



Battlement Mesa: An Emerging New Community, Part Three

By Keith Lammey, President

May 2nd was the 30th anniversary of “Black Sunday” – The beginning of Battlement Mesa’s “dark period.”

Long time Battlement Mesa residents know that May 2, 1982 was the day when Exxon’s board of directors suddenly and without warning announced that they would immediately abandon their Colony Project. The date became known as Black Sunday due to the catastrophic impact it had on Battlement Mesa and the nearby communities.

The period leading up to Black Sunday was full of excitement and overflowing with optimism. Exxon officials had prepared a “white paper” that described their \$5 billion vision that was expected to produce 8 million barrels of oil per day from the Colony Project fifteen miles north of Parachute. The plan was grandiose but believable given Exxon’s involvement and its financial resources. Further, the country needed oil and the long lines at gas stations that followed the 1974 oil embargo were still fresh in our minds. The reserves were here, Exxon was bankrolling the project and work at the Colony site and in the new community of Battlement Mesa was progressing at a feverish pace. Of course we believed that the project was unstoppable, but we were wrong.

Between 1979 and 1982, Parachute’s population grew four-fold from 300 to 1,200. Exxon’s white paper projected that Parachute would ultimately grow to about 15,000 and that Battlement Mesa would grow to 25,000. The new residents came in droves to take advantage of the area’s good jobs and high wages. Although the minimum wage was \$3.10 in 1980, carpenters who might have been unemployed or working at minimum wage in other parts of the country earned \$16 per hour and heavy equipment operators earned at least \$20 per hour. Life was good before the bust came.

On Black Sunday 2,100 people, who worked on the Colony Project, were suddenly unemployed. Exxon even locked them out preventing them from retrieving their personal belongings from the work site. When Exxon left, other energy companies quickly followed. Garfield and Mesa County’s populations fell by nearly 24,000 between 1983 and 1985. Battlement Mesa’s future was gloomy and many must have wondered if it would survive.

Despite the doom and gloom, Battlement Mesa survived its dark period and in the thirty years since Black Sunday continues to emerge as a new community. The community’s future is no longer tied to Exxon and oil shale. The boom period that ended 30 years ago was followed by several years of uncertainty then eventually transitioned into a period of reasonably stable growth.

Like much of Western Colorado, Battlement Mesa still has ties to the energy industry but it isn’t the “company town” that it started out to be. The 3,200 acre community that’s nestled on the mesa south of the Colorado River has been transformed into a beautiful planned community that is unique on Colorado’s Western Slope. Today, new Battlement Mesa residents are attracted here due to the wonderful climate, active life style, outdoor activities, affordable housing, low taxes, excellent schools and the wonderful amenities that Battlement Mesa offers.

Thanks, in part, to Exxon’s massive investment in the community’s infrastructure, Battlement Mesa has a water and sewer district which is positioned for growth, a wonderful 53,000 square foot activity center, a new \$8 million fire station, and a beautiful award-winning golf course, all without any public debt. Furthermore, Battlement Mesa is one of the few areas in Garfield County that already has the infrastructure, available land, with county approved zoning, and a governmental body in place in order to accommodate sustained growth. Battlement Mesa is Garfield County’s Emerging New Community.

The Colorado Dream

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