

Battlement Mesa's Oil Shale History, Part Two

By Keith Lammey, President

Our area's last oil shale boom and bust cycle ended on May 1st 31 years ago. Most of us know the date as "Black Sunday" and several of our residents can, without hesitation, recite the date because they lived through it. The rest of us have heard the stories but only a few seem to know and understand the frenzy that led up to Black Sunday and how traumatic the crash really was.

As I explained last month, I attended Andrew Gulliford's recent presentation about Colorado Oil Shale's past and future. If you are interested in our local history you should read Andrew Gulliford's book, "Boomtown Blues." Today, Dr. Gulliford is a professor at Western State College in Durango but as a former resident of Silt, he lived through the events leading up to Black Sunday, the mass exodus from the Grand Valley and the painful recovery.

According to Dr. Gulliford despite the way it seemed the frenzy didn't happen overnight. The oil shale boom that ended on Black Sunday actually began years earlier. In 1957, Cornell University's scientists and graduate students drafted a report for a community they called Shale City. In his presentation, Dr. Gulliford explained that the community which Cornell University called Shale City is what we now know as Battlement Mesa.

Dr. Gulliford describes the vision for this new community by explaining that Exxon's Colony Project White Paper stated that, "a workforce of 22,000 would be required for the first pit of the Colony Oil Shale project, plus 8,000 people in the plant." Exxon's White Paper projected that the Western Slope's population would grow to four million. This was during the 1974 era when the population of Parachute was 300, Rifle's 2,200, Silt's 900 and New Castle's was 700. By the 1990's, Exxon's new town of Battlement Mesa was expected to have a population of 25,000 which exceeded the existing population of the entire county.

In the early 1980's, this was the hot spot for construction in the United States. The unemployed moved completely across the country to submit their job applications. Unfortunately, many arrived shortly prior to the bust.

A few days before Black Sunday, the Exxon board of directors met in New York City. They didn't like the price of oil and, worse yet, it was going down so they canceled the Colony Project. With the force of a natural disaster, by Monday morning 2100 people were immediately out of work with a measly severance pay equal to a day's wage. Many workers who had moved hundreds of miles for their jobs were suddenly without a job. Almost overnight, the Western Slope's economy was robbed of \$85 million in payroll dollars.

The workers vanished. Within a week you couldn't find a U-Haul trailer within 100 miles.

Work immediately stopped on the Battlement Mesa projects. 400 apartment units were under construction in Battlement Mesa. 46 single family home foundations had been poured and foundations for an additional 112 units were in various stages of completion. By the end of the summer of 1982, 5,000 people had moved out of Garfield County.

To understand how traumatic the change was, you first need to understand the level of prosperity that existed immediately prior to Black Sunday. Dr. Gulliford describes this prosperity by explaining that, "When I talk about oil shale in Garfield County, I say that when things were really rocking it was like somebody drove a dump truck full of \$100 bills down the streets of Silt, Rifle and Parachute and opened the tail gate. There were \$100 bills floating down the street. That is what it was like. It was great!" He also talks about a local character who lived in Parachute called Danny the bum. Even Danny the bum had found paradise. All of a sudden, things were happening, "even for Danny. He had all kinds of things that he could do."

The valley's young adults were among the most impacted because local 18 year olds quickly grew accustomed to earning \$45,000 a year (in 1980) for operating a bulldozer. To maintain their lifestyle, they were forced to leave the valley where they were raised and two or three generations before them had lived and died. Not only did it impact the young adults, but it split up families. Per Dr. Gulliford, it was tragic. The thing that everyone had wanted for their families, "stability and good jobs, disappeared, overnight."

The Colorado Dream

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