

Mountains are giant, restful, absorbent. You can heave your spirit into a mountain and the mountain will keep it, folded, and not throw it back as some creeks will. The creeks are the world with all its stimulus and beauty; I live there. But the mountains are home.

Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

Remoteness and Community.

The mountains are home? Maybe, for a few of the world's remaining indigenous peoples clinging to ancestral traditions against the lure of factory jobs; for the owners of the factories who purchase million-dollar ranches and summer homes in search of a more romantic image for themselves; for mystics like writer Annie Dillard.

The rest of us live by the creeks, on the well-watered and convenient flatlands and valleys, where we may contemplate mountains from afar. Yet sometimes the remoteness of the mountains, as well as the deserts and oceans, becomes more than a place for transcending the mundane; it becomes an economic necessity when we are driven to the upper Amazon in search of gold and grazing land; to the sands of Arabia for oil; to the Rockies and their rugged foothills in the northern Great Plains for coal.

Beginning in the early 1970s, the Montana Power Company began to develop an old mining camp, appropriately called Colstrip, just east of Montana's Wolf Mountains., into what it hoped would become the energy capital of the region. Before too long, Colstrip became a modern boomtown, and its explosive growth, its strip mines and smoke-belching power plants tore at Montana's political terrain for a decade. The combatants in the environmental brawl it stirred up included Edward Abbey and Alvin Josephy, and even oceanographer Jacques Cousteau. The trauma of an industrial invasion of a rural cowboy hamlet was described and analyzed in the journals of academia, as rural sociologists and social impact assessment researchers decried what they claimed was the death of "community" in the West.

Journalists and sociologists often described the women of modern energy boomtowns as the pathetic victims of an industrial nightmare. Psychologist ElDean Kohrs coined the once-popular term “Gillette Syndrome,” from another energy boomtown in Wyoming, to describe a place where a

housewife, after fighting mud, wind, inadequate water and disposal systems, a crowded mobile home and muddy children all day, snaps at her husband as he returns from a 16-hour shift. He responds by heading back downtown and spending the night at a bar drinking and trading stories with men from similar circumstances.¹

The Gillette Syndrome assumed that modern energy boomtowns would suffer from the same social ailments as the boomtowns of the Old West did. Kohrs, in fact, expressly compared the description of his own experiences with those given in a history of early days in Billings, Montana, a boom town itself founded as a center for railroad commerce.²

Translated into the vernacular of academic social science, the Gillette Syndrome constituted an assumed consequence of Ferdinand Tönnies’ assumed theory of *Gemeinschaft-Gesellschaft*. In one form or another, Tönnies’ paradigm lurked behind much of the academic discussions of boom towns during the 1970s,³ so it should come as no great surprise that the

¹ElDean Kohrs, “Social Consequences of Boom Growth in Wyoming,” paper presented at the Rocky Mountain American Association for the Advancement of Science, April 24-26, 1974, Laramie, Wyoming, 3. Copy in possession of the author. Coincidentally, Kohrs’ wife wrote a doctoral dissertation which essentially refuted the Gillette Syndrome, cf. Jane Taucher Kohrs, “Population Growth and Social Disruption in Wyoming,” Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Psychology, University of Wyoming, Laramie, 1978 (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1982).

²Ibid., 2-3.

³E.g., Sam Carnes and Paul Friesema, *Urbanization and the Northern Great Plains* (Denver: Northern Great Plains Resources Program, 1974), 4; Charles F. Cortese and Bernie

Gillette Syndrome guided attitudes in the popular and academic media toward energy resource development.

Yet the women of Colstrip, finding themselves in a remote and socially disrupted environment became skilled home-makers, not in the sense of stay-at-home housewives so much as creators of that elusive feeling of cohesiveness called community, which has morphed into the more formal concept of social capital, the intangible glue that gives a community a sense of consistency and identity.

People Pollution.

Colstrip was established in 1923 as a cheap source of coal for the railroad's steam engines. As diesel replaced steam, the railroad no longer needed its coal resources and sold the mines, including the small settlement which served the mines, to the Montana Power Company in the 1950s, which began development in earnest in 1972. The Colstrip project originally called for two 350-watt mine-mouth generators, to which were later added two more 750-watt units. At the height of the construction boom which accompanied this development, the population of Colstrip reached about 6,000, and has since leveled out at 3,500.

This development produced both electricity and nationwide controversy. America, according to historian and anti-development advocate K. Ross Toole, was preparing to write off an entire region stretching almost from the Canadian border to central Wyoming as a "national sacrifice area,"⁴ a sacrifice to the energy needs of national security. The old-time ranching

Jones, "The Sociological Analysis of Boom Towns," *Western Sociological Review* 8, no.1 (1977), *passim*.

⁴ Toole, *Rape of the Great Plains*, 4.

gentry of the area, fearful of ground water and air pollution, not to mention the rapid influx of workers into the heart of this cattle country, allied themselves with environmentalist to fight the development.

During its construction phase, Toole portrayed the settlement as a befouled landscape on which exploited workers slaved for capitalism:

The main street, bounded on either side by trailer houses jammed together like sardines, ends at the foot of a huge ashen pile of obscenely nude "spoils." The "yards" of the trailer houses are barren of grass, and there are no trees and no birds sing.⁵

Since women were generally excluded from employment in Colstrip because of a company rule which prohibited the hiring of spouses, their initial experience in their new homes was one of profound boredom. Occasionally, someone would organize a social group such as Weight-Watchers, which provided University of Montana sociologist Raymond Gold with an excuse to claim that the women of Colstrip "sit around all day and watch television, eat too much, and get fat."⁶ They constituted, in Gold's mind, "people pollution,"⁷ which threatened to destroy a time-honored sense of community in the rural locations of planned development.

Meanwhile, recent Colstrip resident (and one of the founders of the Weight-Watchers club) Lois Olmstead was busy organizing a Bible study group for women which would eventually undergo a kind of mitosis resulting in numerous church denominations in Colstrip. Despite

⁵ Ibid., 101.

⁶ Raymond Gold, *A Comparative Case Study of the Impact of Coal Development on the Way of Life of People in the Coal Areas of Eastern Montana and Northeastern Wyoming*, Discussion Draft (Missoula: Institute for Social Science Research, June 1974), 163.

⁷ Raymond Gold, "On Local Control of Western Energy Development." *Social Science Journal* 16, no. 2 (1979): 121.

her efforts to unite the group into an ecumenical “mega-church,” as she put it, “the Baptists decided that they wanted to be with the other Baptists, the Lutherans wanted to be with Lutherans, and that’s how many of our churches here got started.”⁸ The churches and other organizations in Colstrip reflected what rural sociologist William Freudenburg once described as a kind of social “cell division,” emphasizing the development of social groups within a community, rather than focusing on the social disruption assumed to be caused by rapid population growth.⁹

Not all newcomers were construction workers or tradesmen. Some were Bechtel managers and engineers whose families had known each other in other construction sites from Alaska to Saudi Arabia. Accustomed to moving their families from one remote location to another, the wives of the Bechtel mid-management received moral and financial support from their husbands’ employer to carry an organization called the Bechtel Wives to Colstrip, a kind of welcome wagon. Energy boom towns, especially in the early 1970s, had a way of isolating the wives of employees, a fact too well known to the Bechtel wives who came to Colstrip armed with a “plan to get involved in something right away.”¹⁰ Developing a community library, helping with a church, simply letting other wives know that they weren’t alone; these were the objectives of the Bechtel Wives. Like every organization, the Bechtel Wives was not wholly altruistic; corporate snobbery crept in from time to time. Lois Olmstead was invited to a Bechtel Wives function because her husband was a manager at the mine. Seated at the head table, she

⁸Lois Olmstead interview.

⁹ William R. Freudenburg, “The Density of Acquaintanceship: An Overlooked Variable in Community Research,” *American Journal of Sociology* 92, no.1 (1986): 56.

¹⁰Nolan and Dolly Fandrich interview.

began to sense the group's pecking order. When one of her luncheon companions complimented her on her dress, she remembered "just delighting in saying that I got it at a garage sale for seventy-five cents. You know, it was like, I want to prove that it doesn't mean anything to me, but at the same time, you could get caught up in all of that stuff, and I remember so clearly when different wives' husbands would get promoted, they'd get to go to the luncheons. I remember just thinking, WOW..."¹¹

Carol Gordon moved to Colstrip in 1979 a few months after her husband. It was not unusual for wives to remain behind for a while to wrap up school for the children, sell the house, and tie up loose ends. The Gordons were lucky to get one of the two houses for sale at the time. It was on Alder Avenue, a neighborhood built for managers and engineers during the first boom, and adjacent to the original Colstrip. "In those days," she remembers, "management individuals wore white hard-hats, so this was called a white hard-hat street."¹² With a new, rather nice home in one of Colstrip's better neighborhoods, with a husband employed as the new manager of the townsite, Gordon outwardly underwent few of the conditions said to result in Gillette Syndrome. Still, during her first few months in Colstrip, she plunged into depression—not simply feeling vaguely blue, but seriously depressed. "I did everything that I thought I should be doing," she says. But the wrenching experience of leaving a full plate in Minnesota and starting over in Montana took its toll: "I had suffered a series of losses."¹³ Gordon began making friends. A secretary at the plant got her reading eastern philosophy as a way of organizing the emotional

¹¹Bob and Lois Olmstead interview.

¹²Carol Gordon interview.

¹³Ibid.

and spiritual questions which perhaps loomed larger for the newcomers of the West's energy boom towns than impact researchers have ever realized.

As with the first boom the Bechtel Wives once again played an important role in the lives of Colstrip's women. "They truly adopted me," Gordon remembers fondly. Since practically everyone in Colstrip was a newcomer, the Bechtel Wives were in their element "because they knew each other from Saudi Arabia or Texas or wherever they'd come from." A Welcome Wagon was organized, "amazingly well attended, in large numbers," which relieved part of the stress of moving to Colstrip.¹⁴ Women met in each other's houses to drink prodigious quantities of coffee, sometimes twice a day,¹⁵ and trade the latest news.

Other women found other opportunities in Colstrip. Nancy Brennan, who had recently written a master's thesis in forestry at the University of Montana on the ponderosa pine population of south-central Rosebud County, found professional employment in Montana Power's chemistry department.¹⁶ Lynn Ferkovich began taking courses at the high school at night when Miles City Community College had a satellite program at Colstrip supported by a grant from the Montana Coal Board.¹⁷ Judi Davis began a degree program at Eastern Montana College in Billings. A number of women began taking courses at Dull Knife Memorial College, the tribal junior college in Lame Deer. In the '70s, women had organized a local library and took

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Boyd and Judi Davis interview.

¹⁶Nancy Brennan interview.

¹⁷Lynn Ferkovich interview; "Coal Board grants funds for Colstrip 'college'," *Rosebud County Press*, 30 September 1983, 21.

leadership roles in local schools and churches;¹⁸ during the '80s the same pattern emerged, perhaps enhanced by increasing opportunities for women generally. Some of Colstrip's women have been uncomfortable with the term "feminism"—a chapter of the National Organization for Women briefly attracted a small Colstrip following¹⁹—but assertiveness and independence have characterized the women of Colstrip in precisely the same way that they characterized the women of early Rosebud County who organized a variety of civic clubs and service organizations.

Not all of Colstrip's women found life in the boomtown quite as sociable; for some, Colstrip was a violent, horrifying place where home and family were marred by torment and abuse. Perhaps part of Colstrip's domestic violence could be blamed on the Gillette Syndrome, but former staff of Colstrip's Battered Women's Task Force remember it as a phenomenon which crossed economic class, newcomer or long-time resident status, employment, and age.²⁰

From its inception in 1980 until it folded in 1992, Colstrip's Battered Women's Task Force consisted of a staff director and several volunteers at first serving Colstrip and later expanding its services to the Northern Cheyenne Reservation until a similar group was organized there. Many of the volunteers got involved because of friends or neighbors who had suffered

¹⁸Nolan and Dolly Fandrich interview.

¹⁹"The NOW is emerging as policitcal [sic] national force," *Rosebud County Press*, 21 October 1983, 23.

²⁰The information on Colstrip Battered Women's Task Force in the following paragraphs was collected from interviews with three former Task Force volunteers. I have listed no citations, since the extreme sensitivity of the subject demands that I withhold the names of those who were kind enough to tell me about domestic violence in Colstrip.

form domestic violence; some simply found the work interesting and fulfilling. The Task Force averaged twenty-four cases a year until 1986—after the construction boom had ended—when seventy-three women called for help.²¹ Volunteers carried beepers so that the police could notify a Task Force member in an emergency. Victims usually underwent a screening interview at the police department, a former volunteer explains, “to make sure that it was a for real thing, and it wasn’t somebody just trying to get out of the house for the weekend.”

Sometimes Task Force staff would take victims under a police escort to a safe house in Forsyth. Later the Task Force identified safe houses in Colstrip and arranged with the Fort Union Inn for a room to be used in emergencies. “There were times I was terrified,” a volunteer remembers. “It was pay day we dreaded. Lots of it was drug and alcohol induced.” As word of the Task Force spread, increasing numbers of calls, sometimes forty or fifty percent, came from the reservation. Another former Task Force volunteer explains that “for a while we didn’t go down to the [Northern Cheyenne Indian Health Service] clinic; the women from Colstrip were afraid to cross the reservation lines, for obvious reasons. When you intervene in domestic violence it can be kind of frightening. So then arrangements would have to be made to bring the women up to the reservation line, and somebody would pick them up there.” The reservation had a violent reputation in Colstrip, and it was partially deserved. Task Force volunteers worried that after repeated trips their cars might be recognized.

A doctoral student in anthropology who lived for several years on the reservation in the 1990s, interviewed Cheyenne women about health issues, especially domestic violence. Occasionally, a former client of the Colstrip Battered Women’s Task Force would remember the

²¹Marla Wolfe, “The Abusers: domestic violence is on the rise; authorities seek ways to fight it,” *Rosebud County Press*, 28 May 1987, 1.

experience of being picked up by a Task Force volunteer at the clinic and sitting in the back seat of the car in silence until they arrived at the safe house. Academics who undertake research on the reservation—and there are usually a few about, since the Northern Cheyennes have been either blessed or cursed with a significant professorial or graduate student presence on the reservation since George Bird Grinnell came from Chicago’s Field Museum to study the Cheyennes in the 1880s—customarily adopt what they think a Cheyenne perspective is or ought to be on a given subject, assuming the role of champion for the Indians especially where Colstrip, its middle America countenance and blue collar outlook, is concerned. “Those white housewives from Colstrip,” the researcher scoffed with obvious contempt, “couldn’t be bothered with talking to Indian women.”²² What she and the former clients never knew was that volunteers were specifically instructed during their training not to engage clients in any kind of conversation. At one point, when clients were put into an initial safehouse in Colstrip, they would be placed in a room while the volunteer left. Clients would then wait until one of the professional staff entered the room through another door. Sometimes the wait would be longer than expected—one of the Task Force’s staff members, who was not a white housewife from Colstrip, took a less than adequate attitude toward her responsibilities—adding to the client’s distress. Unfortunately, what began as an effort by some of Colstrip’s women to render assistance to other women is now characterized by some as having had racist overtones, all because of a critical misunderstanding between the two groups.

This was not the only time that “those white housewives in Colstrip” has been used, like people pollution, as a pejorative. It is difficult to conduct research or provide services in a place like Northern Cheyenne where poverty and despair sometimes seem insurmountable, next

²²Name withheld, personal communication.

door to a place like Colstrip, where tidy lawns and a glut of RVs suggest a let-them-eat-cake attitude toward the less fortunate. But as for “those white housewives in Colstrip” who can’t be bothered to talk to Indians, Nancy Brennan has raised a family and has become one of the most effective of Rosebud County’s political activists. As one of the librarians in Colstrip’s Bicentennial Library, she has worked with disadvantaged young people from the reservation who work part-time in the library. Lynn Ferkovich has raised a family and earned a degree in education from Eastern Montana College, and has worked as a teacher in Dull Knife Memorial College’s G.E.D. program for Indian adults, and then in the tribally-controlled school in Busby. Judi Davis raised a family and also attended Eastern Montana College, but only after receiving an associate’s degree from Dull Knife Memorial College. At EMC she earned a master’s degree in education, and returned to Dull Knife Memorial College as Academic Dean. This particular white housewife from Colstrip teaches Native American Studies classes to Cheyenne college students. Carol Gordon has raised a family, and has used her nursing credentials to provide health care to Colstrip, to St. Labre Catholic Indian School in Ashland, and to coordinate home care on the reservation, also holds a degree from Dull Knife, and has emerged as one of the areas foremost auctioneers. These are the white housewives of Colstrip, Montana.

Women and Boomtowns.

In the 1970s and 1980s, women from across the country met the remoteness of Montana’s hinterlands with a fair degree of resolve and determination. Some certainly suffered from the social disorder of the boomtown, and they were well documented by Kohrs, Gold, and the regional press. Yet others immediately set about the business of building new lives. Gold and other outsiders who passed judgment on Colstrip and its women saw exactly what they expected

to find, a landscape stripped of its nature and humanity at once. The women who live there see something different, something sociologists in the 1970s called “community,” something sociologists, most notably James S. Coleman,²³ later on called “social capital,” and in each case the sociologists bemoaned its loss, while the residents, men and women, of Colstrip and places like it celebrated its growth.

Understanding how women in modern boomtowns have produced the social glue that ultimately made these worksites into homes for their families is less an issue for Women’s Studies than it is for developing a sense of ethnographical wisdom. The boomtown studies of the energy crisis era recorded not the lives of boomtown residents so much as the political preferences of the researchers, who saw only the environmental and social horror they wanted to see, without taking note of the social dynamics of living people.

“As I used to argue with Coleman,” wrote Fr. Greeley, “there is no need to weep for *gemeinschaft*. It is alive and well.”²⁴ From our comfortable homes in the well-watered valleys, we look to the remote with feelings of nostalgia and therefore loss. Yet those who actually live there understand the social mitosis and growth that occur. As Annie Dillard famously wrote, “the lover can See, and the knowledgeable.”²⁵

²³ James S. Coleman, "Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital," *American Journal of Sociology* 94, Supplement (1988): S95-S120.

²⁴ Andrew M. Greeley, "The Great Story and Its Discontents." *Society* 40, no. 1 (2002): 46.

²⁵ Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Bantam, 1975), 18.