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The Environmental Bi-Weekly

# High Country News

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Lander, Wyoming

Friday, June 7, 1974

## Energy Boom—Plans and Payments



Trailer camps are a way of life for many of the newcomers near Rock Springs, Wyo. The space for this assortment of makeshift homes for Jim Bridger power plant construction workers was provided by the Bechtel Corp. By living at the base of the plant they avoid the long commute to work, but they are 35 miles from the

amenities of town. There are no trees, nor yards, no schools, no groceries, no bars, no places to chat with friends here. Just 247 trailer spaces in the dirt, and 80 more to come. Space rent is \$10 a month, which includes electricity. You buy your own propane and you tote your own water.

### 1. Rock Springs, Wyoming

by Joan Nice

Rock Springs, Wyo. Mayor Paul J. Wataha isn't sure you can plan for the kind of growth his community is experiencing.

"What you need is money," he says. "We had a master plan and a transportation plan in 1971 that we couldn't implement because we didn't have the funding available."

Now that master plan is hopelessly outdated. The peak population predicted for 1990 — 26,000 — has already arrived. In 1970 Rock Springs had only 12,000 people.

"Even if Pacific Power and Light had come to us in 1968 and said, 'O.K., we're going to have a large expansion hitting in 1973,' I doubt if we

could have been ready for it," Wataha says. "The cities just don't have the bonding capacity."

The Jim Bridger power plant and the trona (soda ash) facilities increased Sweetwater County property tax valuations by about \$14 million last year. During the same period the city's tax base only crept up by \$400,000, Wataha says.

Although its tax base is bigger, the county doesn't have enough money either. Sweetwater County Planner Steve Young says that the need for county services grows faster than the tax base. "We'll be in a bind for 10 or 15 years," Young predicts.

The county planning staff consists of one

man, Young, and his secretary. The county has a zoning ordinance, but "I know a lot of things happen here that I'm not aware of," Young says. "I just hope that someday we'll catch up with the violations and set them right."

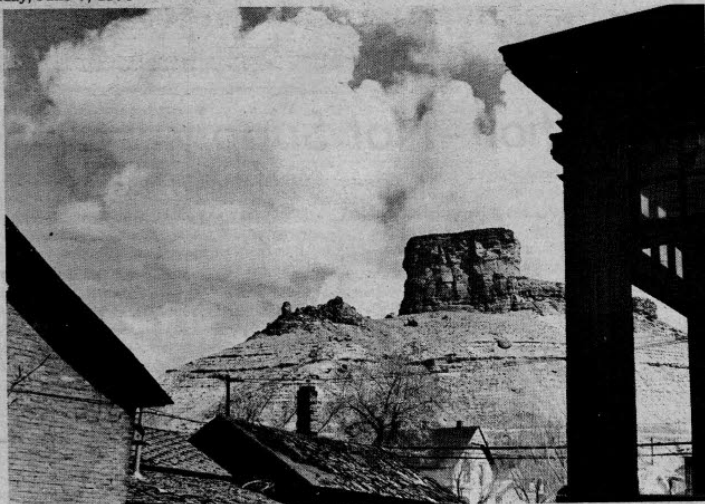
Young hopes to hire a sanitarian to enforce state health statutes soon. Most of his own time is spent dealing with crises.

"We have so many problems confronting us on a day-to-day basis that we're not getting around to the future problems," he says. Since he is informed of new plants and expansions "mostly by reading about it in the papers," it's hard to get a jump on things.

Gov. Stanley Hathaway reminisced about

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Green River, now a part of a multi-million dollar expansion in southwestern Wyoming based on energy and trona resources, made a shaky debut as a railroad town. When the Union Pacific came West in 1868, Green River sprang up. The town flourished for a few months until the tracklayers made their way farther West to what is now Evanston. She re-emerged to become the county seat of Sweetwater County in 1875. Her greatest mineral asset, trona, was discovered in the 1930s.

## 1. Boom...

(Continued from page 1)

problems in the area at the annual Green River Chamber of Commerce banquet in March. Ten years ago the southwestern Wyoming economy was "sour" and the state tried to attract industry to the area, he said.

It was "too much, too fast," Hathaway admitted. "Once you prime the pump of free enterprise, it doesn't stop where you want."

"Priming the pump" has more than doubled Rock Springs' population since 1970. The county seat, Green River has made a parallel leap from about 4,000 residents in 1970 to 9,000 residents today.

For Rock Springs, the population increase has generated an overloaded sewage system, bond issues for new schools and a new hospital, high prices, traffic congestion, myriads of metal homes on wheels, and new kinds of crime.

"On K street gambling, prostitution and cocaine are available to anyone," says Casper-based psychologist Dr. ElDean Kohrs.

Most people predict that the new numbers and new problems are in Rock Springs to stay. The Jim Bridger power plant's peak construction force of 3,000 has shrunk to 2,800. But although units one and two are nearly complete, a third unit will be built, a fourth is under consideration and there are rumors of even a fifth and sixth to come.

More growth is also expected from the coal mining and the oil, gas and trona industries in the area. Fifty-four per cent of the country's soda ash is produced from Green River trona. The chemical is used to manufacture glass, detergents, fertilizers, drugs, plastics, paints, textiles, leather, pesticides and many other products. About 800 new workers will be needed by 1976 to meet the expansion plans of Allied Chemical, Stauffer of Wyoming and FMC. A new trona operation owned by Texas-Gulf will require another 300 workers by 1976.

Oil shale extraction and coal gasification are also possibilities in the area. For all these reasons, most officials are saying that when the

Bridger construction force shrinks, probably no one will notice.

### BOOMS BEFORE

Boom conditions and industrialization are not new to Rock Springs. The town was built in 1868 when coal mines first opened to supply the Union Pacific Railroad. Rock Springs' boom-town style was reflected in its architecture, says historian T. A. Larson: "Old boards, packing boxes and building papers were basic construction material and flattened tin cans were used as roofing."

Mayor Paul J. Wataha and his family have lived through much of the town's booming, busting history. Wataha's great grandfather worked as a stable boss around the time of the Chinese massacre in 1885. In later years, his grandfather drove a city garbage truck.

Wataha's own experience in the town has trained him to be ready for the unexpected. "Patience is a tremendous virtue here," he says.

He first became mayor after the coal mines closed down in 1954. The trains had switched to diesel power and left Rock Springs in a slump. The Sweetwater County payroll dropped from \$21,000,000 in 1953 to \$14,000,000 in 1958.

People were selling property for peanuts," Wataha says. "And we had applications an inch thick for city jobs."

"Then we really started sinking," Wataha says of the town's 1969-1970 period of land subsidence. Rather than leaving pillars in the old underground mines less than 300 feet below the town, miners "just pulled the pillars to extract the last nickel's worth of coal," Wataha says. The town survived that crisis by blowing a sand and water slurry into the cavities.

"Now things have completely reversed," Wataha says.

Now, the economy is booming again. Finding merchandise and employees, not customers, have become the merchants' concerns. Land and houses to buy are extremely scarce and high priced. Almost no rentals are available.

### HOUSING

As Wataha describes it, "Every nook and

cranny is being rented in some fashion. There's just no housing available."

One Rock Springs realtor says he put a house on the market at 1 p.m. and had it sold by 1:30 p.m. the same day.

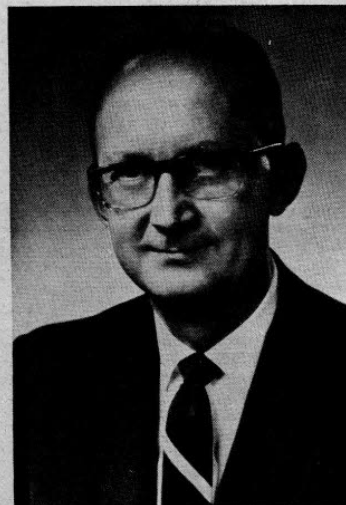
The result looks at little like a return to the old mining camp days. The tents are up again. Well paid workers find shelter wherever they can — in a tent, a camper or a trailer.

Squatters on federal and Union Pacific Railroad land are usually tolerated. Because of the checkerboard pattern of ownership "it would take a surveyor to tell whose land the people are squatting on," says Tim Ryan, real estate manager for Upland Industries, a subsidiary of Union Pacific. Ryan is barraged with calls about land sales. Recently a Bridger worker called and begged Ryan to sell him a cave for shelter.

Upland Industries has been slow to let go of their holdings in the area, despite the demands. The corporation says they are moving slowly because they want quality development. With extensive holdings of land, coal and trona in the region, "we can't just make a fast buck and get out," Ryan says.

Upland plans to sell some land along Bitter Creek to the west of Rock Springs as soon as it is master-planned. Such sales are vital to the community, since most of the rest of the undeveloped land in Sweetwater County is tightly held by the Bureau of Land Management and by the Rock Springs Grazing Association.

Companies are taking some steps to solve housing problems, since the situation has begun to affect their profits. Despite the high wages paid to their employees, the Jim Bridger plant turnover has run as high as 40% a month. It takes 10 days to a month before a worker really becomes productive, a Pacific Power and Light Co. official says. PP&L, a partner with Idaho Power Company in the Jim Bridger project, has lost an estimated \$75 million due to turnover. The coming and going takes place despite very attractive wages, which will be \$5.75 an hour for the average permanent employee working on the Bridger plant and which



Paul J. Wataha, a public accountant, has been the mayor of Rock Springs, Wyo. for the past 17 years. "Patience is a tremendous virtue here," he says. Wataha has steered the town through economic bust and environmental calamity and now is working at easing social pains in an uncontrollable boom.



are \$4.11 to \$4.91 an hour for the average trona worker.

The crowded, uncomfortable housing has contributed to the severity of Rock Springs' other social dislocations. Among them:

#### MENTAL HEALTH

Caseloads at the county mental institution have increased tenfold in the past five years.

#### SEWAGE DISPOSAL

The Rock Springs sewage disposal plant, with a capacity of 2 million gallons, has been deluged with as much as 2½ million gallons at peak times during the last two years. An adequate plant for the future, with a capacity of three million gallons, would cost \$5 million, Mayor Wataha estimates. The city doesn't have that much money, so they'll settle for a stop-gap solution — another 300,000 gallon plant costing about \$300,000.

#### HOSPITAL

Before the Jim Bridger plant construction began, the county hospital emergency room averaged about 300 admissions per month. In the fall of 1973 that figure was up 333% — to 1,300 admissions per month. The county approved a \$5.5 million bond issue last fall for the construction of a new hospital.

#### POLICE

The Rock Springs police department used to get about 8,800 calls a year. Since the boom began in 1970 that figure has more than quadrupled. The department took about 36,000 calls last year. The work force hasn't been able to expand as rapidly as the work load, however. The department had 22 workers in 1970. Now they have 32. "I don't think that's nearly enough," say Mayor Wataha. County Sheriff John Zakovitch notes that much of his increased work is related to new kinds of crimes — more family trouble calls, burglaries, thefts and barroom brawls.

#### SCHOOLS

The strains the boom has placed on the school system made it necessary to pass a \$5.3 million school bond last year for a new junior high school and two new elementary schools. In 1973 alone, Rock Springs schools' enrollment increased by over 11%. Next fall the superintendent of the Green River school district expects enrollment in that city to increase by 50 to 60%. Retaining teachers in a town with high prices, no houses, crowded living conditions and overflowing classrooms has also become a problem in the last few years.

#### CONSTRUCTION ACTIVITY

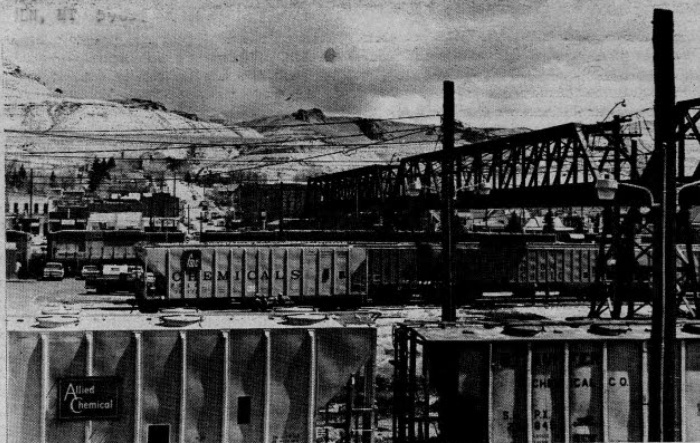
City planner Bill Banks says that last year the city issued 460 building permits in Rock Springs, about the same number issued in Billings, which is a city of 80,000 people.

#### TRANSPORTATION

More cars pass on the Rock Springs overpass leading to downtown than in similarly monitored spots in Casper and Cheyenne, Wyo. The only way to accommodate the traffic in a town with narrow, winding coal-camp streets is to build a circumference route says Mayor Wataha. The new road will be funded by the state of Wyoming.

#### WOMEN'S LIVES

Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) has stationed several workers in Rock Springs



Union Pacific gave the trona-soda ash industry a start in Wyoming by bringing a chemical company in to test drill on their land near Green River in 1944. In 1947 that company began processing what are now recognized as the richest and most accessible trona reserves in the world. The three companies which established themselves in the area now have plans for large expansions. They are Allied Chemical, Stauffer of Wyoming, and the original drillers, Food Machinery and Chemical Corporation (FMC). Texas Gulf, Inc. expects to start a new \$75 million operation in 1976.

The boom in trona and energy resources means many new neighbors for the people of Sweetwater County — and the problems that accompany rapid change. The population of Green River has swollen from 4,000 to about 9,000 since 1970. About 1,100 new trona workers and their families are expected to arrive by 1976.

this year to provide more opportunities for women in the area. A mental health expert put the problem this way: "The primitives knew about communication and provided for women to wash together at the river bank. The Wyoming trailer court does not provide this. For eight hours women wither in isolation while the kids are in school. Then there is the bedlam before and after school when the old man gets home from work."

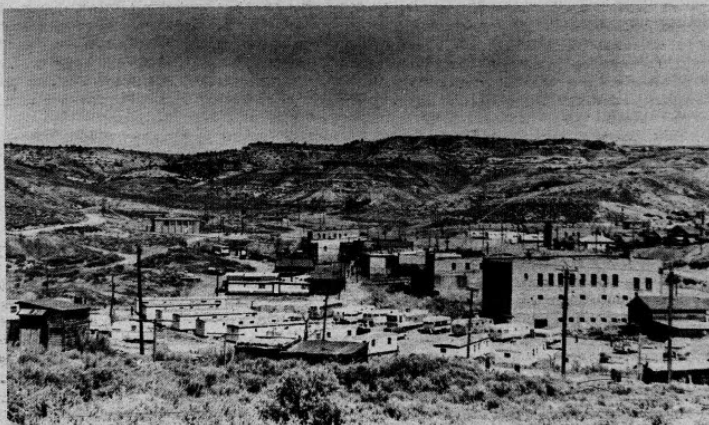
#### SMALL BUSINESSES

While some merchants applaud the increase in business, others wish they didn't have to compete with big industry wages to attract workers. A city official sees the same problem in

government offices. "With industries paying extremely high salaries to unskilled labor, we are having trouble getting people and are losing employees," he said.

The future of the Rock Springs area depends upon trona and the Jim Bridger plant expansions and upon the future of oil shale, coal mining and coal gasification. Officials trying to orchestrate growth are not optimistic. They cannot plan properly because even industry has not been able to accurately predict its needs. Before construction began on the Jim Bridger plant, studies predicted a maximum construction force of 1,200. Three thousand construction workers were actually needed.

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Trailer camps are filling in the spaces in what used to be the ghost town of Superior, Wyo. Superior was a coal mining town in the early part of the century. But lately things had been quiet — until southwestern Wyoming quickly was made the energy and trona capital of the state. Superior is about 25 miles from Rock Springs, Wyo.

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# 1. Boom...

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And even if officials could make plans, it looks like they wouldn't have the money to implement them.

Mayor Wataha hopes he will not have to use bonds to provide basic services for Rock Springs. "Bonded indebtedness goes against the property owner," Wataha says. "And most property owners in Rock Springs have paid for the schools and the sewers once. We have attempted to use bonds for service we've not had before — in areas like recreation."

To fund the basic services, Wataha prefers the one per cent city sales tax. The tax brought in \$500,000 last year. Officials can't plan a budget around this income, however, because the tax comes up for a vote every two years at the general election.

## Energy Boom—Plans and Payments

# 2. Gillette, Wyoming

Nine thousand people live in the Gillette, Wyo. area today. The population may swell to 40,000 by 1978, according to a study drafted by the five coal companies, the one power company and the railroad with interests in the area.

At the Wyoming Environmental Congress, Dr. ElDean Kohrs painted a grim future for the area by describing the much smaller boom which he experienced in Gillette a few years ago. Kohrs, now head of the Wyoming Counseling Center in Casper, worked as a clinical psychologist at the mental health center in Gillette during the oil boom.

The history of power production in Wyoming "is a dismal record of human ecosystem wastage," Kohrs said. "Frontier expansion without planning has left cities crippled by shameful environments which cause human casualties."

Back in 1950 when Gillette was a ranching and farming community, 2,191 people lived there. By the peak of the oil boom in 1970, the town had 7,194 residents. Kohrs saw as the results of that expansion: divorce, tensions on children, emotional damage, alcoholism and suicide.

"Children went to school in double shifts," Kohrs said. "Motels turned over their linens in triple shifts. Jails became crowded. . . mayors shuttled in and out of office regardless of party,



Psychologist Dr. ElDean Kohrs spoke at the Wyoming Environmental Congress in Sheridan this year. He's concerned about the "people problems" which rapid coal development will bring. His experience shows that energy booms have brought depressions, divorce, dissipation, drunkenness and death to the West.

Wataha says it's hard getting used to "a new way of living" in town.

"I've met some very fine people who come into the community and want to become active. And then I've met some who cause problems, because they say 'I'm not going to be here, so why

should I care,'" Wataha says. "I'm just thankful that we haven't had more problems than we've had. But if I started over and somebody told me to run for mayor today and I knew all the problems ahead, I don't think you could get me anywhere close to it."



In the Rock Springs area, every available piece of land is desperately needed for quick, cheap housing. Most of the wide open spaces around the town are tightly held by the federal government (the Bureau of Land Management), Upland Industries (a subsidiary of Union Pacific), or by the Rock Springs Grazing Association.

like bobbins in a loom."

The ultimate sign that something was wrong was the suicide rate — one attempt for every 250 people. An increased divorce rate also ensued. In 1970 there was one divorce for every 1.8 marriages in Gillette.

The sad statistics were a natural consequence of the living conditions, Kohrs said.

"Fatigued men working long shifts, driving long distances to work came home to equally fatigued wives coping with a mud-splattered world," he said. "Trailer courts (42% lived in them) offered only a mud paddy for children's play as they raced between trailer houses and across the trailer court traffic. Even schools were in trailers similar to those in which the

children lived. Nothing seemed permanent," Kohrs said.

The psychologist found that between 1960 and 1970 crime quadrupled, while the population only doubled. "Drunkenness, prostitution and gambling flourished," he said.

School administrators were unprepared for the number of new students. By 1970 the ratio of school children to the rest of the population had changed from one in 70 to one in four, Kohrs said. It was not until two years after the influx that new schools were built.

"The grim statistics of spiritual depression, divorce, dissipation, drunkenness and death indicate that the old West — not the idealized TV kind — but the real world of drought, dirt, elemental danger and a dismal battle for existence are not even 100 years in the past for Wyoming," Kohrs said.

# 3. Hanna, Wyoming

"He is 25 years old, married with one child and working for a coal company at a very high rate of pay. He is a Democrat or an Independent voter. The newcomer has probably moved around quite a bit in the past. He takes his recreation outdoors, hunting and fishing, but would appreciate more in-town recreational facilities. The newcomer is a high school graduate. His demands on municipal services are high. . ."

This, according to researcher Lee Nellis, is a statistical portrait of the average newcomer in Hanna, Wyo. Since 1970, Hanna has experienced a second boom of coal mining activity. In a booklet called *What Does Energy Development Mean for Wyoming?*, Nellis explains what recent energy development did to this small Western community.

From 1970 to 1972, Hanna nearly doubled in population. In 1970 there were 460 people. By December of 1972, Hanna housed 858.

During the boom, the money available to the county and city rose, but not as fast as the population and the demand for services. While the population rose 87.3%, assessed valuation rose only 65.8%. And the per capita tax base fell from \$562.12 to \$499.87.

Suddenly, the town needed a sewer system, a police force and an expanded water system. Traffic increased 39.3% over the two years. Always content with a few bars for recreation, Hanna people are now talking of needing a bowling alley and a drive-in restaurant. Schools are overcrowded and chaotic.

"Teachers feel that newcomers are more demanding of school services while their children are harder to discipline," Nellis says.

Nellis offers some suggestions: "The state should require energy resource developers to file extensive impact statements accurately detailing the extent and duration of their developments," he says. Once informed, "Local people should establish direction for their community before the trailers roll in. The planning should take into account: a) a maximum population desirable, b) a minimum level of community services desirable and its costs, c) the layout of the community including sites for recreation, population density limits and the quality of housing desired, d) the expansion of utilities along the plan laid out, and e) some means of stabilizing the economy."

Nellis also suggests that local schools should make an attempt to train people for the jobs that might come into their community. Hanna old-timers did not land high-paying jobs, Nellis notes. Most of the skilled labor for the coal operations came from out of state.

Finally, Nellis suggests that "an impact tax should be added to the severance tax and paid to impacted communities. . . As debts and taxes rise, a fortune in mineral wealth leaves the area in eastbound unit trains. It seems logical that some of this wealth be applied to problems created by its extraction," Nellis says. "Costs to the corporations will be passed on to energy consumers and this, too, seems logical — consumers should help pay off the social costs of their comfort and convenience."

Nellis's report, *What Does Energy Development Mean for Wyoming?*, was published by the Office of Special Projects, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyo. 82414.



## 4. Colstrip, Montana

Citizens in Rosebud County, Mont. are demanding that industry pay its own way in their community. The group, the Rosebud Protective Association, has asked Montana Power Co. and Puget Sound Power and Light Co. to build a new school for children in Colstrip, Mont.

The Colstrip school is overflowing now, with 400 students. An industry study predicts that coal development activity in the area could push that enrollment up to 1,073 by next year and 1,800 in 1978.

The school would cost about \$2.2 million, according to the study. Even if the county were bonded to capacity, Rosebud would still lack over \$800,000 of the capital needed. (The current legal bond limit is five per cent of the total county taxable value.)

Duke McRae, president of the Rosebud Protective Association, says "the energy companies are responsible for 100% of the impact on the school and they should provide 100% of the funds for a new building. That doesn't include the cost of additional teachers, books and supplies."

Although the impacts have already hit Col-

strip, increased tax revenues won't come until the power plant under construction becomes operational — in 1975. Up until now, money to pay for community improvements has come out of established residents' pockets.

"Taxes in the Colstrip district increased over 20 mills from 1972 to 1973 and apparently will increase as much or more for the 1974 tax year," says William Gillin, a Colstrip area rancher.

The Rosebud group suggests that the two energy firms could pay for the school with money they saved when the county helped finance their air pollution control equipment. The county helped by floating an industrial revenue bond. Without putting the county into debt, the bond allowed the companies to borrow money at a two to three per cent lower interest rate. The companies saved about \$12 million by obtaining those bonds.

McRae also points out that when Northern Pacific Railroad expanded coal production at Colstrip during World War II, its subsidiary, Northwest Improvement Co., built a school for the community.

Montana Power Company (MPC) and Puget

Sound Power and Light Company are partners in the power plant venture at Colstrip. MPC president George O'Connor says that it is not appropriate for his company and Puget Sound to build a school in Colstrip. If it were, he said, Exxon and Continental Oil would be building schools in Billings because of their refineries there.

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The recent coal development in the Colstrip area of Eastern Montana is having a very serious impact on the small rural community where it is taking place. Small communities, such as Colstrip, were prior to the present development, are not in any way prepared to or capable of absorbing the large influx of people that are coming in with the coal development.

William Gillin  
Rosebud Ranchers Association  
Colstrip, Mont.



This country is faced with not only an energy shortage but also an impending food shortage. While the United States is fortunate to have vast deep reserves of fossil fuels, its productive land base is finite, and ever shrinking as it makes way to provide room for a growing population which must also be fed. If coal is required to ease the energy crunch then the emphasis must be on deep mining.

Mrs. Art Hayes, Jr.  
Tri-County Ranchers Association  
Birney, Mont.

## Radioactive Tritium Leaks in Georgia

A cloud of radioactive tritium gas accidentally discharged by the Atomic Energy Commission's Savannah River Plant drifted off the South Carolina Coast and was floating over the Atlantic Ocean early in May.

An AEC spokesman said the gas would maintain an altitude of at least 200 feet and probably would dissipate in "a matter of days." The gas escaped "as a result of failure in a process line at the production facility," he said.

## 5. Lame Deer, Montana



Dave Robinson is chairman of the Northern Cheyenne Landowners Association in Lame Deer, Mont. Rapid coal development on the reservation "can only be felt as modern day genocide," Robinson says.

Our resources are finite. If you're an Indian living on a reservation you can walk up and touch the limits of your world. From one boundary line to another is all you have.

The Northern Cheyenne tribe of Montana is looking at the value of the coal in the space in which they live. They are asking not only how much money coal will bring them, but also what strip mining will do to their way of life.

Consolidated Coal, AMAX, Peabody Coal and Chevron all have permits or leases on the reservation.

The Northern Cheyenne have asked the Department of Interior to cancel existing coal leases and permits on their land. In its administration of these agreements the Bureau of Indian Affairs has violated federal regulations, says tribal council chairman Allen Rowland. The BIA omitted the required technical assessment and set the bonding rate too low to cover possible damage, Rowland says.

At Senate hearings on coal leasing in Bil-

lings, Rowland stated that the Northern Cheyenne want complete control over strip mining activities. "We do not want a high influx of non-Indians coming into our reservation and destroying our culture and our life style," he said.

David Robinson, chairman of the Northern Cheyenne Landowners Association, wants the leases canceled to give his people time to learn about what coal development will mean to them, before massive strip mining leaves them without a choice.

The Northern Cheyenne Research Project, headed by Robert Bailey, is trying to fill the research and education gap. The team is looking at coal and various other ways the tribe could support itself. The group has already discovered that there is no baseline information to ensure reclamation and environmental protection on Cheyenne lands, should coal development begin immediately.

The Landowners Association has stated that rapid coal development might mean "genocide" for the tribe. About 3,000 Cheyennes live on the reservation now. Coal development might bring in 1,100 workers and their families — making the Indians a minority on their own reservation.

"We aren't a big tribe," says association member Jim King. "If coal companies come in they would vanish us."



We feel, very strongly, that special interest groups, such as coal companies, gas and oil companies and others, are served first and last. That the individual land owner takes a back seat position. . . . We would want to be able to control the number of people who would come into our reservation and where they would live and how they would relate to us.

Allen Rowland, president  
Northern Cheyenne Tribal Council  
Lame Deer, Mont.