

Cotter at the Crossroads

A community grapples with a uranium mill's past, present and future



Cañon City's Colorado Territorial Correctional Facility, known as Old Max, is just one of the Colorado Department of Corrections' facilities in the area. Times-Call /Jeff Haller

Cause & Effect

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CAÑON CITY - Leaning back in a chair in his office in a historic building on Cañon City's main thoroughfare, George Turner ponders just why it is so important for a mill that provides only a fraction of the jobs in the local labor force to stay open.

As the head of the Cañon City Chamber of Commerce, there are certainly more important industries holding together the economic backbone of Fremont County for him to worry about.

As a whole, mining and milling activities have contributed no more than 2 percent of Fremont County's entire labor force for the last decade, according to data from the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment. In 2001, that had fallen off to 1.2 percent, with nine mining-related operations, including Cotter, contributing just 170 jobs out of a total workforce of 13,694.

In comparison, the 12 state and federal prisons in and around Cañon City employ more than 3,000. And the city's tourism-related business - hotels, restaurants and attractions such as the Royal Gorge - bring another 1,400 jobs to the area.

Construction, retail, manufacturing, health care and social work, hotel and other government jobs all had at least five times as many employees as the mining industry, and even financial services, transportation, and arts and entertainment contributed more jobs to Fremont County.

Still, said Turner, who was Cañon City's mayor during the time contamination from the mill left Lincoln Park with a Superfund designation, Cotter jobs are coveted because they pay well, \$9 to \$10 an hour for entry-level employees.

"There's 100 jobs out there at the mill, 100 good jobs," said Turner. "I think it would be a crime if we lose them."

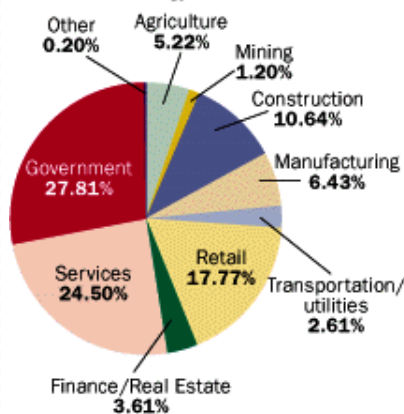
In its heyday, the Cotter Corp. was an economic force, creating jobs and generating tax revenue for the area. During its early operations in the 1960s, a hundred jobs in a town that had only several thousand residents were hard to ignore.

Even in the late 1970s and early 1980s, after contamination from the mill was discovered in the wells and soils of nearby homes, the mill employed close to 250.

But that was long ago.

According to county tax records, Cotter was assessed

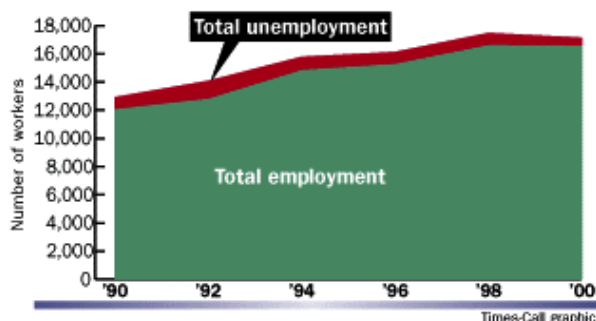
Types of employment in Fremont County, 2000



Source: State Department of Labor Times-Call graphic

Unemployment in Fremont County

Employment rate is influenced by the close economic ties to state and federal jobs.



Times-Call graphic

\$234,289 in property taxes for 2001, just 1.5 percent of the \$15.3 million in property taxes levied and collected in Fremont County last year.

Shut down for more than a decade as a result of a depleted uranium market and environmental problems, the mill employed a skeleton crew of only several dozen until operations resumed in 1998. Since then, the mill's labor force climbed steadily above 100. Then Cotter management was forced to begin laying off workers again in May.

Three rounds of cutbacks since then have left the mill with only about 50 full-time employees.

For a region where, according to 2000 Census data, almost 25 percent of the population aged 25 and older doesn't have a high school diploma, and where less than 12 percent have a bachelor's degree or higher, the losses hurt because Cotter's jobs are relatively high-paying, said Turner.

The average weekly wage for the mining industry in general was \$578, higher than most of the state Department of Labor's other employment categories. In fact, only government employees and manufacturing workers had higher average monthly wages on a statewide basis.

Mining workers earned 56 percent more than retail employees, 74 percent more than agricultural workers, 7 percent more than financial service providers, and nearly double what real estate and rental service providers made in 2001, according to data compiled by the state.

While the loss of jobs might seem insignificant given the mining industry's place in Fremont County economic pecking order, Turner said effects trickle down.

"If we lose those people, we have to assume there's 100 homes where 100 mortgages aren't being paid, 100 people who aren't buying clothes and food and who aren't paying for things like electricity and gas," he said. "And that's going to be felt."

Turner said he gets frustrated by all the controversy surrounding the mill's proposal to dispose of mildly radioactive Superfund waste in its tailings impoundments, especially when the state health department has all but signed off on the plan.

"We have to trust that the government agencies have our best interests at heart. If you can't trust the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, who can you trust?" he said. "The Maywood soil fell under (the mill's) license. They don't have to notify us every time they haul in a load of ore."

"There are things that shouldn't be open to public debate. This stuff is so technical that the public will never be able to make an informed decision."

In the end, he said, the balance between minimal risk from

the mill and the Cotter's economic benefit to the community, small as it may be, needs to tip in favor of workers, jobs and prosperity.

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