s when a paved state secondary highway that connected the area to Riverton with a travel time of less than an hour.

The Gas Hills story is also instructive on the benefits of modern company towns. The towns of Gas Hills also allowed the uranium companies to expand rapidly, especially when the area's mills began to run, without putting undue stress on Riverton's infrastructure. The expansion and contraction of the town was paid for by the companies responsible for the expansion and contraction, and it was those companies tasked with balancing the desire to attract good workers and provide a decent place to live with the long-term viability of the uranium industry.

1 James B. Allen, *The Company Town in the American West* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966), 7.

The Early Gas Hills Community - 1953-1957

As with earlier company towns, Wyoming's uranium company towns' layout varied based on geographical challenges and on the desire the company had to run a town. Rather than being a model community, centrally planned by one company, Gas Hills' development was more organic. "Trailer houses and heavy equipment are sprouting up all over the Gas Hills uranium discovery area as outfits prepare for production," wrote the *Ranger* in 1954.² In the earliest stages of prospecting and claim staking, prospectors and workers parked campers and mobile homes haphazardly, wherever they could in the Gas Hills.

The Gas Hills was not a company town in the traditional sense. In the Gas Hills, companies formed as entrepreneurs merged claims and began production. More organized camps grew out of scattered areas when companies consolidated and began to consciously provide housing for their employees. During its whole existence as a town, Gas Hills consisted of several such company-maintained camps. In May, 1955, the Lucky Mc camp consisted only of "Eight trailers" that were "parked about the headquarters building in which [had] been installed bunkhouses for the men, a modern kitchen and a mess hall."³ The *Ranger* commented that "Quite a mining community is growing in the area."⁴ Lucky Mc ran the camp that would grow to provide most of the town's vital services, including a post office and a school, but several other companies also managed their own camps – several of which had recreation halls.

2 "Gas Hills Claim Area Bustling With Activity," *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, November 16, 1954).

3 "Community Grows in Gas Hills," *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, May 31, 1955).

4 Ibid.



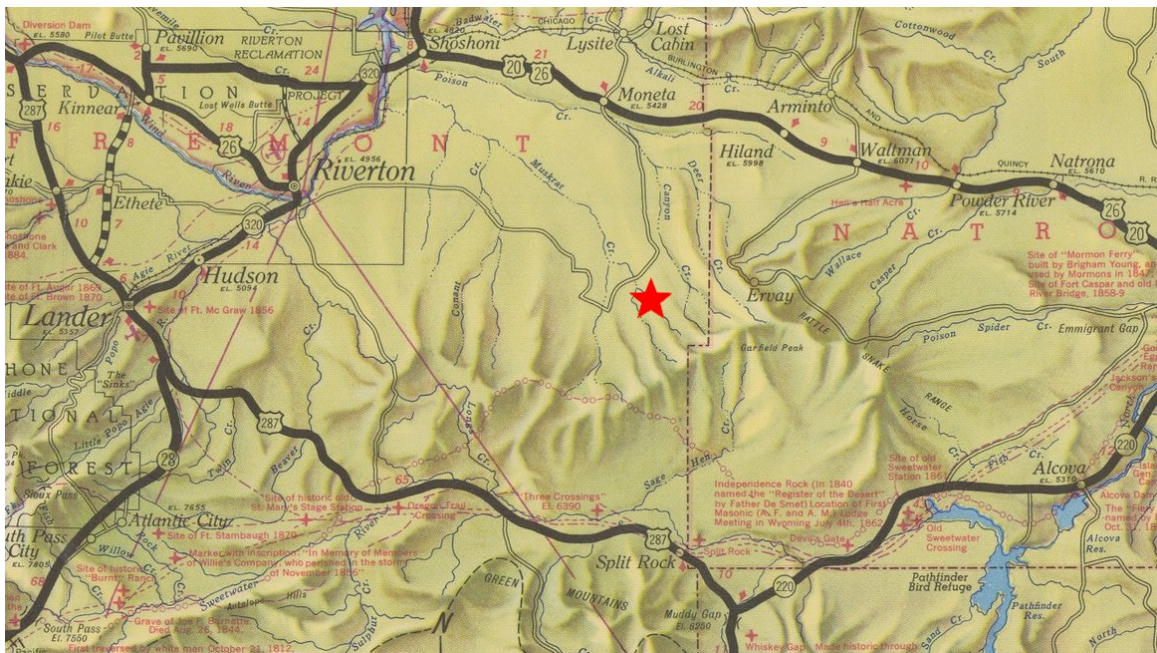
Photo 1: Lucky Mc's Gas Hills camp in the mid-1950s. Courtesy: Riverton Museum

Building the first Gas Hills Road

When the McNeices discovered uranium in the Gas Hills, getting to the area from Riverton required taking a “faint wagon and oil truck track, winding its torturous way over sand hills, sage brush flats, and dry sand washes.”⁵ (see map 1) Routes to the area from other towns were not any better, and improving these roads quickly became a major concern. The new industry depended on access to roads for two reasons: First was getting workers and supplies into the area. Mining is a very capital and labor intensive task, and moving machinery and workers in and out of Gas Hills could be very difficult without

5 Lucky Mc Newspaper, “The Story of Lucky MC,” *Lucky Mc Newspaper*, February 1962.

improved roads. In February, 1955, a dozen men in three different groups “Spent an uncomfortable night [...] after their vehicles became trapped in deep snow as they tried to make their way into Riverton from Gas Hills.”⁶ One group of Lucky Mc employees – which included Neil McNeice and Lowell Morefeld –was forced to abandon one of their two vehicles. Just one week later, a similar spring storm stranded 21 people in 13 vehicles for three days and two nights, and was rescued by the coordination of a chartered airplane and a bulldozer whose owner happened to be staying in his mobile home in the Gas Hills.⁷



Map 1: Section of 1953 Wyoming Highway Map showing the uranium area prior to the discovery of uranium. Star indicates Gas Hills district.

6 “Storm Strands Dozen Men In Gas Hills Area,” *Riverton Ranger*, February 22, 1955.

7 “Caravan Of 21 People 12 Vehicles Emerge From Hills,” *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, March 1, 1955).

The second reason that made the industry dependent on good roads is the ability to get ore to market. The first processing mills in the Gas Hills would not appear until 1957, so for the first four years, truckloads of unprocessed ore had to be hauled out of the Gas Hills. At first, companies hauled unprocessed ore to places as far away as Edgemont, South Dakota and Salt Lake City, Utah.⁸ In spring of 1955, Wyoming's first AEC buying station opened in Riverton, which made ore hauling trips shorter, but the ore still had to leave the Gas Hills on subpar roads.

Unlike previous company towns, whose owners were entirely responsible for building their infrastructure, and despite the fact that mining companies in the Gas Hills did build and maintain a great deal of their own infrastructure, improving travel to and from the Gas Hills area required coordination between mining operators in the region, various offices within the state and county government, the governing bodies of the Wind River Indian Reservation, and even the federal government's Atomic Energy Commission. Almost as soon as mining activity began, mining companies began pushing for the construction of an improved road to link them with Riverton. In January, 1955, the AEC announced in a letter to the Riverton Chamber of Commerce that "insofar as there now appears to be reserves and potential to warrant construction of a road [to the Gas Hills,] plans are being made toward that end." Once approved, the AEC would ask congress to appropriate necessary funding to the Bureau of Public Roads, and construction could begin. The project proceeded, the AEC allotted funding, and construction on a \$300,000 leveled and graded two-lane gravel road began in spring of

8 Charles Snow, *Chasing Gas Hills Yellowcake*, 1st edition. (Reno, NV: LeRue Press under imprint LeRue Books, 2013), 31.

1956. The AEC program that funded roads such as this was not designed to provide hard surfaced roads, but simply to provide access roads, sufficiently graveled and drained as to provide year-round access to the region.⁹

In the nearly four years that passed between the discovery of Gas Hills uranium and the completion of this first improved road, Fremont County ran road graders (called patrols in the 1950s) but “found it impossible to keep up with it,” and poor road conditions meant that vehicles often had to take alternate, longer routes usually through Waltman. The AEC funded gravel road was completed in 1957. (See map 2) Upon its completion, some workers began to commute. One bus company, Zanetti, would rack up hundreds of thousands of miles traveling this road.¹⁰



Map 2: Section of 1958 Wyoming Highway Map showing completed AEC-funded road.

9 “Access Road to Be a 2-Lane Gravel Route to Gas Hills,” *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, December 7, 1955).

10 Zanetti Bus Lines, “2 Million Miles,” *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, June 9, 1961), sec. B.

Paving the Gas Hills Road – 1960-1964

The AEC-funded road was an important first step, but upon completion in 1957, it was already insufficient. Shortly after construction ended on the access road, the Riverton Ranger observed that traffic on this gravel road “now resembles the Pennsylvania Turnpike with its churning traffic.”¹¹ Within just one year of its completion, nearly 400 vehicles were traveling the 40 mile road daily.¹² The Wyoming Mining Association, in a September 1957 letter to Governor Milward Simpson, encouraged swift action on improving the road’s condition:

[...]With the influx of workmen to these growing operations, it is evident that the situation will become progressively worse. It is not only a problem in the transportation of workmen and supplies, but also one of school and medical facilities for workers and their families, as well as providing the necessities for life.

The companies concerned have the problems of transporting large quantities of materials. Each has his own roadways to maintain but it does not appear reasonable that the main road used by all should not be adequately constructed and maintained as a public highway. To us, it appears that the main road is heavily traveled. Those using it pay the usual gas tax. In addition, the uranium companies are heavy users of gasoline and diesel fuel for off-highway purposes and pay the usual gas tax on this fuel.¹³

Governor Simpson, who had visited the Gas Hills and Crook’s Gap area just a month earlier, lent a sympathetic ear, but initially deferred action to the County Commissions of

11 “Editorially Speaking: Plans Are Underway To Improve Service Roads To The Gas Hills,” *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, July 20, 1957).

12 “Road Problems in Gas Hills Discussed With County,” *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, July 3, 1958).

13 R. W. Bemer, “Letter to Governor Milward Simpson from the Wyoming Mining Association,” September 19, 1957, Milward Simpson Collection Box 208, Folder 10, American Heritage Center at University of Wyoming.

Fremont and Natrona Counties, who were already planning on meeting to discuss the issue.¹⁴

After nearly a year, with no apparent movement on the road issue, A.V. Quine of Lucky Mc sent a lengthy memo to the Governor, again urging swift action on the road. Quine, Chairman of the a multi-company group in the Gas Hills called Operator's Road Committee, claimed that "time is of the essence: we cannot wait ten years or more to get a road," and that a paved road is necessary because gravel roads are too costly to maintain at an acceptable level. Quine hoped to help the State find a way to pave not only the Riverton to Gas Hills Road, but also the road from the Gas Hills to Jeffrey City. He recognized that such an expensive undertaking could be politically hazardous, but hoped that:

Our ingenuity and political perspicacity would find a way, especially when we are talking about an industry whose products will be worth more than \$500,000,000 within the next decade, the bulk of which would no doubt circulate in Wyoming.¹⁵

His principal suggestion to spend roughly \$4,000,000 to build a paved road. To pay for it, Quine suggested leveraging federal/state Mine to Market funds wherein the Federal Government contributes 65%, leaving the state to contribute \$1,400,000. Quine proposed building the road immediately and allowing mining companies to repay the State by using \$600,000 in estimated fuel taxes over the next four years, combined with \$800,000

14 Milward Simpson, "Letter to Wyoming Mining Association," September 24, 1957, Milward Simpson Collection Box 208, Folder 10, American Heritage Center at University of Wyoming.

15 A. V. Quine, "Memorandum: Data, Gas Hills - Crooks Gap Mine-to-Market Road," July 3, 1958, Milward Simpson Collection Box 189, Folder 13, American Heritage Center at University of Wyoming.

in a special fee that mining operators in the region would pay the state over the next four to eight years.

This proposal intrigued Simpson, who began to take a more active role in the project, believing that “the future of the industry and the future of Wyoming is hinged on this [the road] project.”¹⁶ Responding to Quine, he wrote, “Your delineation, pointing out all of the ramifications of this gigantic project, has my head awirl! I am not going to go off half-cocked without a full interpretation of your suggestions as applied to the law.” Simpson believed that “the answer lies in approaching the oncoming session of the legislature, which meets in January, 1959,” but committed to do what he could sooner to find a solution:

Without committing you or your company, and without revealing the source of the information, I am shooting [the memo] along to various avenues which enable us to come up with something that will be realistic. Believe me, my friend, I am most grateful to you for your valuable assistance in this undertaking.¹⁷

The Governor forwarded the memo on to several advisers noting his belief that “our plans and legal specifications are archaic and outmoded when it comes to assisting a new and enterprising industry in such areas as this.”¹⁸ In his letter to J. R. Bromley,

16 Milward Simpson, “Letter to Attorney General Thomas O. Miller Regarding Gas Hills Road Funding Proposal,” July 17, 1958, Milward Simpson Collection Box 189, Folder 13, American Heritage Center at University of Wyoming.

17 Milward Simpson, “Letter to A. V. Quine in Response to His Funding Proposal for the Gas Hills Road,” July 17, 1957, Milward Simpson Collection Box 189, Folder 13, American Heritage Center at University of Wyoming.

18 Milward Simpson, “Letter to Fred Bennion of the Wyoming Taxpayers Association,” July 17, 1958, Milward Simpson Collection Box 189, Folder 13, American Heritage Center at University of

Superintendent of the State Highway Department, he wrote, “The thing I would like you to do for me is for you [...] and the boys over there to put your slide rule to this matter and come up with a suggestion as to how we can get this job done.”

In response to the Governor, the Wyoming Taxpayer’s Union concluded that there “numerous fallacies in the memorandum” which made its suggestions “impractical.” Their response stated that they knew of “no simple solution, and unless the Fremont County commissioners [were] willing to change their priorities, [...] the only other recourse [would be] political action.”¹⁹ Attorney General Thomas O. Miller elaborated on these fallacies – essentially explaining that Wyoming law prohibited a taxation scheme that would allow a specific industry to be taxed in a nonuniform way in order to repay a specific project such as this. He further noted that Wyoming’s balanced budget requirement would make this road difficult to construct as proposed. Miller concluded, as did most, that the only recourse was legislative action.²⁰

Though Mining operators and state, county, and local governments understood the importance of good roads, none of these entities possessed the proper mechanisms to act quickly or unilaterally to improve transportation. No mineral boom in Wyoming had yet occurred that involved such a time-sensitive, valuable natural resource in such an isolated

Wyoming.

19 “Letter from Wyoming Taxpayers Association to Governor Milward Simpson on the Gas Hills Road Proposal,” July 21, 1958, Milward Simpson Collection Box 189, Folder 13, American Heritage Center at University of Wyoming.

20 Thomas O. Miller, “Memorandum to Governor Milward Simpson on the Gas Hills - Crooks Gap Mine-to-Market Road,” n.d., Milward Simpson Collection Box 189, Folder 13, American Heritage Center at University of Wyoming.

area. Winning AEC contracts depended on the ability of mining companies to get their production to the market. The ideal for them was to complete the whole road immediately. But the statutes governing funding and construction of roadways in Wyoming required much slower, more deliberate action.

Throughout 1959, problems with the road continued to cause headaches for mining companies in the Gas Hills. In February, ten foot high snow drifts closed off all travel to and from the area for a few days.²¹ At the end of March, Fremont County Commissioners met to discuss the county's road needs and priorities for road construction projects. Noticeably absent from the agenda was the Gas Hills Road.²² In response to this meeting, Quine again aired his frustration at the lack of progress on the road: "We have labored under the apparent naive impressions that roads were built for the public good." He noted that despite more than two years of struggling to find a solution to improve the roads, "one of the greatest industrial enterprises is left to wallow in the mud."²³

In spring of 1959, the tide began to turn slowly towards progress on the Gas Hills Road. In late April, Fremont County placed five road graders for a few days on the road and installed several culverts to improve drainage and prepare for the busier spring and summer months. Upon completion, one grader was designated to work the road full-time. At the same time, members of the Lander Chamber of Commerce wrote to Wyoming Senators Joseph C. O'Mahoney and Gale W. McGee and congressman Keith Thompson

21 "Drifts Blocked Gas Hills Road Sat. Night Til Monday," *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, February 17, 1959).

22 "Road Hearing Tuesday at 10," *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, March 26, 1959).

23 "Quine Presents U-Road Needs," *Riverton Ranger*, April 2, 1959.

seeking federal aid to improve the road.²⁴ Later in May, the county added a second road grader to maintain the road full-time. June brought with it yet another, more realistic plan to pave the road, which would essentially designate the Gas Hills road a State Secondary road, place it in second priority behind the another road project in the county –a project to refurbish parts of US-287, the Lander-Diversion Dam road – and split funding with that road. In discussing this new plan with the Lander Chamber of Commerce, Quine stated, “We can’t depend entirely on Uncle Sam for help, unless we subscribe to the Big Brother philosophy.”²⁵ This was an apparent response to the Lander Chamber having no recommendation “other than to ask for federal help.”²⁶ Finally, on June 4th, the County Commission passed a resolution asking the State Highway Commission to declare the Gas Hills Road a secondary highway, essentially following Quine’s most recent suggestions.

The Highway Commission, in turn, dealt another setback to the Gas Hills Road. Though the Diversion Dam project was a primary US highway, the Highway Commission ruled that that project must be finished using State secondary funding before any additional secondary designated road work in the county could begin.²⁷ In response, Gas Hills residents, “long frustrated by broken springs, blown out tires, and aching

24 “Place Five Patrols on Access Road,” *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, April 23, 1959).

25 “Present New Plan to Try To Pave the Gas Hills U-Road,” *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, June 2, 1959).

26 Ibid.

27 “Riverton Renews Push for Better G. Hills Road,” *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, October 22, 1959).

sacroiliacs, finally blew a well-deserved fuse [...] over the condition of their road to Riverton.”

They directed their anger at the two largest towns nearest them – Riverton and Lander – and at the County Commissioners upon whose shoulders rests the prime responsibility for the condition of their road. The frustration took the form of a petition threatening economic boycott at Riverton and Lander if something wasn't done for the Gas Hills Road and its dust, wash boards, chuck holes, blind curves, and sundry other ills. Lander took one look at the petition and according to their radio station, chucked the petition in to the waste basket, referred to as "file 13" by the president of the Lander Chamber of Commerce.²⁸

Despite the treatment given this petition by the Lander Chamber, the petition seems to have been a turning point in the struggle to complete the road, and things began to move more quickly. Highway Commissioner Harold DelMonte announced in November that Federal aid for State Secondary roads would no longer be used for the Diversion Dam road, releasing \$320,000 annually to the Gas Hills Road project. This funding could potentially be combined with a total of \$180,000: \$90,000 annually from mining companies in the Gas Hills, and an additional \$90,000 in matching state-county highway funds.

The potential availability of \$500,000 annually to construct the road to Gas Hills concerned some Wyomingites, undoubtedly familiar with the boom-bust cycles common in the history of Western mining towns. They worried that there was “not much sense in building a first class road if, about the time the road is finished, the ore is all mined out and the mills standing idle.”²⁹ People speaking in favor of the road, including the Gas

28 “Editorially Speaking: Long Frustration Over Gas Hills Road Improvement,” *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, October 22, 1959).

29 “Editorially Speaking: Gas Hills Uranium Has Long Life Ahead, Road Needed,” *Riverton Ranger*

Hills' roughly 1200 residents, argued that, with the end of AEC contracts coming in 1966, a private market will emerge, but with uranium prices that could be higher or lower than the current guaranteed rate. However, "efficient, low cost production areas with latest design mills will be in the best position to compete in a free market for uranium." They argued, "[i]n short, the industry is looking for a good 20 years full-blast operation. A good road into the area will put local industry in a better position to produce uranium and yellowcake over the next 20 to 25 years."³⁰

Operators in the Gas Hills, with the funding available, obviously wanted the road built as quickly as possible with as little cost to themselves as possible. Since matching funds, if they would be used, had to be acquired before survey and work could begin, operators sought was to quickly match those funds. Quine's newest plan would begin the survey and construction immediately. The state would be allowed to count the roughly \$100,000/year that the companies spend on maintenance of the gravel road as their \$90,000 matching contribution to the county/state fund.³¹ The Fremont County Commissioners rejected this proposal, removing their matching \$90,000 from availability for the project, which would have to proceed on only the \$320,000 in state Secondary road funding.³²

(Riverton, WY, February 4, 1960).

30 Ibid.

31 "Operators Present Compromise Plan for Gas Hills Road Oiling," *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, February 16, 1960).

32 "Comissioners Say No To \$90,000 on Gas Hills Road," *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, February 25, 1960).

Nevertheless, in February of 1960 surveys for the paved roadway began with the assurance that “every obstacle has now been cleared for start on the road.”³³ During the rest of 1960, the Highway Department surveyed the first twelve miles of the road. In October, with surveys on going, but no contracts open yet for bidding, and no dirt work done on the road, State Superintendent of Education made an additional plea for quick action. Superintendent Velma Linford, who had recently visited the Riverton school district which also served Gas Hills, wrote to the Governor, now J. J. Hickey, and Highway Commissioner J. R. Bromley. She emphasized the negative impact of bad roads on the area’s high school students: “With the present road conditions, the trip requires two hours and 15 minutes at best and children arrive at school in the morning and home at night battered from a hard ride.”³⁴ Her letters were joined in late October by an additional pair of petitions: one from around 500 Gas Hills residents and one from around 100 Riverton residents who worked in the Gas Hills, wondering why it was taking so long to get started on the road’s construction.³⁵ Highway Commissioner E.R. Record promised that construction would occur “just as fast as secondary money accrues to Fremont County.”³⁶ Furthermore, Governor Hickey promised to explore all possible

33 “Start Survey on Gas Hills Road Project. Expect Contract After 120-Day Period,” *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, February 25, 1960).

34 “New Demand, Gas Hills Road,” *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, October 14, 1960).

35 “New Gas Hills Petition Has Over 600 Signatures,” *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, October 26, 1960).

36 Associated Press, “Gas Hills Road Action Promised,” *Riverton Ranger*, October 21, 1960.

funding options to speed construction of the entire road.³⁷ Unfortunately for Gas Hills residents and operators, no additional funding would ever be secured, State Secondary funds alone constructed the road in five stages over the next several years.

Stage	Miles in Stage	Total Miles Completed	Began	Finished
1	6.7 miles	6.7 miles	Late 1960	Mid 1961
2	7.6 miles	14.2 miles	Early 1961	Late 1961
3	8.2 miles	22.37 miles	Early 1962	Late 1962
4	9.6 miles	32 miles	Late 1963	Early 1964
5	12 miles	44 miles	Mid 1969	Early 1970

Table 2: Gas Hills Road Completion Timeline



Map 3: Section of 1962 Wyoming Highway Map showing first 14 paved miles of Gas Hills Road.

³⁷ Associated Press, "Governor Says Gas Hills Road an Emergency," *Riverton Ranger*, November 18, 1960.



Map 4: Section of 1963 Wyoming Highway Map showing 22 paved miles of the Gas Hills Road.

Completion of the fourth stage of the Gas Hills road in 1964 brought the road roughly 75% of the way from Riverton to Gas Hills. Its completion coincided with a decline in the uranium industry that resulted from preparation for the allotment period. With between 10 and 12 miles remaining, no further action occurred on the road for several years. As the uranium industry languished in the late 1960s, so did the settlements in the Gas Hills. People left the area looking for work in other industries. Even many people who continued to be employed by uranium operators in the area left the area and moved to Riverton, as the mostly paved road allowed much more tolerable commutes. No overall population data exists, but school enrollment in the Gas Hills, which had peaked at nearly 200 in 1960, fell by roughly half by 1963.^{38 39}

38 Hugh Ellis, "Gas Hills Problems Aired at School Board Meet," *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, November 30, 1960).

39 "Call for Bids on GH School," *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, September 17, 1963).



Map 5: Section of 1965 Wyoming Highway Map showing last segment paved until the uranium industry recovered in 1969

The Gas Hills Pinnacle – 1957-1962

The booming uranium mining industry and the relative difficulty of traveling to and from Gas Hills make the time period from 1957 to mid-1962 the town's peak period. The 1960 census unofficially placed Gas Hills as the third largest town in Fremont County, with a population of 1129, and school enrollment approached 200.^{40 41}

By 1959, “besides the uncounted number of scattered mobile homes, there [were] three main trailer camps.”⁴² The first and largest, Lucky Mc, was “spread over several hillsides, with ‘suburbs’ running up into the draws.”⁴³ Federal Gas Hills (later Federal American) Partners built its mill and “village” in 1959.⁴⁴ Both Lucky Mc and Federal

40 “Riverton Population Hits 6,784; Gas Hills Third Largest, Has 1,129,” *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, May 17, 1960), Vol. 54, No. 22 edition, sec. A.

41 Ellis, “Gas Hills Problems Aired at School Board Meet.”

42 “Home on Wheels Standard Dwelling in Gas Hills Area,” *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, October 29, 1959), sec. 1.

43 Ibid.

44 “FAP Awaits Another Spring,” *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, June 17, 1982).

survived into the 1980s. The other camps such as those that Globe Mining, Vitro Mining, and others built existed in the 1960s, but never were as prominent as the Lucky Mc and Federal camps. Finally, at least two companies built trailer courts that were not affiliated with any mining operation. B&B and Mimar both built and rented spaces to residents in addition to service stations, a cafe, a laundry, and other services.

George Banks and his wife ran a small grocery store starting in March, 1958. As the community grew, they expanded their inventory, even offering hunting and fishing licenses. In 1961, a second grocery store – the Diamond-Valu Market opened in a new 5,000 square foot commercial building, and offered fresh produce and meat as well as other grocery items.⁴⁵

Federal Gas Hills in particular tried to run and manage a pleasant company town in the middle of the Wyoming sagebrush. Companies encouraged residents to improve their trailer spaces by building fences, and landscaping their yards. For several years, Federal ran a landscaping contest where they invited the Riverton Garden Club to judge entries and pick first and second place winners in three categories: most beautiful yard, most improved yard, and best use of 80% or more native vegetation. First prize winners would win three months free trailer space rent, and second prize winners would have one free month.⁴⁶

45 “New Grocery Store Opens Doors In Gas Hills, Grand Opening,” *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, January 5, 1961).

46 “Contest Successful Event Gas Hills Landscaping,” *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, September 26, 1962).

Both Federal and Lucky Mc built recreation halls and community residents used them for many organized functions. Residents did form several organizations. Many of the town's young people became members of the Gas Hills Gophers, the local 4-H chapter. Some also joined the Cub Scouts. In the summer, the companies had softball leagues. Women in the town created an organization called the Fairy Housewives, where they banded together to help newcomers and people who needed extra help with childcare, housework, and other needs. Numerous informal card-playing groups also existed in the town. The Gas Hills had few other options for entertainment. Evening and weekend options for entertainment were especially limited. Unlike Jeffrey City, the town had no movies or bowling, and few dining establishments so some Gas Hills residents traveled to Jeffrey City for bowling, dining, or other entertainment.

Gas Hills School

The population in the Gas Hills swelled and declined so quickly that precise population records are difficult to assemble. However, the area's elementary school offers a glimpse into the the rapid growth and decline of the area.

Despite the difficulty in traveling the Gas Hills Road, to and from Riverton, the two places were linked economically by the uranium industry. By 1957, Fremont County School District #25 in Riverton had already seen a significant increase in both the town's population and in school enrollment brought by the uranium industry. Between 1948 and 1956, the district's enrollment grew from 1095 to 1644.⁴⁷ A July 1957 study found that just Lucky Mc's direct operations in the Gas Hills brought 123 grade school students and

⁴⁷ "Hold First Meeting on School Boundary Revision," *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, June 6, 1957).

33 high school students to Riverton. The district argued that taxes to pay for the additional hundreds of students in Riverton should come from the industry that brought them, even though it likely meant building a new elementary school for children who lived in the Gas Hills. Despite a few legal protests from landowners in the area who saw a significant tax increase, the annexation occurred in time for the 1957-58 school year.

Gas Hills' Elementary School – a first through eighth grade school – struggled for several years to keep up with the number of students that moved into its boundaries. In summer 1957, Lucky Mc donated the use of its old office building to District 25, which they renovated into a serviceable school building. The company also continued to pay utilities for this building. The district anticipated an enrollment of between 35 and 40 students.⁴⁸

A year later, the district anticipated that enrollment had roughly doubled, and once again scrambled to plan for an influx of students. Twenty two Gas Hills high school students began to take a bus to Riverton and back daily.⁴⁹ The school board explored erecting new steel four-classroom school building and “teacherages” – teacher’s apartment housing.⁵⁰ Unsure of the future, the steel building could be built far less expensively than other types of buildings. It could also be disassembled and moved elsewhere for much less. Just before the beginning of the 1958-59 school year, school asked for and approved a \$115,000 bond issue to fund construction. This bond would raise money exclusively from the Gas Hills area. While the district waited for the new,

48 “Gas Hills School Study at Lucky Mc,” *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, August 1, 1957).

49 “To Run Bus For Gas Hills HS Students,” *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, August 6, 1959).

50 “Board Meets Tonight in Gas Hills,” *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, August 28, 1958).

larger school to be built, the school operated in the old Lucky Mc Office turned school on shifts. Grades one, two, five, and six attended from 8:15 AM until 1:00 PM, and grades two, three, seven, and eight attended from 1:15 PM until 5:45 PM.

Gas Hills School enrollment grew so rapidly that when the new school was finished in December, 1959, it was already too small and the multipurpose room had to be divided into two additional classrooms. The district proposed and its voters passed a \$30,000 bond-funded addition to the new school that would add an additional two rooms and restore the multipurpose room to its original function as a play area, music room, and cafeteria. Facing criticism from State Superintendent Velma Linford, who visited the district during construction of the new addition, the district hired a full-time principal for the Gas Hills and the school discontinued the practice of operating on half days. Waiting for the new addition to be finished and still chronically short on space, the district held one class in a room behind the Lucky Mc post office.⁵¹ At the end of November, the school board authorized the school to acquire a 10x40 foot trailer house to use as additional classroom space while the two-classroom was finished, and likely after that. By then, the school's enrollment had ballooned to 193, and the school had determined that even with the new addition, the school would be too small. "One of the rooms at the school is used on an alternating basis," the *Ranger* reports. "While one class recites, another is in the hall. (Principal) Kittle says he uses his car for an office."⁵²

With the school bursting at the seams, District 25 proposed an additional bond issue. In total, the district sought to raise \$970,000 for various projects, including some

51 "Big Changes Made at Gas Hills School," *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, October 12, 1959).

52 Ellis, "Gas Hills Problems Aired at School Board Meet."

\$200,000 to bring the Gas Hills school facilities up to par with the elementary schools in Riverton. Gas Hills was the only school in the district that had no hot lunch program, and no indoor multipurpose and recreation area. However, this proposal coincided with preparation for the allotment period. Citing likelihood for declining enrollment, the school board looked at building a separate, less expensive building for a cafeteria, but ultimately postponed all action on the Gas Hills school.⁵³

As progress on the Gas Hills road occurred, and as the uranium industry prepared for the allotment period, enrollment in the Gas Hills school declined almost as quickly as it grew prior to 1961. The 1962-1963 school year finished with 112 students, and the 1963-1964 school year began with just 88. The district then decided to spend a much more modest \$15,000 to remodel the interior of the existing building by converting two classrooms back into a single larger cafeteria and multipurpose room. This left the school with six total classrooms, three of which sat dormant.⁵⁴ By 1972, enrollment had dropped to around 50.⁵⁵

Bigger Industry, Smaller Town –1969-1979

The long, drawn-out process of improving the Gas Hills road combined with a substantial change in the industry brought the community in the Gas Hills into a state of decline. After a slow half-decade, the uranium industry once again took off in the Central Wyoming. Utility companies began to invest heavily in nuclear power, and this private

53 “Gas Hills Protests School Building Halt,” *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, September 17, 1962).

54 “Call for Bids on GH School.”

55 “Gas Hills Grade School Is One Big Happy Family,” *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, June 15, 1972).

market eventually pushed the price to roughly five times the price paid by the AEC prior to the Allotment Period. So, “With the resurgence of uranium demands” in 1969, “the Fremont County Commissioners returned the completion of road to their priority list.”⁵⁶ Finally, By the end of 1970, a “ten year dream was realized [...] with the dedication of the paved road from Riverton to the Gas Hills mining area of Fremont County.”⁵⁷ Starting in 1970, the uranium industry climbed out of the doldrums and went into overdrive, and production skyrocketed through the 1970s. More people than ever found work in Gas Hills’ uranium mills, mines, and associated industries. However, this growth in the Gas Hills industry was not reflected in the physical growth of the camps in the Gas Hills. In 1972, the Gas Hills school’s enrollment was roughly one quarter of its peak.⁵⁸ Its grocery stores no longer existed.⁵⁹ I have no evidence that any camp besides Lucky Mc and Federal still existed. Like the school, the small community spent the better part of a decade bursting at the seams with facilities that were perpetually too small. Then the community shrank leaving behind only a few who apparently enjoyed the small community. There is no evidence of substantial growth of either the school or the community through the 1970s. The well-maintained highway which took less than an hour to travel made commuting from Riverton the obvious choice for most of the area’s employees.

56 “Gas Hills Road Bids in October,” *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, June 19, 1969).

57 “Ten Year Dream Realized with Completion of 44 Mile Riverton to Gas Hills Road,” *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, June 24, 1971).

58 Ellis, “Gas Hills Problems Aired at School Board Meet.”

59 “Gas Hills Grade School Is One Big Happy Family.”



Map 6: Section of 1971 Wyoming Highway Map showing completed Gas Hills Road

Through the end of the decade, a small but far less transient population continued to call Gas Hills home. Most if not all of these people who either lived in Federal's small camp of trailer spaces and a few cinder-block houses, or in Lucky Mc's camp of a handful of site-built houses and 40 trailer spaces. They developed a small, close knit community in the midst of a booming industrial area. The vast majority of uranium workers in the Gas Hills lived in and commuted daily from Riverton. Even the Gas Hills School's teachers commuted daily from Riverton.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Ibid.



Photo 2: Lucky Mc. Camp in the early 1970s. Photo by Don Snow, courtesy of the Riverton Museum

The rise and decline of company towns in the Gas Hills confirms Allen's thesis that the existence of such settlements depends on the lack of communication and transportation networks. Even though the town continued to house a population until the industry's demise, it seems highly unlikely that such a town would have ever been built had the Gas Hills Road already existed in its present paved form prior to 1953.

The most important story of the Gas Hills for this thesis is the role that it played in dampening the effects of the fluctuations in uranium in the local economy. Without the communities in the Gas Hills, local communities – mostly Riverton – would have had to absorb many hundreds, even thousands of new workers in a short period of time. Without the Gas Hills' bachelor dormitories, many of these would have been transient workers, uninterested in anything more than making a quick buck. Because of the Gas Hills'

isolation, this expansion had to be largely either paid in advance for or financed by the uranium companies, who had to include management of their villages into their economic calculations. Besides the road, the largest taxpayer expenditure in the region was no doubt the school, which was mostly paid for by the uranium companies, and was eventually sold and moved. As for the road, even though it would never be built in today's market, it does provide improved access to a oilfields,ranches and even the Castle Gardens petroglyphs site. Additionally, the Wyoming Department of Transportation uses the road to test new maintenance and rehabilitation techniques designed for roads with little use.⁶¹

61 "Highway Improvements Scheduled on Gas Hills Road East of Riverton," accessed February 18, 2019, <http://www.dot.state.wy.us/news/highway-improvements-scheduled-on-gas-hills-road-east-of-riverton>.

CHAPTER 4

JEFFREY CITY – COMMUNITY AND IDENTITY

Where communities in the Gas Hills grew organically and later assumed a company-town structure, Jeffrey City's creation was very different. Upon securing milling contracts from the AEC, Bob Adams recognized that the isolation of his planned mill probably necessitated a town of some kind. Clearly inspired by industrial and company towns from the recent past, Adams took a different approach to housing his employees than the region's other uranium companies by planning and building a comfortable settlement.

Between Jeffrey City's founding in 1957 and the beginning of its ultimate decline, which began in 1980, the town passed through three distinct phases, corresponding to the companies involved in the town. Between 1957 and 1971, the town was owned and operated exclusively by Western Nuclear. Starting in the late 1960s, Phelps Dodge began to acquire shares of Western Nuclear, and by 1971, Western Nuclear became a wholly owned subsidiary of Phelps Dodge. Finally, starting in 1977, other mining companies expanded their operations in Crook's Gap, bringing their own employees to the area and expanding the size of the town significantly.

1957-1970 – Western Nuclear's Jeffrey City

Building a company town for the uranium industry in the late 1950s meant performing a delicate balancing act. On one hand, attracting workers to a desolate area meant that the company needed to provide basic necessities and additional creature

comforts, good pay, and low living costs. On the other hand, building a settlement whose permanence made it more costly would have been more comfortable, but was risky because nobody knew how long the uranium industry would last. Once Bob Adams obtained his first contract with the AEC and began constructing the mill, Adams knew that he would have at least several years of production. Like the camps in Gas Hills, Jeffrey City relied heavily on mobile housing. Most other buildings, like the modular homes and steel buildings, benefited heavily from mass production and prefabrication, which kept costs down. This also resulted in making Jeffrey City feel temporary – a likely result of the uranium market’s uncertain long-term viability. The town had to be nice enough to attract workers, cheap enough to be worth the uranium gamble, and well-designed enough that it could grow if uranium became the major industry that Adams hoped it would.

Planning and Layout

Though I have not found documentation on whether Adams himself planned Jeffrey City, or if he hired a firm, the town’s meticulous planning is obvious from photos and maps. “The town cannot be likened to mining camps of an era long past,” wrote the *Denver Post*. “It seems that a modern metal such as uranium demands modern conveniences – and Jeffrey City has them.”¹ A main street named Sweetwater Boulevard ran east-to-west, just south of US Highway 287. Sweetwater Boulevard served most of the town’s businesses, provided access to bachelor dormitories, and served as the

1 Red Kelso, “Camp Springs Up, Complete With Conveniences,” *The Denver Post* (Denver, CO, February 13, 1957).

northern border for the townsite. The highway served as an obvious separation between the town and the Western Nuclear uranium mill.

Western Nuclear reserved the western edge of town as a community area. Bob Adams Avenue, running south from Sweetwater Avenue, served this area. The recreation hall – a 140x60 foot Quonset hut – sat on the first block on the avenue. Like most company towns, the ‘Rec Hall’ was an important building that served a variety of functions. Initially, it served as a public meeting place, a place churches could use to hold meetings, the nurse’s station and dispensary. Organizations could schedule events in the rec hall, and the company did not charge rent for its use. Room partitions divided the rec hall into classrooms for Jeffrey City’s first school. Later, when Mrs. Peterson relinquished her postmistress duties, Western Nuclear relocated the post office to the Rec Hall. During various times in Jeffrey City’s history, it also served as a movie theater, a beauty salon, a skating rink, and an indoor shooting range. Outside, the company built an outdoor swimming pool.

South of the Rec Hall, the local school district worked with the company to build an elementary and Jr. High school, which expanded frequently, and eventually had a high school and a large field house. The Company’s townsite maintenance facilities, the fire hall, and the water department sat across Bob Adams Avenue from the school. Finally, The “Teacher Court” – company-provided mobile homes for school employees – sat south of the school buildings.

Housing

East of the school and community buildings, in the center of town, the company built two U-shaped streets, Jackalope Drive (named after Wyoming's official state mythical creature) and Coyote Drive. Each of these streets contained 13 modular single story ranch style "horseshoe houses" - nicknamed for the shape of streets they occupied. The company rented these 26 homes to salaried Western Nuclear employees, AEC consultants, and other key personnel (see photo 3). These homes occupied the outside of the horseshoes, while the company built parks and recreational facilities inside.

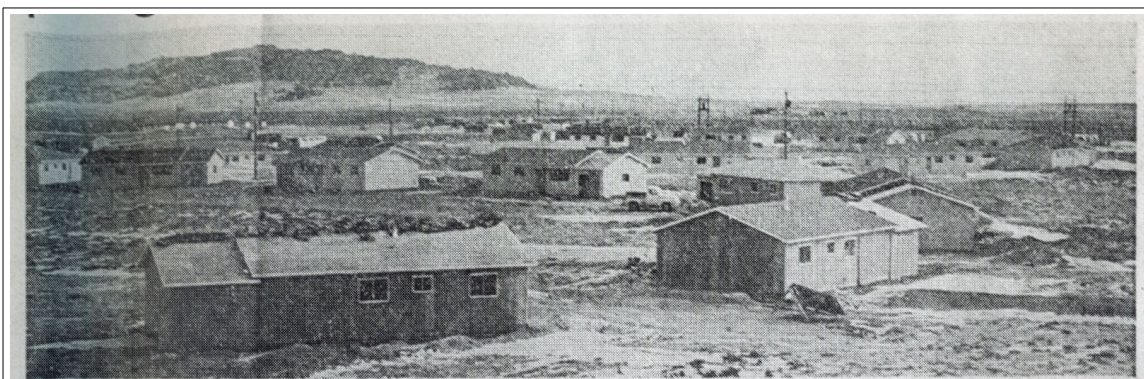


Photo 3: "Horseshoe Houses" Photo from: Red Kelso, "Camp Springs Up, Complete With Conveniences," The Denver Post (Denver, CO, February 13, 1957).

Like the camps in the Gas Hills, the majority of Jeffrey City residents lived in mobile homes. On the south and east ends of town, the company built streets in a grid pattern and provided lots and utility hookups for mobile homes. The company charged \$19 (roughly \$160 in 2018 adjusted for inflation) for a mobile home space, which covered the lot's rental and utilities. At its dedication in 1957, the town had a population

of about 150 and contained a 36 unit bachelor dormitory and space for 60 mobile home units. By 1959, the number of mobile home spaces had expanded to 145 spaces.² In 1957, Western Nuclear had purchased several mobile homes to ease the transition as the first workers moved into Jeffrey City. The company sold most of these homes to their first occupants, but when six tenants left before 1959 without their mobile homes, the townsite crew repaired the homes and either resold or rented them.³ Most of the company's employees owned their own mobile homes, but Western Nuclear occasionally bought and sold mobile homes to employees "at attractive prices."⁴

Western Nuclear allowed, even encouraged residents to personalize their trailer spaces. Many planted grass and flowers, built fences, and otherwise worked to establish nice yards. Some even managed to grow vegetable gardens in their trailer lots.⁵ Residents of the fledgling town planted trees in their lots virtually as soon as the town began operating.⁶ The company likewise planned and maintained parks and green space throughout the community.

Between 1957 and the early 1970s, the layout of Jeffrey City stayed basically the same. When necessary, the company built streets and added additional mobile home

2 William Anthony Romek, "Anthony Romek Reminisces" (Montana Historical Society Research Center, 1979), 5.

3 Ibid., 9.

4 "Western Nuclear Launches \$20.3 Million Improvement," *Riverton Ranger Mining Edition* (Riverton, WY, June 14, 1974), sec. A.

5 Isabel Hagemeister, "Jeffrey City Citizens Work to Beautify Their Dwelling Places," *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, August 16, 1961).

6 Ruth Hillger, "Jeffrey City Greet Springtime Gladly," *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, May 16, 1957).

spaces on the southern and eastern edges of town. Mobile homes and their residents came and went with the ebb and flow of the uranium industry. The town's early population demographics parallel that of Gas Hills. Its population increased rapidly from just around 150 in 1957 somewhere between 815 and 1200 people just three years later.^{7 8} During the stretch-out period, the town's population once again diminished, and the population stayed relatively small through the mid-1960s.

Infrastructure

The location of Jeffrey City made providing basic infrastructure relatively easy. Transportation in and out of town was generally no issue, since Western Nuclear located the town on an already-existing highway. For electricity, Western Nuclear contracted with Hot Springs County REA, whose high voltage transmission lines already ran near the area. Nearby oilfields sold natural gas to the townsite through Northern Utilities. The company drilled two 180 foot deep water wells, which filled two 250,000 gallon storage tanks. The company also built and maintained a sewer system. All of this basic infrastructure served both the town and the mill.⁹ Western Nuclear built and operated a television station translator to bring TV stations from Casper and Riverton to the town's residents.¹⁰ Additionally, they built a city park where they planted grass and trees.

7 William Anthony Romek, "Anthony Romek Reminisces."

8 "Riverton Population Hits 6,784; Gas Hills Third Largest, Has 1,129," *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, May 17, 1960), Vol. 54, No. 22 edition, sec. A.

9 William Anthony Romek, "Anthony Romek Reminisces," 5.

10 Ibid., 6.

Law Enforcement, Healthcare, Management

In Jeffrey City's early years, the Fremont County Sheriff's department deputized Western Nuclear's instrument repairman, Dick Fairservis, who initially provided the small town's sole law enforcement. Up to 1959, "his deputy duties had been minimal."¹¹ By 1962, another deputy served the area, as well as a Justice of the Peace. The town eventually moved away having employees deputized, but would later help pay salaries for two additional sheriff's deputies to serve as town police.

To satisfy the need for medical services in the community, they hired a "company nurse" in July, 1957. The nurse, Mrs. R. T. Brown, worked out of the dispensary which initially occupied two rooms of the bachelor dormitory and later operated out of the recreation hall. Nurse Brown worked under supervision of Dr. Robert Paul of Rawlins, who traveled to Jeffrey City weekly (each Thursday from 8:00 AM to noon) to see patients.¹² Later that same summer, the company improved its preparedness for medical emergencies by purchasing an ambulance and training EMTs..

During the town and mill's construction, Eddie Basden, the Superintendent of Construction, and Bob Adams' son-in-law served as the towns "unofficial mayor."¹³ As the town neared completion, Western Nuclear hired a townsite manager who was responsible for ensuring that the town ran smoothly and that the residents were content. The townsite manager functioned as a mayor, and a community council represented

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Elna Hurdle, "Jeffrey City Uranium Mill on 24 Hour Day Operation," *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, July 11, 1957).

¹³ Kelso, "Camp Springs Up, Complete With Conveniences."

residents, though it had no lawmaking power. Anthony Romek, one early townsite manager served starting in 1961. As townsite manager, he arranged for mosquito control, arbitrated neighbor disputes, and oversaw housing and mobile home space assignment. He oversaw the first publication of the company newsletter, *The Western Nuclear News*. Richard Fairservis, previously mentioned, later also worked as the townsite manager.

The company employed people work in the “townsite crew.” Under the direction of the townsite manager, they were tasked with the work that a conventional town’s public works crew would perform. The townsite crew fixed waterlines, sewers, roads, and sidewalks, repaired company owned homes, and maintained the parks that the company built. In the summer especially, several high school aged kids worked for “townsite.”

Businesses and Entrepreneurship

Instead of building a company store, Adams found ways for private entrepreneurs to become involved in providing necessary goods and additional recreation for the residents of Jeffrey City. Western Nuclear allowed companies to buy or lease plots of land in order to provide these services. Cliff Bloomenrader ran one grocery store called the Jeffrey City Mercantile. Hut Coates ran a second store called the Prairie Market. Two service stations in addition to the fuel pumps at Home on the Range operated in the town. Georgia Weaver ran a restaurant, and Eddie Basden, formerly the town’s superintendent of construction ran a bar, a restaurant, and a coin-operated laundromat. Near Home on the Range, Bob Reddon ran another bar.¹⁴ Meal tickets for the restaurants were available from the company to men who lived in the bachelor dormitories and had no access to a

¹⁴ William Anthony Romek, “Anthony Romek Reminisces,” 5.

kitchen. In 1962, Keith Purinton built and opened a bowling alley. Bowling leagues quickly became a primary recreational activity in the town, and remained an important activity for the duration of the town's life. Purinton also operated the Atom Theater; he purchased movie projecting equipment and showed movies in the Recreation Hall. Presumably, these entrepreneurs lived in housing built onto their businesses or located on the same property, unless they, or members of their immediate family worked for Western Nuclear and were thus eligible for company housing.

School

Construction of the Western Nuclear Mill and Jeffrey City began in fall of 1956, and with the influx of construction, advisement, and management personnel, came some children. These very early Jeffrey City students – between 30 and 40 of them – went to school in some of the company-built horseshoe houses, since construction on the recreation hall had not yet began. During the summer of 1957, it became apparent that a more permanent school would be required, but how large the enrollment would be was not yet certain. Until they could work with the district, the company planned on using the planned recreation hall as a school, and the company hoped that they could hire a husband and wife who were both teachers and house them in one of the company houses.¹⁵

At some point during the 1958-59 school year, construction began on a new eight classroom school that included such amenities as an office, a health room, a combination

15 Elna Hardie, "School Problems Important Item at Jeffrey City," *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, July 18, 1957).

lunch/activity room, a hot lunch program, and room for 200 students, 50 more than were enrolled at the beginning of that year.¹⁶ Upon its completion, the Rec Hall would be converted back into a full-sized basketball court, which community organizations and the school's Junior High sports could use. This new building was supposed to be completed in February, but severe winter weather delayed its opening until just in time for the 1959-60 school year.

Like the school in Gas Hills, early Jeffrey City grew faster than the school district anticipated, and its early years were plagued with futile attempts to keep pace with the growth. Soon after the inauguration of the first new school, the community and the district expanded it to roughly double its original size. During the allotment period, population growth in Jeffrey City stopped, but did not reverse as dramatically as had occurred in Gas Hills.

Early Jeffrey City Culture

Life in early Jeffrey City would foreshadow its culture at its peak. Like virtually all mining towns, alcohol flowed freely, and bar ownership, for those brave enough to take on the challenge, could be extremely lucrative. Some of the town's early residents recalled loading a small spinet piano into the back of a pickup truck in the evening and after a night of singing and drinking, driving the piano around to outside of friends' houses who had skipped on the evening's activities to play piano and sing.¹⁷

16 "Jeffrey City School May Be Ready For Use February 1," *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, December 4, 1958).

17 "Jeffrey City Boom and Bust," *Main Street, Wyoming* (Riverton, WY: Wyoming PBS, May 28, 2006).

Though it was pretty easy to find trouble in Jeffrey City, that alone did not define the town. Western Nuclear built parks and encouraged residents to plant trees. Local newspaper articles tell numerous stories about residents participating in bowling leagues, holding Tupperware parties, playing cards with their neighbors and friends.

Early & Mid 1970s – Phelps Dodge Acquisition

In the late 1960s, mining giant Phelps Dodge began investing in Western Nuclear, and in 1971, Western Nuclear became a wholly owned subsidiary of Phelps Dodge – a company with a long history of running company towns. Though Western Nuclear maintained a great degree of autonomy under Phelps Dodge, they company drew inspiration and expertise from Phelps Dodge in improving living conditions in Jeffrey City. As a step toward improving the town, the company built three duplex units that it rented out on a trial basis. After 2 years, and with the duplexes maintaining a stellar 95% occupancy rate, the company planned further expansion in 1974, to the tune of about \$3 million. The company found that improving housing conditions drastically reduced turnover. In 1971, the turnover rate for Western Nuclear was around 300% for hourly workers. By 1974, that number had been reduced by more than half, and the company felt that further improvements in living conditions and recreation opportunities could “get that number down to a reasonable level. Say 50%.”¹⁸

The company planned further expansion and improvements, which involved adding an additional 88 permanent structures to the 30 that already existed. The company built 6 6-unit condominiums (photo 4),²⁴ small single-family homes – called

¹⁸ “Western Nuclear Launches \$20.3 Million Improvement.”

“crackerboxes” for their unique box shape (photo 5), a new bachelor’s dormitory, (photo 6) improved mobile home spaces, and increased recreational opportunities. This massive \$3 million expansion pushed the town’s boundaries further south and west. They paved nearly all of the streets in town and built curbs and sidewalks.



Photo 4: Newly completed six-unit condominium unit. Photo from: “Western Nuclear Launches \$20.3 Million Improvement,” Riverton Ranger Mining Edition (Riverton, WY, June 14, 1974), sec. A.

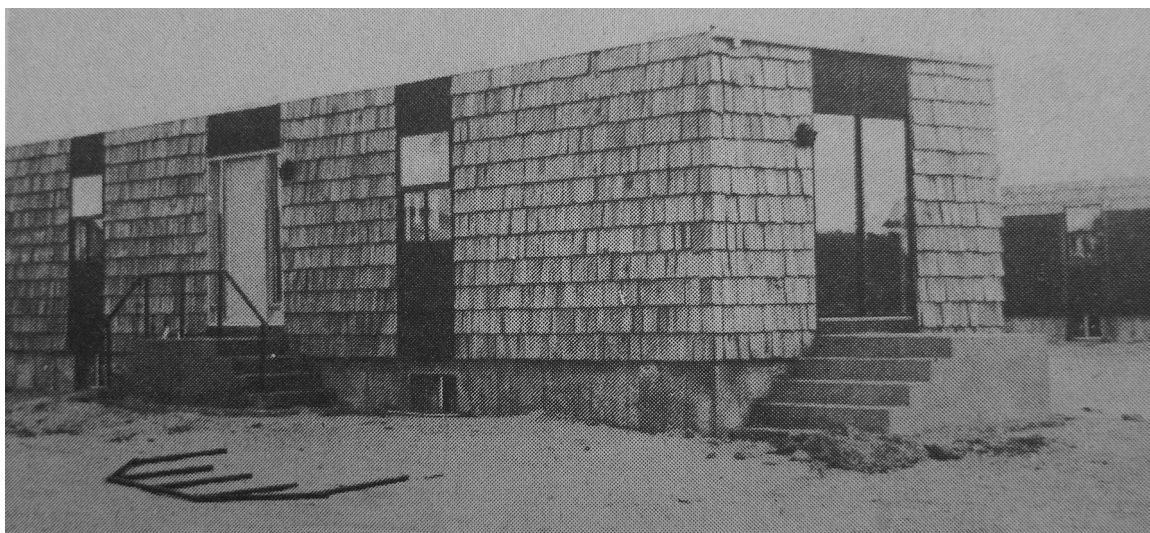


Photo 5: Single-family modular "crackerbox" home. Photo from: Ibid.

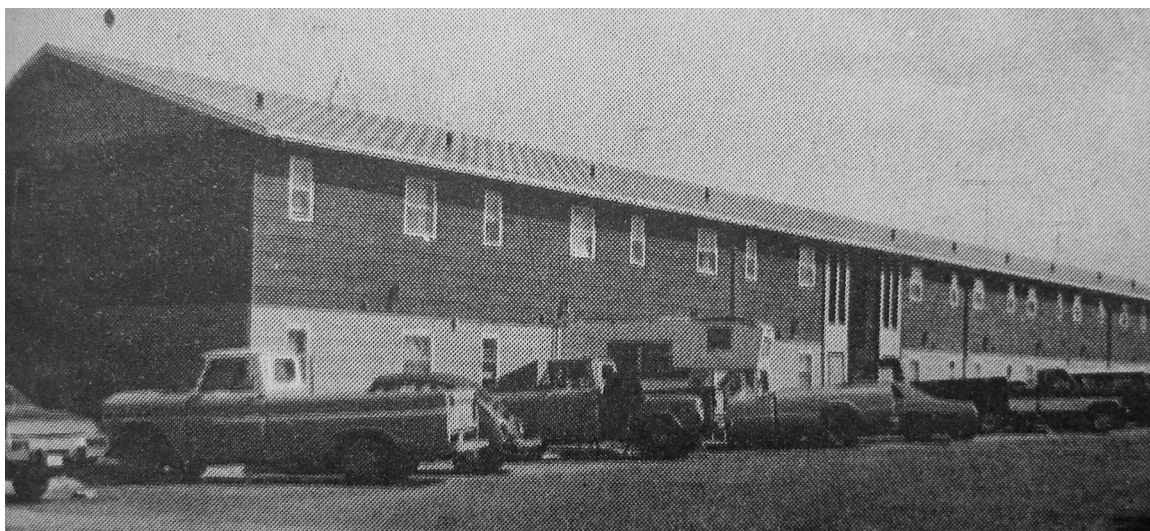


Photo 6: Newly Completed Bachelor Apartments. Photo from: Ibid.

Into the 1970s, as the town's growth accelerated, the county sheriff's department took a greater role in law enforcement in the town. Earl Osborne, Charlie Taylor, and John "J.D." Darnell served as the town's peace officers throughout the 1970s. Unlike conventional small towns, where law enforcement funding came from local taxes, Western Nuclear and later Lucky Mc contributed money to the Fremont County Sheriff's Department to pay salaries of two of the deputies policing the town. The companies maintained that "they do not try to direct the actions of the three deputy sheriffs."¹⁹ Furthermore, without that without the funding, "Jeffrey City would only have one deputy and one highway patrolman."²⁰

19 Lee Lockhart, "Lee Lockhart Comments ... Law Enforcement," *Jeffrey City News* (Jeffrey City, Wyoming, September 22, 1977).

20 Ibid.

During this same time, Western Nuclear also expanded recreational opportunities within the town. They built baseball fields, tennis courts, and planned a new, indoor, regulation-sized swimming pool to be operated alongside the then under construction high school.

1977-1981: Jeffrey City's Pinnacle

The late seventies were the pinnacle years for Jeffrey City. The town's population grew rapidly, from around 650 in 1974, to somewhere around 5,000 people by the end of the decade. The uranium industry had not only recovered from the slump of the allotment period, the price of uranium, and the rush to produce it had far surpassed the prices offered during the peak of the first AEC-supported boom. The Ranger's 1976 Mining Edition's full-color cover photo depicts a mill operator watching yellowcake come off of a drum filter. It's headline: "Mining Smiles on Wyoming." A year later, the annual edition of the paper reported: "Lucky Mc: Full Tilt in Gas Hills," and "Lid Pops Off Uranium."²¹

22 23

1977 was a pivotal year in the town's history. Additional mining companies moved into the area and brought with it a massive influx of people. In May, 1977, high school students in Jeffrey City graduated in their own town for the first time ever. The *Jeffrey City News* – a weekly newspaper published by the Wyoming State Journal began

21 "Mining Smiles on Wyoming," *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, June 17, 1976).

22 "Lucky Mc: Full Tilt in Gas Hills," *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, June 16, 1977).

23 "Lid Pops Off Uranium," *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, June 16, 1977).

publication, reporting on that graduation ceremony in its first issue. The *News* brought local news and commentary to the area that was not affiliated with the companies.

Arrival of Other Companies

Though ranchers, business owners, and other locals took advantage of the town's services, the bulk of the Jeffrey City's operation was exclusively controlled by and geared toward supporting Western Nuclear. In the mid 1970s, the town became a multi-company town when Pathfinder Mines (Lucky Mc's new corporate name as a subsidiary of General Electric) began work on their new Big Eagle mine just south of Jeffrey City. In less than a year, the Big Eagle operation alone brought an additional 400 people into the Jeffrey City area, and Pathfinder prepared for the influx by participating in the development of two new subdivisions, one on each side of Western Nuclear's Jeffrey City.²⁴ Since Western Nuclear had already facilitated the existence of most community services, Pathfinder's main concern was to provide housing. Residents of these new housing developments would shop in the stores and attend the school that already existed in Jeffrey City. Pathfinder Mines even cooperated with Western Nuclear by helping staff and fund each summer's company picnic, or community picnic as it became.^{25 26}

24 Pathfinder Mines Corporation, "Letter from Pathfinder Mines to Residents of Jeffrey City," July 20, 1978.

25 "Recreation Fair and Company Picnic Saturday," *Jeffrey City News* (Jeffrey City, Wyoming, August 10, 1978).

26 Ibid.; "Community Picnic Set for Aug. 18," *Jeffrey City News* (Jeffrey City, Wyoming, August 2, 1979).



Photo 7: Jeffrey City in late 1979 or early 1980. Photo from the Jeffrey City News

Pathfinder Subdivisions

On a hill just west of Jeffrey City, Pathfinder built a subdivision containing 24 Boise Cascade modular homes. The company planned on developing and selling commercial lots in this area as well. In contrast to Western Nuclear, Lucky Mc/Pathfinder was always reluctant to get into direct management of the company town. Instead of renting these homes, Pathfinder offered financing programs and sold them to employees.²⁷ Jeffrey City residents referred to the Pathfinder subdivision as “Snob Hill,” “Snob Knob,” “Nob Hill,” and other similar names. This name doesn’t mean that the

27 Jeffrey City News, “Lucky Mc Builds 24 Homes,” *Jeffrey City News* (Jeffrey City, Wyoming, November 17, 1977).

employees in this subdivision were far better off than Western Nuclear employees, simply that they had the opportunity to purchase nicer, more permanent housing on a hill. Many company towns in the west had a Snob Knob-- the prominent hill upon which managers' an superintendents' homes sat – but Jeffrey City may be the only company town whose Snob Knob was occupied by employees of another company.

Lonnie Claytor, who grew up on his family's ranch just east of Jeffrey City – land he now owned – together with his friend Gary Barney, an attorney from Lander had been watching the development of uranium in Fremont County for quite a while. Knowing that the new Big Eagle mine, among other mining activities would bring workers to the region, they formed a corporation named Green Mountain Village, Incorporated, and set out to develop Claytor's property. Barney met with Utah Construction executives and agreed to provide housing, in the form of 100 mobile homes spaces, to workers coming to the Big Eagle Mine. This project involved paving streets, installing curbs, gutters, and utilities, and other work at a total cost of more than a million dollars.²⁸

Law Enforcement, Healthcare, Management

Throughout the height of the uranium boom, the company continued to pay the salary of two Fremont County Sheriff's deputies, which meant that the town had four total law enforcement officers: Three sheriffs deputies and one highway patrol officer.

28 "Green Mtn. Village Development Begins," *Jeffrey City News* (Jeffrey City, Wyoming, June 9, 1977), Ore.

The town's substantial population and isolation proved challenging for these officers, especially since there was no jail or holding facility of any kind in the town.

Law enforcement officers probably had no shortage of work during Jeffrey City's boom period. Mining companies paid good wages for hard work, and like most such towns in the west, underneath the town's relatively stable, close-knit community was probably a current of transient "tramp miners" - people who drifted into town, worked long enough for a paycheck or two, and left. Jeffrey City is remembered by its former residents as both a close-knit community and a bit of a rough and tumble mining camp.²⁹

Providing consistent medical care for Jeffrey City's residents appears to have been a struggle in the region, and extra incentives were required to find someone willing to live in the boom town, much less open a completely private practice. Both Western Nuclear and Pathfinder funded EMTs and ambulances, who could take care of most emergencies in the area, but until the end of 1977, there was no general practice doctor. In December, 1977, the Jeffrey City Medical Clinic, funded by a partnership between Western Nuclear and Pathfinder, hired Doctor E. B. Burgoon.³⁰ Dental care had arrived in the town earlier that year when Dr. Sackett opened a dental clinic in a converted mobile home.³¹ Doctor Burgoon left a few years later, and the companies paid a Lander doctor to

29 "Everything About Wyoming - Home on the Range No More: Jeffrey City, by John Egan," accessed May 4, 2019, http://www.wyomingalmanac.com/readings_in_wyoming_history_5th_edition/home_on_the_range_no_more_jeffrey_city_by_john_egan.

30 "Jeffrey City Gets New Medical Doctor," *Jeffrey City News* (Jeffrey City, Wyoming, December 15, 1977).

31 "Dr. Sackett to Open Dental Clinic in Town," *Jeffrey City News* (Jeffrey City, Wyoming, September 15, 1977).

see patients on a weekly basis while they contracted with a medical contracting company to staff the clinic on a more permanent basis.³²

Business and Entrepreneurship

From the very beginning, Western Nuclear preferred to facilitate the establishment of private businesses instead of running anything resembling a company store. As the 1970s began to draw to an end, Jeffrey City saw its shopping and business community expand rapidly. At its peak, the town had the already existing bars, restaurants, grocery stores, and the motel. Additional businesses opened up in the area including the Jeffrey City State Bank, a Coast to Coast hardware store, a lumber yard, the Burger Shack, among other businesses. In addition to traditional businesses, numerous Jeffrey City residents opened small businesses out of their homes, advertising in the Classifieds section of the Jeffrey City news

Other Private Subdivisions

The growth of Jeffrey City's business community created a demand for housing for people who were not affiliated with either Western Nuclear or Pathfinder Mines. At least two privately owned mobile home subdivisions sprung up in the area. These two subdivisions, the Oregon Trail Mobile Home Park, and the Lone Tree Mobile Home Park did not offer rent at the subsidized rates that residents of Jeffrey City proper enjoyed, but they were open to anybody regardless of their employment status in the company.³³

32 "New Jeffrey Doctor to Arrive Monday," *Jeffrey City News* (Jeffrey City, Wyoming, August 23, 1979).

33 "Oregon Trail Mobile Home Park," *Jeffrey City News* (Jeffrey City, Wyoming, September 20, 1979).

School and Associated Recreation

Jeffrey City's new high school opened in time for the 1976-77 school year, and included an indoor swimming pool. The school, with its gymnasium, pool, and other facilities became an important center of recreation in the town. One position in the school's payroll was that of a Recreation Coordinator. This person served on a volunteer based community recreation board, but had no voting power.

Jeffrey City's school was still part of Lander's school district, and the town would not become eligible for its own K-12 school district until it had more than 500 students enrolled in school from the town. The arrangement that the mining companies had with the district stipulated that the district would fund Jeffrey City's schools at the same cost per student as Lander schools, and the mining companies would pay the difference in cost to the school district. In 1976-77, Western Nuclear paid some \$65,000 (over 270,000 in 2018 dollars) to the district to make up this difference – presumably for just the high school students that attended in Lander during that year. After some legal wrangling, Jeffrey City's schools became part of a unified school district in 1978.

CHAPTER 5

THE DEMISE OF WYOMING'S URANIUM COMMUNITIES

The Demise of the Market and the Towns

After the AEC began allowing utilities to purchase processed yellowcake uranium for their nuclear power plants in the late 1960s, the price of yellowcake rose briskly. By 1975, the \$8 per pound paid by the AEC seemed minuscule compared to the current market price of around \$40/lb. that held steady from 1975 to 1979. The steady price was, however, built on a shaky foundation. The country as a whole no longer shared the relentless optimism for the atom's potential that they had in the 1950s and 1960s. The general public was more wary of nuclear energy and radioactivity. The escalating cold war lead to calls for nuclear disarmament and skepticism fell over even peacetime uses of atomic energy.

25 years, 6 months, and 15 days after the McNeice discovery of uranium in the Gas Hills, and only twelve days after the release of a popular anti-nuclear themed movie – *The China Syndrome*, disaster struck the industry. On March 28, 1979, a nuclear power plant on Three Mile Island, Pennsylvania experienced a partial meltdown. As a result of the meltdown, some amount of radioactive gas was released into the atmosphere. Though the meltdown caused no measurable effects on human life, it destroyed what little confidence the American public may have still had in uranium. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission placed a temporary moratorium on new nuclear power plant construction, and utility companies shelved plans that they previously made to build new plants.

Initially, Wyoming's uranium industry thought little of the Three Mile Island incident. The *Jeffrey City News* makes no mention of it in at least the two months following it. The event, however, bolstered the anti-nuclear movement, spooked the country and sent the price of uranium into a free-fall. The effects of uranium's declining price were made far worse by the general price inflation of the late 1970s. Uranium companies in central Wyoming, blindsided by the newfound fear in atomic power, believed that the effects of Three Mile Island were temporary and that the price of uranium would recover. They furthermore believed in the overall benefit of the energy provided by nuclear power. This prevailing belief was articulated by Western Nuclear's preventative maintenance foreman: "[nuclear energy] has been proven the safest form of energy we have ever had. There is a pretty strong minority in the U.S. controlling our energy. I don't think they can prove it's unsafe, they've tried too many times."¹ Lee Nugent, a Lucky Mc manager blamed the Nuclear Regulatory Commission for "still reacting to the public pressures that the Jane Fondas and Tom Haydens and Ralph Naders drum up."² Anticipating a quick recovery, uranium companies did not drastically change the pace of their mining and milling operations through 1979 and early 1980. Furthermore, Jeffrey City especially continued to expand and new businesses continued to open.

1 "Fenske Believes Uranium Will Recover," *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, June 19, 1980).

2 "Nugent: Three Mile Island Still Hangs on the Horizon," *Riverton Ranger Mining Edition* (Riverton, WY, June 18, 1980).

In 1980 no new nuclear power plants were ordered, 16 plants were delayed, and 69 plants were canceled.³ The continued brisk uranium production combined with low demand to drive prices further down. Finally, the industry began to realize that the downturn was not a short-term dip. Wyoming's uranium industry slowed to a crawl. Companies scaled back into a holding pattern and hoped for the industry to prosper again. Lucky Mc cut 200 employees by June, 1980, and planned on laying off an additional 50 by the fall of that year. Western Nuclear had hoped to reduce its workforce by attrition only, but by August, 1980, and with no recovery in sight, it too began layoffs. Federal American, who produced exclusively for TVA, shut down almost completely in early 1981. Their workforce dropped from a high of around 600 to a "skeleton crew" of about 50, whose job it was to continue reclamation work, prepare permits, and perform maintenance while the company waited for a rebound.

With the uranium industry in a freefall, its workers came to view Three Mile Island "with the same tone many others would mention D-Day or a presidential assassination"⁴ A January 1981 editorial in the *Jeffrey City News* argued that "Nuclear power [would not] advance until fear is eased."⁵ The editorial stated that the Anti-nuclear crowd "honestly believes [that] nuclear power is a threat to public safety," and that in their sincerity they "have managed to convince a large part of the population that their

3 "Uranium Comeback Predicted within Two to 10 Years," *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, June 18, 1981).

4 "Nugent: Three Mile Island Still Hangs on the Horizon."

5 "Nuclear Power Won't Advance Until Fear Is Eased," *Jeffrey City News* (Jeffrey City, Wyoming, January 29, 1981).

case is valid.” The author criticizes the nuclear industry for not effectively responding. “This may be preaching to the converted,” the author states, “but the case for nuclear power is strong. In over 20 years, not one nuclear reactor operated by a utility within the U.S. has caused damage or injury to the public. The greatest injury caused by the worst nuclear plant accident of all time, Three Mile Island, was mental anguish.”⁶

Lack of Government Support

Many in Wyoming blamed over-regulation for continuing to suppress uranium prices into the early 1980s, but governor, Ed Herschler disagreed: “regulations are not hurting the industry as much as the overall economic situation.” The governor cited the surplus of yellowcake on the market and the ability that foreign countries to produce it less expensively. One cause of the low demand for uranium is the hysterical attitude that many have against nuclear power. “I think it’s safe, but they’re the loud ones,” he said.⁷

Despite the uranium industry’s sense of desperation, it did have one particularly powerful ally in United States Senator Alan K. Simpson, who began his service in the Senate just months before the Three Mile Island incident. Senator Simpson chaired the Nuclear Regulation Subcommittee of Environmental and Public Works from 1980-1984.⁸

6 Ibid.

7 Paul Menser, “‘Sick until 2000’ -- Herschler Predicts Rocky Times Ahead for Uranium Mining,” *Jeffrey City News* (Jeffrey City, Wyoming, January 22, 1981).

8 Burg Simpson, “Hon. Alan K. Simpson,” *Burg Simpson: Good Lawyers. Changing Lives*, accessed April 26, 2014, <http://www.burgsimpson.com/cody-wyoming-lawyers/hon-lawyer-alan-k-simpson/full-bio.html>.

Wyoming's uranium towns were in a uniquely powerful position, considering their small size, to exploit this ally. With a total population of between 4,000 to 6,000 inhabitants, they represented roughly a full percent of Wyoming's diminutive population of around 470,000.⁹ This means that, in terms of influence in the Senate, Jeffrey City and Gas Hills had roughly as much representation as a California city with a population of 2.3 million inhabitants.¹⁰

Senator Simpson fought hard for his state's uranium industry. Between 1979 and 1987, he introduced a total of eleven pieces of legislation dealing with atomic energy. The goals of these pieces of legislation included simplifying regulation, expediting power plant approval, and tariffs and quotas on foreign imports of uranium.^{11 12} "We may have to do something that is a little bit repugnant to me in most cases," he said. "We may have to

9 State of Wyoming Economic Analysis Division, "HISTORICAL DECENNIAL CENSUS POPULATION FOR WYOMING COUNTIES, CITIES, AND TOWNS," accessed January 31, 2017, http://eadiv.state.wy.us/demog_data/cntycity_hist.htm.

10 U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau of the Census, *1980 Census of Population*, Census Report - California (U.S. Department of Commerce: Bureau of the Census, March 1982), 8, accessed April 26, 2014, http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/1980a_caAB-01.pdf. In order to calculate this, I determined that Jeffrey City represented roughly 1% of the State of Wyoming's population, and then calculated the same percentage of California's population based on the 1980 Census (23,668,000).

11 Based on searches performed on the Library of Congress' legislative website:
<http://www.thomas.loc.gov>

12 The Library of Congress, "The Library of Congress: Thomas," Legislative Search Engine, *Thomas*, accessed April 25, 2014, <http://thomas.loc.gov/home/thomas.php>. – Searches and summaries provided by this search engine provided information on Simpson's proposed legislation

pursue a limitation on imports.”¹³ However, the tide against nuclear power had turned and all of Simpson’s proposed uranium legislation failed. After 1987, possibly as a result of the Chernobyl meltdown, Senator Simpson submitted no legislation dealing with nuclear power.¹⁴

End the Industry and the Towns in the post-uranium period

By 1982, Wyoming’s uranium producers described themselves as “hanging in there,” but over the next year, the industry almost completely shut down. By mid-1982, Western Nuclear cut its number of employees from a high of 625 to just 86. In the wake of the announcement, the town’s residents held a massive “town sale” to liquidate possessions and prepare to move elsewhere.¹⁵ Western Nuclear’s Operations Manager Ted Keller explained: “We expected a turnaround by now, but in fact, the situation is depressed worse.”¹⁶ A year later, the company employed only 45 people, who maintained equipment and facilities so that “when mining is again justified, [they would] be ready.”¹⁷ Big Eagle’s employment had also fallen from 350 to 12. Western Nuclear no longer hauled ore to the mill, which stood dormant most of the year. It only ran between 16-20 days per year to process uranium from mine water.

13 Paul Menser, “Nuclear Power Will Get Push from Simpson,” *Jeffrey City News* (Jeffrey City, Wyoming, December 18, 1980).

14 The Library of Congress, “The Library of Congress: Thomas.”

15 “Jeffrey City ‘Booms’ with Activity over Weekend,” *Jeffrey City News* (Jeffrey City, Wyoming, June 18, 1981).

16 “Western Nuc ‘Hanging in There,’” *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, June 17, 1982).

17 “Western Nuc’s Staff ‘Cautiously Optimistic,’” *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, n.d.).

The massive bust in the uranium industry had negative consequence for Jeffrey City's school district. The district had just spent \$15,000 on a field and a track – its oval outline still visible on Google Earth, football helmets, and other equipment to outfit its first ever Longhorn football team “that never played a game because of reduced student numbers.”¹⁸ Even more tragic, in January, 1980, the community passed a \$2 million bond issue that funded, among other things, a fieldhouse and gymnasium sports complex that cost \$1.4 million. The gym went into service in Fall, 1981. Less than half a year later, a leaking sprinkler pipe damaged the floor. The decreased school enrollment and population made repairing the floor unfeasible, and the gym was never used for competitive sporting events again. Later, in August, 1982, the school district closed the swimming pool after an engineer's report deemed the building to be unsafe due to lack of maintenance.¹⁹ The school's population continued to drop as families left the town.

The decline in the uranium industry desolated Jeffrey City. The rapid increase in population in the late 1970s quickly reversed. The single and multi-family housing that the company built as recently as 1977 once had long waiting lists of families trying to get a more permanent house. By 1983, only about forty of the town's 300 housing units were still occupied, and the town's population had fallen to around 500. The remainder of the town's dwellings sat empty and boarded up. Townsite manager Richard Fairservis “found out the hard way [that] a building deteriorates faster with no one in it.”²⁰ Initially

18 “They're Still Hanging on in Jeffrey City,” *Jeffrey City News* (Jeffrey City, Wyoming, December 9, 1982).

19 “Pool Building Done by Dec.?,” *Jeffrey City News* (Jeffrey City, Wyoming, August 18, 1983).

20 “Fairservis Learns Empty Buildings Can Crumble,” *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, June 17, 1983).

vandalism caused damage to many of the properties, but as the town became desolate, nature replaced delinquency as the primary cause of damage. The town's paved streets began to suffer from lack of use. "Traffic keeps cracks to a minimum. Now, we have excessive cracking."²¹ Fairservis felt that an additional cost in resuming uranium extraction in the area would be re-establishing and refurbishing the townsite.

Since mobile housing continued to dominate Jeffrey City, for many residents and families, leaving town was as a relatively simple process of performing some maintenance on the home, disconnecting utilities, and arranging for their home to be towed to a new location. The proliferation of mobile housing made the town feel perpetually temporary, even as the company built new houses. Perhaps the decline of Jeffrey City would have been less dramatic if residents were more physically invested in the town itself. They would have had an incentive to try to diversify the area's economy. However, the mobile home obviously facilitated relocation and therefore possibly accelerated the town's demise.

In the early 1990s, the remnants of the town were sold off in an auction. Many of the modular homes were sold from off of their foundations for just a few thousand dollars a piece. Many of the original "horseshoe" homes found new foundations on Wood street in Lander. Other homes from Jeffrey City and the Pathfinder subdivision ended up in Lander, Riverton, and even as far away as Laramie. Some of the few remaining residents banded together and formed the Jeffrey City Water and Sewer District, which continues to manage the townsite's infrastructure.

21 Ibid.

Lucky Mc's Gas Hills camp

The settlements in Gas Hills were ultimately destroyed by the decline of the uranium industry, but the town's decline was not as dramatic as that of Jeffrey City. The Gas Hills Road made commuting from Riverton relatively easy, and relatively few people chose to remain in the Gas Hills. Most of the non-company affiliated businesses had long since ceased operations. Still, the companies in the Gas Hills suffered. Lucky Mc's workforce in the Gas Hills had dropped from a high of 676 in 1980 to just less than 250 in mid-1982.²²

Federal American's Gas Hills Camp

In 1981, Federal almost completely shut down, leaving its village empty. Only a few continued to work for the company, "enough to keep the faith of another spring somewhere in the future."²³

Federal's Village streets are empty. The sounds of screen doors slamming and kids on bicycles is a haunting recollection. A fence starts to droop into what was once a flower bed. Gigantic mining machinery, once the pride of the company, has either been sold or sits silent in the morgue.²⁴

As the years wore on, virtually all of Wyoming's uranium workers left the industry. Reclamation work continues on old mines at a snail's pace, and a resurgence in Wyoming's uranium seems as unlikely today as it did in 1985.

22 "Nearly 4000 Uranium Jobs Lost over the Period of Three Years," *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, June 17, 1983).

23 "FAP Awaits Another Spring," *Riverton Ranger* (Riverton, WY, June 17, 1982).

24 Ibid.

Today, there is very little direct evidence in Fremont County's towns of the role that the uranium industry played in building up the area. Astute observers find a few traces of the once prominent industry in Riverton and Lander. Most notably in Lander are several homes from the Jeffrey City area that people bought and moved to Lander. Riverton's role in the industry is a bit more obvious. At the south end of town, Chemtrade operates a sulfuric acid plant that was originally part of Susquehanna Western's Riverton uranium mill. Furthermore, the headquarters building for U.S. Energy has a large underground mine headframe taken from the Jeffrey City area, which serves as the company's homage to the uranium industry. Finally, the student center at Central Wyoming College bears the name of Lowell Morfeld, the co-founder of Lucky Mc, who donated generously to the institution.

The Uranium Industry Today

The majority of electricity in the United States – roughly 65 percent – comes from combustion of fossil fuels. Nuclear power currently accounts for roughly 20 percent, and renewable (including hydroelectric power, wind, and solar energy) account for most of the remaining 15%. To power its 99 nuclear reactors located at 61 power plants in 30 states, the United States imports roughly 89 percent of its uranium, mostly from Canada, Kazakhstan, and Russia. The movement of uranium around the world is not strictly a market issue due to the sensitive and potentially dangerous nature of nuclear technology. Decisions to import atomic fuel are driven by political reasons at least as much as they are by market decisions.

Though the period of high atomic culture has long passed, there are still viable reasons to pursue nuclear power. It can produce a massive quantity of electricity and does not contribute to climate change. Once the upfront cost of construction is completed, the plants are long-lasting and economical. The average age of commercial nuclear reactors in the United States is 38 years old. However, events such as Chernobyl and the Fukushima meltdown remind us that when nuclear power goes wrong, it does so dramatically and catastrophically. Furthermore, the relatively small quantity of waste produced by nuclear power is highly toxic, and no permanent storage solution currently exists in the United States for this waste.

Despite the drawbacks, it is hard to imagine a world where nuclear power doesn't provide a significant portion of the electricity. Growing populations, growing worldwide economies, increasing technology, and the increased use of electricity to provide automotive transportation are all increasing demand for electricity. This is all occurring at a time when world governments are making major efforts to curb greenhouse gas emissions, most of which come from burning coal and natural gas for electricity generation. Nuclear industry supporters claim that newer power plants can be designed to be safer and better able to withstand catastrophic situations that caused the Chernobyl and Fukushima meltdowns.

Wyoming continues to be the country's leading producer of domestic uranium, and has the largest reserves of uranium at any price under \$100/lb. However, the industry looks much different than it did in 1979. At its peak, Fremont County alone had five active uranium processing mills that ran around the clock. Uranium companies ran at

least two additional mills: one south of Jeffrey City in Sweetwater County, and one near Shirley Basin in Natrona County. None of Wyoming's mills operates today, and all of them except for the Sweetwater Mill have been decommissioned and demolished. Currently, the only active uranium mill in the country is located in San Juan county Utah. In March of 1980, the uranium industry employed 5,449 people in Wyoming alone.²⁵ As of 2016, nationwide employment in the uranium industry sits at just 560 people; Wyoming accounts for 323 of them.²⁶ Surface and underground mines currently account for a small percentage uranium production in the United States. Instead, most production comes from in-situ leach mining, a process where producers inject acid or carbonate treated water into uranium formations to dissolve the ore, which they then recover through an ion exchange process. This method, developed in the Gas Hills, is much less labor intensive, and even if full-scale uranium production ramps up in Wyoming to its historic highs again, it is unlikely to require the manpower that the industry employed in the 1970s.

In the event that the uranium industry would recover in Wyoming, it is unlikely that Jeffrey City, the Gas Hills, or Shirley Basin would ever return as the company towns they once were. We would observe James Allen's thesis in action. While on paper, the transportation network in central Wyoming is very similar to how it was in 1979, the region's highways continue to be improved and widened. Furthermore, highway travel in the 1970s was legally restricted to 55 miles per hour. Today, increased speed limits –

25 "Nearly 4000 Uranium Jobs Lost over the Period of Three Years."

26 *2016 Domestic Uranium Production Report* (Washington DC: U.S. Energy Information Administration, May 2017), <https://www.eia.gov/uranium/production/annual/pdf/dupr.pdf>.

currently 70 miles per hour on both the Gas Hills Road and Highway 287 to Jeffrey City – have cut the travel time by almost 30%. Furthermore, communication technology has improved significantly and infrastructure could scale to demand in the region. The decreased dependence on manual labor combined with the infrastructure mean that a return to Jeffrey City's or Gas Hills' glory days is unlikely to ever occur, even if widespread uranium exploitation does return to the region.

In Defense of the Modern Company Town

Booms in mineral industries are superficially great for local economies. Unemployment drops, sometimes to near zero. Wages and salaries rise, and tax money flows into local and state government coffers, ready to be spent on a myriad of projects. Booms bring with them problems as well. During the boom, swarms of new people move into an area, and sometimes the local culture and character of a place is totally transformed, often without the consent and participation of historic residents. Additional substantial problems result when booms turn to busts. Suddenly, more people live in an area than can financially support the area. Many leave in search of work on other places. Some that leave suffer financial turmoil as they suddenly find themselves upside down in mortgages, and unable to repay loans. Those that stay in the communities feel the effects of unpaid bond issues for newly expanded but suddenly unnecessary infrastructure.

Boom/bust cycles are difficult for everybody that suffers through them, but their effects are substantially less harmful with modern company towns. Housing and basic infrastructure have been likely paid for in advance by the industries and companies responsible for the growth. If not, they are responsible for its repayment or debt

settlement. Additionally, in the case of Wyoming's company towns, most who lived in company-owned homes had little lost equity when they left town. Those who lived in mobile homes were able to relocate at minimal expense. Those who lived in company owned houses only needed to make new housing arrangements when they moved; they didn't have to try to sell homes. Jeffrey City's new school field-house was probably the single largest bond that had not yet been repaid when the industry declined, and its entirely that a similar school bond issue would have been left behind had the town been a conventional incorporated town.

The company towns of Jeffrey City and Gas Hills sprang up out of nowhere. They grew, shrank, and then grew almost exponentially with the industry that supported them. Then, the uranium bust occurred, and the towns died almost as quickly as they arrived. Their residents moved on to other things. The local incorporated communities kept their identity. Although the local economy experienced a significant decline, the uranium bust did not leave locals with a community they did not recognize, and a bunch of unpaid bonds.

EPILOGUE

ROCKIN' THE BAKKEN

Most of my life has been a front row seat to booms and busts in the energy industry. For more than thirty years, my dad and uncle, ran a small oilfield contracting company in central Wyoming. Of course, as a child I was oblivious to these cycles, but looking back, it's pretty easy to see, for example, that when we moved to a cheaper house in or around 1987, it was probably related to the crash in oil prices. Starting in high school, I worked summers for the company. My family's close relationship with the energy industry has profoundly influenced probably all of my siblings' career paths, but three of my brothers work in related industries. My youngest brother is an engineer for a phosphate mining company in Soda Springs, Idaho. Another brother is a consulting attorney for the energy industry in Denver. My older brother is a fishing engineer for the oil and gas industry, who got his start during the Bakken fracking boom in North Dakota.

My brother and his young family moved to Williston in 2010. At the time, I was working as a school teacher in south-central Montana, and at only 460 miles away, they were among my closest relatives, so I visited them somewhat regularly. They initially moved into a small apartment for a short time – the company that hired him bought an entire apartment complex and paid its residents to move out so that the company could have temporary housing for their key personnel. My brother managed to buy a house in the midst of a housing shortage. It turns out that buying a house in Williston was far easier than renting one.

Each time I visited, I was awestruck by the interesting contrast between Williston and the rest of the country, which was still reeling from the effects of the Great Recession. In September, 2011, we went out to eat in a hometown diner kind of place. Another sign accompanied the “Please Seat Yourself” placard – a handwritten sign on pink paper and attached with Scotch tape that read, “Please be patient ☺ – We are shortstaffed EVERYDAY!” That sign might as well have been Williston’s town slogan. Plumbers, electricians, or other contractors had schedules filled months ahead. Fast food restaurants and retail chains were paying \$15 per hour for entry-level employees. The official unofficial vehicle of Williston was a white Ford SuperDuty pickup truck with Texas license plates. Williston’s hardware store shelves always looked like they had been picked over in preparation for a hurricane. I could go on, but the point is that I’d never seen a boomtown quite like Williston in my life. Though not a company town, Williston’s sudden dependence on the fracking boom was undeniable.

Not long after I began this project, the price of petroleum began to slide. The last half of 2014 was particularly bleak, as the price of oil slid from \$111.80/barrel to less than half that by the end of the year. The decline continued through 2015 and finally bottomed out in February, 2016 at a price of \$35.87/barrel.¹ I haven’t been to Williston since 2012. My brother’s company moved him to Denver, and more recently, to Houston. However, it seems that things now are less bleak for the town. Oil prices have somewhat stabilized since 2016, and the town seems to have embraced its new identity as an oil town.

1 “Crude Oil Prices - 70 Year Historical Chart,” accessed March 26, 2019, <https://www.macrotrends.net/1369/crude-oil-price-history-chart>.

However, while I was researching Jeffrey City and the Gas Hills, I couldn't help but see striking similarities between the uranium industry of the 1970s especially, and of the fracking boom of the mid-2000s to the mid-2010s. Both booms occurred in an industry that relied heavily on manual labor. Both booms occurred in an industry that is seen by environmental groups as heavily controversial at best, and an existential danger to society at worst. Both occurred during nationwide economic turmoil. Though oil and fracking companies in Williston did not generally provide trailer hookups, many of Williston's new oilfield residents arrived and lived in camper trailers, some of which are almost as big as the mobile homes that housed most people in Gas Hills and Jeffrey City.

When I started writing this thesis, the Bakken boom seemed headed toward a similar fate that the domestic uranium industry suffered. At the end of her 2017 book *The New Wild West: Black Gold, Fracking and Life in a North Dakota Boomtown*, Blaire Briody wonders if Williston will someday suffer the same fate as did Jeffrey City.² My bet would be that Williston sticks around, even if the oil industry somehow becomes obsolete. That is not to say it couldn't suffer a significant population decline, but Jeffrey City and Williston have several important differences.

Primarily, Williston existed as an incorporated community long before the oil boom began. It had an economic motive to exist before the boom, and likely would after. Additionally, the inability of the majority of Williston's residents to hitch up their homes and head for greener pastures would probably ensure that many would make a substantial attempt to diversify their economy.

2 Blaire Briody, *The New Wild West: Black Gold, Fracking, and Life in a North Dakota Boomtown*, 2017.

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