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PART III: THE REACTIONS OF TOWNSPEOPLE IN THE STUDY AREA

Townpeople in the Montana Sector

There is a good deal of suspicion among the inhabitants of Rosebud County that much of the tax money generated by coal development will be used by the more populous areas of the state. According to one informant, this is no longer a suspicion.

The percent of net proceeds tax paid the county has been reduced, with the balance going into the state general fund. Property taxes are paid and then redistributed on the basis of population for equalized school foundation funding. Consequently, no so-called "impact" money is made available to the affected counties.

Some even think that the larger cities of Montana are pushing for coal development in order to get more tax money out of it--a dollar benefit for which eastern Montana would pay a high social cost. One resident stated:

This suspicion is substantiated by the fact that a reduction to the county's share of the net proceeds tax was passed by the legislature, last year, and that \$136,000 was taken out of the Rosebud County school funds to finance education in Montana's urban communities.

All this has given people in this part of the state the feeling that many other Montanans would like to join out-of-staters in taking advantage of the area. Many informants stated that the coal companies were not being taxed enough

or were evading responsible action in this department.¹

One informant commented:

Traditionally, legislation in Montana has been written for the benefit of large ventures. This same tradition is still evident in the state's tax structure.

Whether or not sufficient tax money from coal will flow into the county, at least some locals are already enjoying substantial economic benefits.

The Forsyth residents interviewed showed considerable reluctance to examine the nature of their good economic fortune; this reluctance is understandably affecting their ability to plan ahead. Several informants reported perceiving a pervasive sense of greed in the community and a

¹For example, some Rosebud County locals have observed that the companies report the evaluation of their equipment, and county officials are not always able to determine its accuracy. This procedure suggests to these locals that the companies are not carrying their fair share of the tax load and do not intend to. In fact, some informants noted, it appears that they are deliberately seeking ways to avoid doing so. In contrast, a Montana Power executive stated, "We even try to report equipment on railroad cars so that we can pay more taxes to the county."

Another tax concern involves reclamation. Some feel that the cost of reclamation should be separated from rather than tied into net proceeds for tax purposes since by artificially inflating reclamation "costs," net proceeds tax can be greatly reduced; others prefer not to think of reclamation at all, assuming (or hoping) that company plans will bear fruit in due course.

concerted effort on the part of coal and power companies to play up to the latent greediness present in some businessmen and landowners. Some in Forsyth who originally completely welcomed economic development are now beginning to complain of such attendant social costs as a continually {overcrowded downtown area} Also, a feeling of fatalism about their future was reported cynically by some area locals because of their view of the power of the big companies, and resignedly by others because "you can't stop progress." For the most part it appears that, whether their current concerns and interests are primarily economic or not, residents are very much oriented to the present, although the ranchers have more interest in preserving the past than do the townspeople because they are more concerned about the possible long-range adverse effects from coal development which could put them out of business.

Few townspeople in Forsyth are upset about development in regard to both what has already happened and what is anticipated in the future. They feel it will benefit most people. One individual who agreed with this view stated that the life-styles of people in Forsyth had not been significantly affected. According to her, people who have been here a long time "feel they have a priority on

the place but that will go by the board before long."

Another stated:

Most of us would not want our way of life to change very much. If there is a large expansion, it could seriously affect us. The effect so far is not very great.

However, one informant did not like the idea that the local women were being exposed to "foul talk and dirty people who are very noticeable in the bars now"; most local men would agree that the women should be treated as ladies, in or out of taverns.

Commenting on the population influx so far, one towns-
person stated that it "has been gradual enough so that it
hasn't hit us very hard." However, Forsythians are aware
of being urbanized. For example, one said that he used
to know everybody within a hundred-mile radius but now
knows only about 30 percent of the people in the area.
Many of these new people anticipate being in Forsyth for
an extended period. Until additional permanent housing
is available at Colstrip, many employees there whose jobs
are expected to continue for some time will likely choose
to settle in Forsyth; as such, ^{by who.} they are believed to make
potentially better citizens than the more temporary new-
comers, most of whom have been and will continue to be at
Colstrip.

who are these
new people?

With more housing going up at the construction site, builders in Forsyth are naturally hesitant to engage in what they fear may turn out to be an overinvestment in the housing market. It is difficult to anticipate needs of this kind for more than two or three years ahead, by which time present construction activities on Colstrip's units one and two will be over and a decision will have been made regarding the construction of units three and four. A go-ahead would signal an additional three or four years of economic activity at Forsyth at approximately the present level, but the reaction to uninterrupted development is no longer generally favorable. The businessmen, for example, have indicated a growing desire to have a pause before units three and four are constructed so that the impact of the first two units can be absorbed and assessed and in order to better determine what additional construction would mean.² One expressed the fear, "Where will development stop?" He also added, "Montana Power needs to be open with people about its plans."

Most agree that while development seems to have resulted in more money being around now, the quality of

²Ranchers have also expressed this desire.

life for townspeople has not become noticeably different. Sympathy for the ranchers' plight was directly expressed: the cost of labor, equipment, and supplies for farms and ranches has risen sharply--putting pressure on landowners who need to expand in order to survive. One middle-aged businessman, a lifelong resident of the area, emphasized that landowners were not as interested in the money they could get from coal as they were in keeping their land and hence their life-style. While land shortages are affecting ranchers and town residents alike, the latter (excluding newcomers) are not nearly so concerned with this aspect of development as they are with the pressures being brought on the schools, the sewer system, and especially the city water supply.

Until the city council moved to deal with the community's water problem a few weeks ago, Forsyth residents were more worried about their city water system than about any other immediate community problem associated with the coal situation. People in town are reportedly still planning to drill more wells to water their lawns in an effort to supplement the inadequate local supply of water available from an outdated system. They evidently believe that the town will have a modern water system only after the present one is definitely replaced. Some are resentful

of having to have the new system, needed largely for the sake of the newcomers in town who, according to one informant, "will not be here long enough to pay for it."

The new residents in Colstrip appear to be much less settled than their Forsyth counterparts are. Some persons leave town because they are too bored here.³ "You can't even find a place to keep a horse." A lot of both single and married men have chosen to commute from Forsyth, where there at least is a bowling alley and a movie theater. Some of the new workers find they are faced with no job security at all--they could be laid off at any time. Out-of-state people feel they have lower priority in this regard than in-state workers have. However, the pay scale and working conditions on these jobs are considered pretty good for the most part. Other immediate concerns, such as getting groceries, are changing as desired stores and facilities get built. Newcomers are quite concerned with the educational opportunities available locally, and several indicated a desire for a more varied school program than what was currently offered. "If school people

³The Mormon church was cited (by a non-Mormon) as the only group which was making a big effort to be helpful to newcomers by welcoming them and providing activities.

think of you as temporary, they won't be willing to put themselves out for you."

Other persons are attracted by life in Colstrip. Several interviewed said they liked the town's small size, although one teacher indicated that the move took some adjusting: "It took us a while to learn to shop by the month and not by the day when we moved to Colstrip." One newcomer from Billings, a mother of three young children, commented, "Living here brings a family closer together because you aren't always running off to K-Mart." She and her husband would prefer to live on a small piece of land and to own their home rather than be in town, but she "put an ad for land in the paper like everyone else does when they come" and got no response. They like working for a small company that cares about its employees. Another newcomer disagreed with them.

They [the company] just walk all over the little man, and we are just white slaves is all. {The money is great, but they take it all away from you}[through the high cost sustained in living in a one-company job site].

*They come
every day.*

This person's husband, however, pointed out that the good wages (thirteen to fourteen thousand per year for skilled labor), strong unions, and free weekends were some of the attractive features of working in Colstrip.

Newcomers and locals were asked about their views of their ranch neighbors. One local housewife in Colstrip responded by saying that she considered the ranchers a complaining lot: they complain about increased taxes but "mainly because they don't own coal." This informant cited what she believed to be good progress made by those seeking to reclaim stripped land, indicating that she does not share ranchers' concern about the success of reclamation efforts. Because of her husband's good association with Montana Power and the fact that her parents were ranchers in central Montana, one of the newcomers interviewed felt she was in a position to see both sides of the coal issue.

But the ranchers here don't tell both sides. You'd think MPC was stealing their land when they're really getting a lot of money for it. . . . I know from my work experience around the state that there are ranches for sale that they can buy.

Locals in Forsyth were much more sympathetic with the problems landowners reported.

Other informants felt that the ranchers were not really adversely affected by coal-related activities and cited examples. One Billings lawyer working with leases said:

I've never seen a landowner yet that didn't have another ranch in mind if he can just get money for the one he's on. That's typical.

Ranchers are as happy as can be to let you drill [exploratory] on their land because you agree to let them use the water for wells. . . . We give them

fifty dollars a hole and the right to case the water, and they're happy with that arrangement.

He also acknowledged some of the difficulties for both landowners and himself.

Landowners just have to decide whether they can ranch along with mining. If they say they can't, I just go right on down the road and don't bother them. . . . With oil and gas leases you can sign up fifteen a day, but with coal leases you have to live with them. We learned the hard way at Sarpy Creek--don't buy coal leases until you have the surface. In Powder River we have to buy the surface leases first, then wait as long as two years for federal leases and then anybody can go in and bid on it.

His views of the land vary.

I have a ranch and I ran some miners off. I don't want them spoiling my beautiful place. I won't lease for even oil and gas exploration for fear they'll find something. But that's different because that is beautiful land, more desirable than this land we're talking about.

Lawyers' attempts to file for reservoir sites, which involved threatening landowners with condemnation, were reportedly made only because the state had failed in its duty to file for that water; and if no one filed, Wyoming and North Dakota would impound it. The three-year moratorium on industrial use of water from the Yellowstone and its tributaries may give those states a chance to do that. Various informants agreed that Montana should be protected from water rights usurpation by North Dakota and Wyoming and

that industry should pay for water development.⁴ The water rights question is bothering more and more people, including landowners north of the Yellowstone who are out of the coal belt. Few would mind if the companies relied on storing spring run-off water but are not sure that such a source will be sufficient for anticipated industrial needs.

Informants stated that big companies want big coal reserves in order to increase the value of their stock on the market and to have a replacement for other fuel they are losing because of shortages. They are also interested in locating and obtaining the rights to low-sulphur coal. One prominent Billings land broker summed up the crux of the matter by saying: "In three years it [coal development activity] will all be over for us. The coal companies will be located by then." In other words, all leasing and land sales activity will be completed.

According to the land brokers interviewed, coal companies are having difficulty in dealing with landowners

⁴One informant stated that the Water Resources Board, which was not allocated the money needed to enforce Montana's 1973 water law, has had hundreds of applications for water under the new law but has no money to publish or otherwise start to work on them. The adjudication procedures need to be carried out stream by stream; and if they are not, this informant believes, the moratorium may really be needed.

because the former cannot understand that offering more money will not automatically resolve any problems in negotiating for leases. The landowner's values must be determined and a lease written that takes these values into account. Because ranchers fear having to deal with a railroad, coal company, or the federal government, who are considered inaccessible if something goes wrong, land brokers are used as go-betweens. One stated, "We will stand in your [rancher's] shoes, be a buffer, be responsible, be available." However, these informants are also concerned about one company's extended buying rather than leasing in the Decker-Birney area, wondering what will happen to an area where a big industry owns so much land. They report that a great deal of money is being offered to the ranchers here so that the coal company will be in a stronger position to negotiate with a large ranching business that borders these ranches.

In spite of their expressed concern for the landowners, the land brokers stated that they had sold the companies on their singular ability to package coal-rich ranch land into economically attractive, strip-minable units and were capitalizing on the companies' need for people who understood both the legal aspects of coal development and the uncertainties felt by area residents. They indicated that

they did considerable lobbying at both the state and federal level to try to influence policy and that if the federal government would establish a leasing policy it would minimize the economic pressures and gambles for everyone. Various policies were cited as needed and concerned whether or not to allow mining without the land-owner's permission; whether or not legal title to surface rights is needed or just a bond for anticipated damage; when federal coal will be leased; and whether or not the government can or will restrict development of power generating complexes, gasification plants, and other industry.

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Although mine-mouth generating plants would mean more mining contracts and thus more secure employment for miners, the "people pollution" problem which would be created thereby has prompted informants in this group to feel that it is more desirable to process the coal elsewhere than locally. Even the present activity has not been wholeheartedly received for this reason.⁵ These townspeople would prefer

⁵Miners say this is not as nice a place in which to live as it was when they first came here because of the construction workers who have arrived. Miners do not want too many people around, and they do not like the kinds of people who are moving in. Because a number of miners are Mormons and are thus nondrinkers and heavily family and church oriented, they have little in common with construction workers who normally do not abstain or who have had to leave their families behind.

Miners vs.
Construction
workers.

