Boom! Boom! Boom!

War on the Colorado Plateau

In the 1970s, all that stood between the people of southeastern Utah and their dreams of high paying jobs in the mineral and energy industries was the federal government and its wilderness study areas. This first of a four-part series, Ray Wheeler describes how southeastern Utah routed the feds and, for all practical purposes, privatized the public land.

By Raymond Wheeler

After the Party's Over

It's 5:00 pm on a lovely spring afternoon in Moab, Utah. The sun blazes in through an open doorway, pooling on the floor of the Grand County Courthouse. It has been a long and tedious county commission meeting; I am praying for a quick end.

But commission chairman Jimmie Walker has one last item. There is a problem at the Moab city dump.

Things just haven't been the same at the dump since the Chamber of Commerce issued its now famous nationwide challenge. Moab, declared the Chamber, had the most scenic dump in the nation.

As county commissioners go, Jimmie Walker is one of the best. He knows his job, he knows his constituents, and he knows Grand County like the back of his weathered hand. This was a matter of civic decorum -- nothing more, nothing less.

We had a chuckle, but behind it there was an ache in the air. Those scavengers weren't tramps or latter-day hippies. Many were longtime residents of Moab -- people like Blackie. I heard about Blackie later that evening, while sharing a dish of ice cream with my neighbor, Ruth Brown.

"Lots of people go up there to dump every day," Ruth was saying. "Like Blackie and his wife Sandy -- they used to go up there couple of times a week."

Like many Moab residents, Blackie was a miner who lost his job when the Atlas Uranium Mill shut down. Blackie was a good carpenter and handyman, but in Moab, where everybody is a carpenter and handyman, that didn't pay the bills.

As a last resort, Blackie and his wife began paying regular visits to the Moab City Dump. "You know, his wife died last year," said Ruth. "And Blackie just ain't been the same since..."

Blackie's predicament is far from unique. In just six years, the town of Moab -- and most of southeastern Utah -- has undergone a metamorphosis most of us encounter only in history books. Since 1980, shot down by the simultaneous collapse of the oil, uranium, coal and potash markets, southeastern Utah has banked into an economic utopia unlike anything since the Great Depression.

Between 1980 and 1986, Grand County lost more than a thousand jobs -- thirty percent of the county's nonfarm wage
and salary employment. The official unemployment rate now stands at 19 percent and the county’s population has plummeted near 20 percent.

"We’re looking at unemployment rates which are depression, not recession, levels," says University of Utah Business Economics and Business Research director Thayne Robins. "We’ve had communities with 22 to 25 percent unemployment in the past five years."

Since 1982, southern Utah has been falling, out of control, into a seemingly bottomless economic black hole.

"Every time we think we’ve bottomed out and reached a floor -- as established by local (power plant) consumption of our coal, with a few fortunate contracts with companies outside the area -- then something happens, like the Wilberg mine fire, and we have even more loss, and more businesses closing," says Bill Hove, director of the South Utah Association of County Governments.

The Ghost of Christmases Past

J ust seven years ago, Moab’s economic and political future looked radically different. On the morning of the commissioners’ meeting, tracking backwards through the annals of the town’s newspaper, the Moab Times-Independent, I was drawn, in Henry Adams’ phrase, by “invisible lines of force” to a remarkable issue: that of November 20, 1980. On that thirteenth day of November, the town of Moab, Utah, had achieved the pinnacle of its triumphal moment of victory in a battle to be as brutal -- and public -- as in any country in an energy crisis. uranium and oil exploration companies were penetrating roadless areas.

In November 1976, days after the passage of FLPMA, Gulf Minerals launched a massive uranium exploration program, slicing 30 miles of roads and 22 drill pads into the heart of the 100,000-acre Marcos Mesa wilderness area -- a bighorn sheep lambing area and for nearly a decade the Moab District’s number one candidate for primitive area designation. Though Gulf repeatedly promised, in writing, to reclaim all physical impacts, by 1979 it had abandoned the program, slicing 30 miles of roads into a 7,000-acre wilderness inventory unit. To the south, uranium and oil exploration companies swarmed over the bencheslands near the perimeter of White Canyon and Natural Bridges National Monument.

The grand finale of the Bulldozer Wars came on the Fourth of July, 1980, when 200 flag-waving Moab residents celebrated Independence Day with a ceremony that by now had become local tradition -- parading a bulldozer into the nearby Mill Creek Canyon Wilderness Inventory Unit. When Gene Day announced, several days later, that the bulldozer had mistakenly stopped short of the unit boundary, a Grand County crew hustled the bulldozer back to the site and extended the road until it crossed the unit.

This act was so brazen that the commissioners were convinced they would be jailed. Gene Day was our biggest obstacle," recalls Jimmie Walker. "He was going to have the federal marshals come over for the court hearing, and his (Utah Senator) Orrin Hatch back in Washington, keeping an eye on it, to make sure we wasn’t going to meet with our constitutional rights.

Psycho logical Warfare

That was the physical dimension of the war -- bulldozer scars, webs of seismic survey lines, sour-spun streambeds, drillpads, borrow-pits, stag piles, and hundreds of miles of new roads spiderwebbing the nation’s last great block of pristine desert wilderness. But there was a psychological dimension as well.

One day, after publication of BLM’s first wilderness inventory map for Utah, San Juan County Commissioners...
lands. We're going to sabotage your vehicles... You had better start going out in twos and threes, because we're going to take care of you BLMers..."

In that same day, Black met with Utah congressman Gunn McKay. According to the Moab Times-Independent, McKay warned McKay that residents of the county were frustrated with the agencies and may resort to violent action. Said Black, "People might get hurt. There's going to be a lot of vandalism."

In a county where "outdoor recreation" means carving up canyon bottoms with bulldozers, ripping across fragile cryptogamic soils on off-road vehicles, and pulling apart thousand-year-old Anasazi Indian ruins in search of valuable artifacts, the "vandalism" threat has seemed almost comical.

But when an entire pictograph panel was destroyed by vandals near Moab in April of 1989, it was as if Calvin Black's prophecy had at last been fulfilled. "An abrading material was used to scour the thousand-year-old paintings from the wall of Winding Sandstones" marveled the Times-Independent. This was not a high-school prank. It was a bold and deliberate act of war.

For five years, the campaign of intimidation had been gathering momentum. For BLM employees and environmental activists, death threats were routine. In January 1978, Moab writer Fran Dalvel wrote a letter to the Department of Energy, that DOE terminated the operating license of the nearby Atlas Minerals Uranium processing plant, since it was common knowledge that the plant was breeding radioactive matter directly into the Colorado River. That evening, the phone began ringing with the first of a series of death threats from Atlas employees. The calls were identified by Barans as "calls from the same person." His message to the caller: "You... will... be... shot..."

The ubiquitous nature of such threats was depicted in an August 1980 letter to the paper, from the wife of a federal mine safety inspector: "From the time of our arrival here, we have been under constant harassment... We have been ordered to stay at home by the local law enforcement agency..."

We were not allowed to graze Red Canyon that he would make sure that highbush sheep would not use the area. Melvin also said that a person could get shot going into Red Canyon. I mentioned to Melvin that he could go to jail for shooting a BLM employee. Melvin indicated that he would not be out of luck if he was in jail when compared to the BLM individual he would shoot. I do not feel that Melvin constitutes a threat to my well-being, because Melvin has threatened me every other year for the past five years. However, I believe it is important to document his attitude towards highbush sheep.

This tendency to push people out in concentric waves, spawned in satellite cities hundreds of miles away. Most of the people flooding into this area, for example, come from California, not the frost belt. Ultimately, over the farthest corners of the rural West, the BLM is bound to be affected. Unlike many developed nations, the United States is still expanding rapidly, adding more than 2 million people a year (1 million in the Western states). This growth is due partly to a high birth rate, the "echo" of the 1950s baby boom, and partly to heavy immigration. The United States today in about two-thirds of the world's immigrants, who account for between one-third and one-half of our annual population increase (depending on which estimates you use for illegal immigration).

While the Rocky Mountain states got very little of that foreign immigration, they lead the country in the rate of natural increase. The Mormon dominoes of Utah and parts of adjacent states have a fertility rate (children born per woman) higher than any other part of the nation.

Humans are the only creatures for whom constant population growth is regarded as "normal." Other animals' numbers may wax and wane but in the long run are normally stable. Not so with mankind, whose numbers have grown geometrically, increasing by increasing amounts, for as long as we know.

Soon enough, of course, we will have to learn how to get along with a stable population and a stable economy, since neither can expand forever. Perhaps the current Rocky Mountain experience will give us some practice in that endeavor.

The dump for Moab, Utah, has a view of the LaSal Mountains.
During the boom, Idaho succumbed to good sense

Lest you think that the entire West succumbed to the hypnotic beat of boom, boom, boom, here is an account of how the conservative state of Idaho behaved conservatively -- resisting the lure of a coal-fired power plant that was to carry the state to the land of milk and honey.

By Pat Ford

Six months ago, Idaho's richest man stepped confidently into a time machine. Putsam King J.R. Simplot announced that one of his companies would build a string of coal-fired power plants along the Snake River -- two 1000-megawatt plants a year, for year after year after year.

Fourteen years dissolve -- it is 1974, and 2000 megawatts a year is roughly the official construction schedule of Northwest and Northern Rockies electric companies. Big coal and nuclear plants are rising or about to rise in every neighboring state -- Celanese in Montana, the Craig trio in Colorado, several each in Wyoming and Utah, Vatho in Nevada, Boardman and Tujan in Oregon, and, in Washington, the flagship, the five-plant WPFS nuclear complex. And these are only the first wave.

Idaho is poised for its usual role -- follower. Idaho Power Company announces it will build a 1000-megawatt coal plant, called Pioneer, near the Snake River south of Boise.

Idaho's business, agricultural and political establishments embrace Pioneer; conservationists and low-income advocates violently attack it. Wall Street stands ready to float the bond offerings. The Simplot proposal, however, draws neither embrace nor attack -- only silence. For it is 1968 and Pioneer was never built. Idaho, the only state without a commercial coal or nuclear plant, enjoys the lowest electric rates in the nation and has a surplus of electricity into the next century. Its establishments no longer speak with one voice on energy, its citizen groups have real dreams to occupy them, and Wall Street is otherwise engaged.

Yoked to the past, Simplot says that rejecting Pioneer was "the biggest fool thing that anybody ever done for the state of Idaho." Strike "fool" and you are nearer the verdict of events.

Idaho Power's public relations name for its coal plants has become, 14 years later, a fitting name for the broader story, an economic and environmental success story in which Pioneer's face did the pioneering.

How Idaho's people said no to Pioneer is half of a vivid tale of grass-roots democracy. The other half is something we don't much believe in -- wise and courageous government. Beginning 14 years ago, the Idaho Public Utilities Commission foresaw the future and chose to lead rather than follow.

The Snake River's crescent fall across southern Idaho is a magnetic field, gathering land and water, people, settlement, development and power. Three-fourths of Idaho's people, three-fourths of its largest economy, all but one of its biggest industrial plants and employers, and its dominant religion and politics are all on the Snake River Plain.

This creation has a mantra: "The Snake is a working river." Had Fanaday never wired the dynamo, the Snake would still have been worked. But the marriage in our century of electricity to the river's own current makes the landscape and economy of southern Idaho what they are.

In 1961, Idaho Power Company's corporate parent built Swan Falls Dam in the Snake River canyon south of Boise. Stand within its old stone powerhouse, hear and feel the intimate throb of its horse-sized turbines just steps away, and you can grasp, at the human scale, the elegance and craft of hydroelectric generation in a way the giant dams won't allow. You can understand the growth of skills and pride in generating power from this river, and how they could lead -- as bigger dams produced too, twenty, then eighty times what Swan Falls can -- to skills and pride in wielding power over this state.

Idaho Power built dams on the Snake River -- 16 of them along 465 miles -- for 65 years. Most of that hydropower was on the cost curve of companies today. Economies of scale, relatively stable costs, and free fuel made the electricity cheaper with each new wave.

By 1969, that system produced a kilowatt-hour for less than half a cent. Idaho homes and businesses joined their Northwest neighbors, similarly blessed with Columbia River hydro, in the high-energy, low-cost era.

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Idaho Power was the most powerful institution in the state. Its establishments, energy seeding and lubricating the whole: Save for the LDS Church, Idaho Power was the most powerful institution in the state.

That is how they came at Pioneer -- "like they came at everything, like Idaho was named for Idaho Power."
Good sense...  
(Continued from page 21)

mission found the need would exist by 1982 or 1983. (This was the change from Ward’s draft, which admitted no such need) Prior to this, Shurtleff was then denied because of potential “impact on air quality and human health ... in the state’s most populated and fastest-growing region.” Shurtleff’s insistent need equation was put off a bit and left explicitly unresolved. But Pioneer was dead. 

It would take another story as long again to tell the story of the PUC. New Governor and a smaller version of the same monitoring tower resumed. At one site, a company air plant, had quite accidentally never been Power’s oldest water right, at Swan Falls Dam, had quite accidentally been subordinated. It was for 840 cubic feet per second of Swan River flow, but 70 years of irrigation decisions had reduced actual flow at Swan to some 600 cfs. 2400 cfs was out-of-bounds, like a second rule for the primary decision. In August 1977, Peavey, Mullaney and 30 friends filed a petition with the PUC asking that all the hydro system’s lost potential, from failure to defend the Swan Falls right, be removed from Idaho Power’s rate base and refunded to customers. The wedge to break the Idaho Power-agriculture alliance was driven.

The issue was soon in court, but time had not yet ended. Beginning in 1978, Idaho Power was again forced to defend the primary decision on its rights. Idaho Power’s potential financial exposure forced it to build a building, a budgerigar-like structure on the path of its water right still intact—forced it to begin resisting new diversions from the river. Idaho Power’s potential financial exposure forced it to build a building, a budgerigar-like structure on the path of its water right still intact—forced it to begin resisting new diversions from the river. It was for 8400 cubic feet per second of Swan River flow, but 70 years of irrigation decisions had reduced actual flow at Swan to some 600 cfs. 2400 cfs was out-of-bounds, like a second rule for the primary decision. In August 1977, Peavey, Mullaney and 30 friends filed a petition with the PUC asking that all the hydro system’s lost potential, from failure to defend the Swan Falls right, be removed from Idaho Power’s rate base and refunded to customers. The wedge to break the Idaho Power-agriculture alliance was driven.

Crisply out on a course of their own. Call it a PUC lynch mob, “ says Ward. “They made it about the utilities, howled and howled.” Lenaghen’s growl can be unexpected. “It can be in public life.” Lenaghen’s growl can be unexpected. “It can be in public life.” Lenaghen’s growl can be unexpected. “It can be in public life.” Lenaghen’s growl can be unexpected. “It can be in public life.” Lenaghen’s growl can be unexpected. “It can be in public life.” Lenaghen’s growl can be unexpected. “It can be in public life.” Lenaghen’s growl can be unexpected. “It can be in public life.”

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