

Cotter at the Crossroads

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



Grand Junction faced cleanup earlier

By Ellen Miller

Special to the Daily Record

GRAND JUNCTION -- It took years, cost many millions of dollars, disrupted traffic, tore up basements and patios and required delicate political compromises.

It also provided thousands of jobs at a time when the economy was tanked by the oil shale bust and removed a public relations black eye caused by national magazines calling Grand Junction "the town that glows in the dark."

It was the mill tailings clean-up, the costly legacy of the Cold War when Western Slope uranium was processed at the Climax Mill in Grand Junction and other towns. Canon City could experience something similar if the Cotter Corp. mill is ever shut down.

Not thought at the time to be harmful, the uranium mill tailings in Grand Junction were used as free construction fill throughout town during the 1950s and 1960s. Foundations, basements, patios, retaining walls and streets were contaminated with the low-level radiation left in the tailings after processing. The Climax Mill sat on the bank of the Colorado River.

Even today, after the \$450 million clean-up, radiation surveys are required for building permits to make sure properties are clean.

And those in the forefront of the political infighting and fund-seeking still wonder if it was necessary.

"The danger was insignificant," said former state Sen. Tillie Bishop, R-Grand Junction. "But we were living with a bad image. We lost companies we were trying to recruit because of it."

Doralyn Genova, a Mesa County commissioner whose first term starting in 1989 coincided with the turmoil of shipping the tailings out of town for disposal, first encountered federal involvement long before she got into politics.

Her oldest son was five when the family moved into a Fruitvale house in 1971. In the basement was monitoring equipment installed by federal authorities as a "control house" free from tailings.

"When I first saw the stuff in the basement I was going to throw it out," Genova said. "From time to time they'd come out for more work than meter-reading and sometimes they'd pack us all off to a motel for a few days. The DOE always paid."

By 1978, the federal government -- but not many local Grand Junction citizens or leaders -- was sufficiently concerned about danger from the low-level tailings in Grand Junction and other western mill towns that it passed the Uranium Mill Tailings Radiation Control Act.

It was designed and funded 90 percent, with states picking up the rest, to clean up 24 abandoned sites. In Grand Junction, 4,200 separate properties, in addition to the Climax Mill, were found to contain

radioactive tailings.

In the Colorado Legislature, Bishop and other Western Slope legislators scrambled to assemble the necessary 10 percent state match for the federal funds.

“The state wouldn't do all of it,” Bishop recalls. “Part came from energy impact funds.”

In a delicate compromise, other northwestern Colorado counties agreed to loan their expected energy impact fund disbursements to Mesa County -- money that was gradually paid back, Bishop said.

“The costs ran way over,” he said. “So we set up an oversight committee to keep all of the parties from taking advantage. We needed a watch dog.”

Clean-up of vicinity properties - residential and commercial - began about 1984. Unemployed oil shale workers hauled dirt with their pickups and small trucks from basements and driveways to the Climax mill site, where it was piled until the mill cleanup began. In 1989, the city of Grand Junction and Mesa County locked horns with the DOE on its plans to truck 4.6 million cubic yards of stockpiled dirt and tailings from the Climax mill through town out to the Cheney disposal site near Whitewater, about 10 miles southeast.

Eventually, the DOE agreed to ship the tailings out of Grand Junction by rail to Whitewater. The federal government built an eight-mile haul road so trucks could finish the job. By 1991, contaminated soil and tailings were enroute to the Cheney site. Work was complete by late 1993. The Climax mill site was certified clean in March 1997 and the site is now the future Las Colonias Park, which the city of Grand Junction plans to start developing next year.

Although the haul road was torn up after the project's completion, the DOE donated the right-of-way to the state. Today, it's a four-lane segment of U.S. 50.

“The biggest fight was against truck-only and we won that one,” Genova said. “Whether it was all necessary I don't know, but at the time it pulled us out of the dumpster.”

“It was all new money and it put people to work,” she said. “We put every guy laid off from oil shale to work on the vicinity properties, and it saved us.”

She said that the federal funding provided for clean-up projects has expired, and the state's economic downturn has left Colorado with little money to share future costs.

“Ours came in under the federal legislation that's expired,” she said. “We were there when it was a targeted project. So I don't have any idea where they'll go for funding” should a similar clean-up ever be undertaken in Canon City.

Audrey Berry today is the spokeswoman for the DOE's Grand Junction office. Back in the 1980s when the push was on to obtain federal funding, Berry worked for Colorado Sen. Gary Hart and later for Sen. Tim Wirth.

The Cheney disposal cell will stay open for a few years for the

Monticello (Utah) clean-up project and future extractions of tailings from Grand Junction properties missed in the original clean-up, she said.

"It's hard to believe it was that long ago and took as long to do it as it did," she said.

Ellen Miller is a freelance writer who lives in Grand Junction. She is a former staff member of the Colorado Associated Press.

[Return to the Critical Mass home page](#)