

High Country

news

April 15, 1984

Vol. 17 No. 7

A Paper for People who Care about the West

\$1.00

In the wake of oil shale

Peaches and apples roar back

by Ed Marston

Harry Talbott of Palisade, Colorado, is in the satisfied, conciliatory mood of a man who likes the direction in which his world is moving.

Although his family's Talbott Farms is one of the area's largest landowners, some of his pleasure comes from a precipitous drop in the value of local real estate. That drop came in the wake of the oil shale bust, and it allows him and other established and new growers to buy land from developers, speculators and bankruptcy trustees and put fruit trees on it.

Talbott Farms should take up all his time. He and his two sons manage an operation which irrigates, fertilizes, sprays and picks apples and peaches off 15,000 trees. Like many farmers, his "management" is very hands on; he's easiest to find at 10

p.m. at his shed repairing a tractor.

Despite the hours a large orchard requires, Talbott is involved with a variety of community activities: a trust that receives donations of development rights from property owners who wish to keep their land in agriculture; a cooperative that packs and ships fruit; and an informal group that takes newcomers to fruitgrowing under their collective wing. Talbott says his group advises them on what land to buy, what type of trees to plant, and even loans them crews to get the trees in the ground.

The actions are not purely philanthropic. Fruitgrowing is a community effort, and, up to a point, the more growers the better off everyone is. Fellow fruitgrowers are needed to maintain irrigation ditches and to produce enough fruit to attract pickers, agricultural suppliers, buyers and even political support to the area.

But the growers are careful about whom they welcome. "If people come

in, we're friendly and cooperative, but we keep our eyes open" for signs that the person is interested in fruitgrowing over the long haul, and won't sell the land once the young trees are planted or leap to participate in the next land boom.

Talbott has come by his suspicions the hard way: the fruitgrowing community was split during the oil shale boom into those who wanted to sell out the United Fruitgrowers packing shed in Palisade for its high real estate value, and those who saw the cooperative as an integral part of their industry. "You sure found out who the genuine fruitgrowers were," Talbott's group won that battle and he is now serving his second year as president of the board.

The struggle over the sale of the packing shed and dozens of other battles over proposed subdivisions, splits of fruit orchards into smaller parcels of land, and undisguised political fights left the growers and

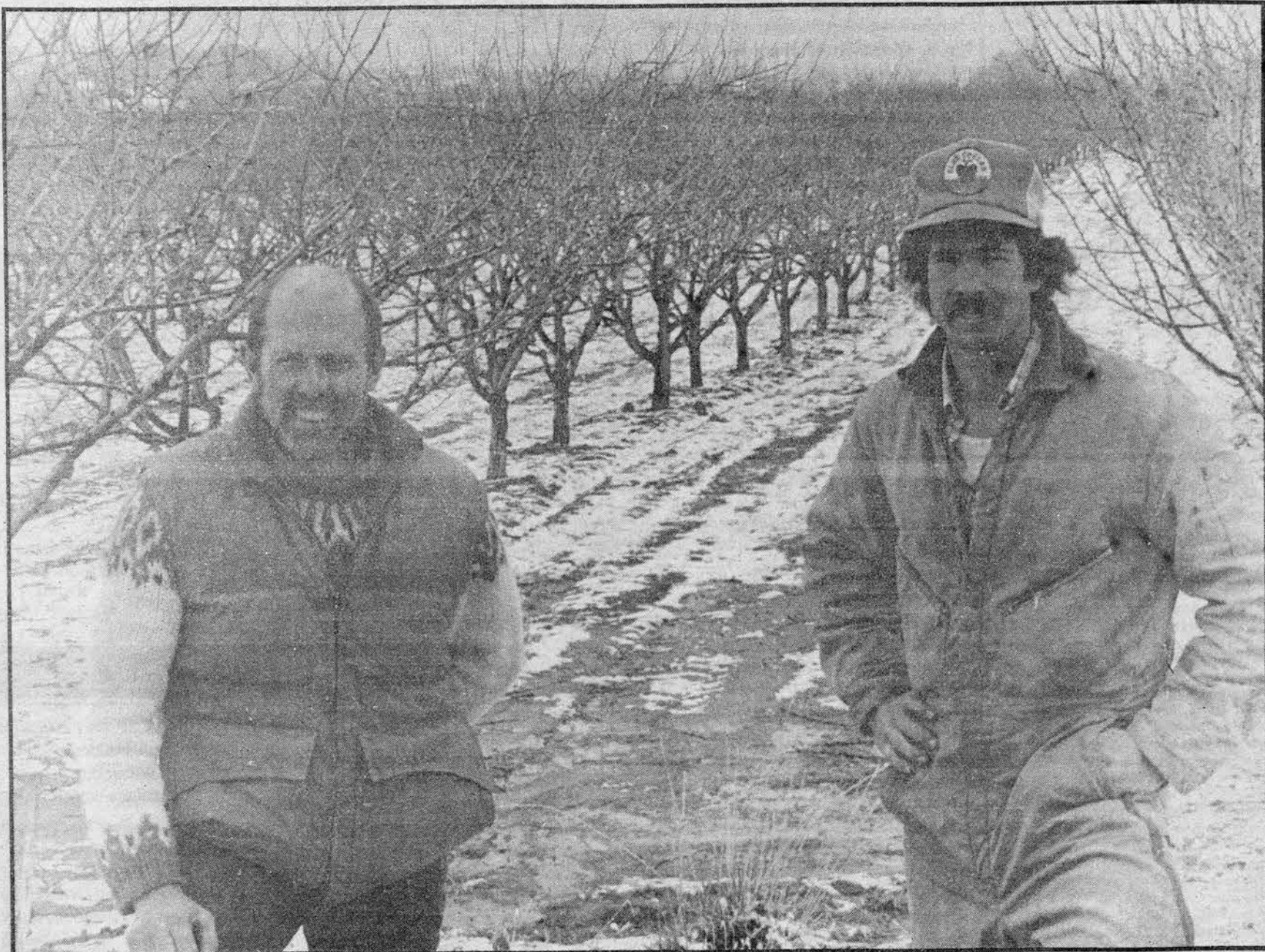
Palisade divided -- a division Talbott is now trying to repair by occasionally praising his former opponents in a weekly column he writes for a local paper.

Thanks to Exxon's closure of its Colony oil shale project in May, 1982, and the continuing collapse of the speculative economy which surrounded the oil shale boom in the early 1980s, Talbott can afford to be generous. Fruitgrowing is one of the few games in town.

Palisade is located about 15 miles upstream from Grand Junction. The "stream" is the Colorado River, and Palisade is at the high end of the Grand Valley, 15 miles closer to the oil shale deposits in the Parachute area than Grand Junction itself.

It is a pretty town of the type developers love, bounded on the south by the Colorado River and on the north

(Continued on page 12)



Harry, right, and son Charles at a Talbott Farms orchard

12-High Country News -- April 15, 1985

Roaring back...

(Continued from page 1)

by sage hills. The cool summers and moderate winters encourage fruit-growing and orchards are found on both sides of the river. But housing development on the town side of the river has eaten into the fruit industry there. The extensive orchards owned by Talbott Farms are south of and on a mesa above the river. High above these orchards is the Grand Mesa -- a 10,000-foot-high flat topped mountain which provides a scenic backdrop and irrigation water.

Talbott says, "We're seeing a resurgence in the fruit industry. We're seeing between 30,000 and 50,000 trees planted every year -- that's the ones we can count. The trend started about three years ago," he says, just when oil shale activity collapsed.

Oil shale had threatened the very existence of a fruit industry. Developers and speculators bought up orchards and then neglected the trees because they expected to build housing or offices any moment. The failure to spray or cultivate led to the spread of insects and weeds. Houses went up along irrigation ditches, making it that much more difficult to maintain them. And members of the fruit packing cooperative, having received a lucrative offer for their packing shed, were fighting over whether to sell it.

Expansion at that time was out of the question. Land prices were up to \$15,000 an acre, Talbott recalls, and where orchards weren't being formally subdivided, they were being split to death, with a few acres chopped off an orchard for a trailer, home or even bank.

Today, Talbott says, land values have come back to \$7,000 to \$8,000 an acre for an orchard. "That's reasonable, if it's producing and has good variety trees."

A boom in fruitgrowing is especially surprising given Palisade's closeness to Grand Junction, which was featured in the April *Atlantic* as an example of a busted Western town.

The Grand Junction/Mesa County Chamber of Commerce objected strongly to the "negative" way the magazine portrayed the community. In its reply to the article, the Chamber could have used Palisade fruitgrowers as examples of a Mesa County group which is both thriving and not looking for a handout. But it is unlikely that anyone at the Chamber would have pointed reporter Nicholas Lemann toward Talbott.

For it is Talbott's often repeated charge that pro-development forces centered in Grand Junction acted in ways that hurt the fruit industry. He charges that the dominant county commissioner during the boom years, a glass contractor named George White, engaged in a rural form of blockbusting, approving land splits, subdivisions, roads, new schools and commercial development so as to do the utmost damage to the fruit industry.

"I think White used Rick Enstrom and Maxine Albers (the other two Mesa County commissioners) to try to destroy agriculture. We stopped some stuff and embarrassed him on some other things. Some of the stuff we didn't stop is reverting back now (to agricultural land use) or the developers have gone broke.

Although much of the Talbott group's time was spent fighting the county commissioners, the town of Palisade also proved to be an enemy. Palisade, he says, "came up with a scheme to jump the river and annex Talbott Farms and go on to annex several thousand acres on the side of the Grand Mesa." The town's hope was to provide land for extensive housing developments to help pay for the expanded utilities it had borrowed to build.

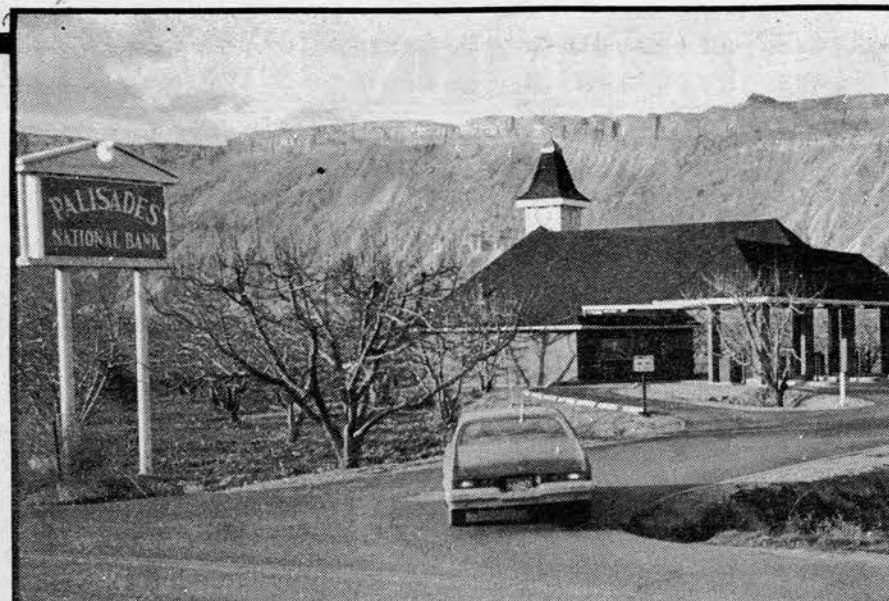
"They put several million dollars into a big water system, and don't have any way to pay for it." The annexation attempt "was our worst scare -- the town council was very pro-development. The developer bragged that he had the council in his hip pocket."

The developer, who Talbott says is now roofing houses in Denver, may have been right. But a recall instigated by the out-of-town fruit-growers succeeded in ejecting a key council member, and the annexation effort collapsed, Talbott says.

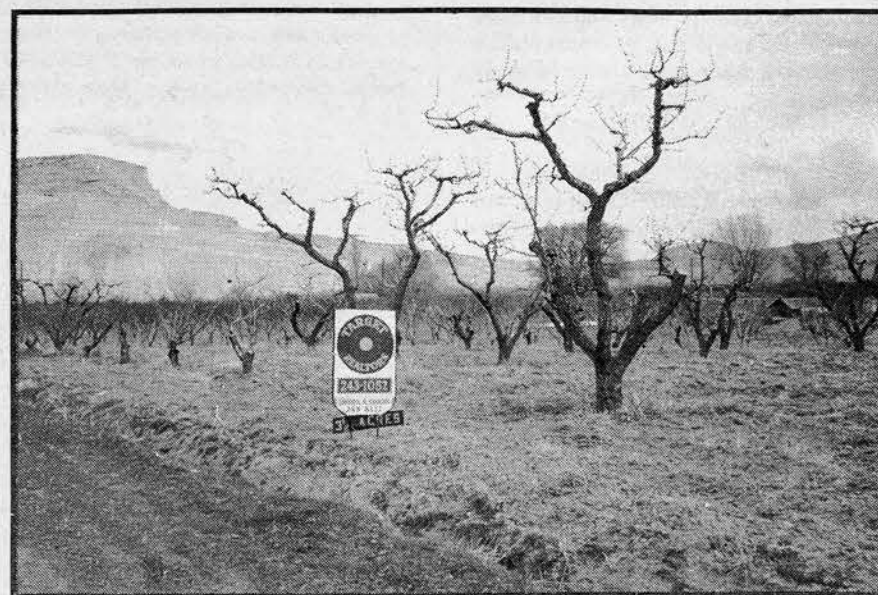
The speculation would have collapsed without the efforts of the Palisade group. "But to some extent, we survived because we fought them. Areas that didn't fight, like west of Palisade, didn't survive" as fruit-growing areas. The irrigation ditch that serves that area, Talbott says, now has hundreds of people living along it, making maintenance difficult and expensive.

"But we're still fighting the same fights -- land splits, giving away IRBs" (industrial revenue bonds) and a lack of awareness on the part of local government of the need for rational land use policies, Talbott says.

A development-minded board of county commissioners would have both practical and political reasons for rural blockbusting.



Palisades National Bank



A neglected orchard right after the bust

'We're like a chicken with its head cut off -- you get a lot of activity for a while.'

Residential and commercial development and agriculture are uneasy neighbors. Homes, children and pets don't mix well with the irrigation ditches the fruitgrowers need. Burying or otherwise protecting them raises the cost of developing a subdivision. Many homeowners are uncomfortable about living next to an orchard which may be sprayed six times in the course of a summer. And growers resent the hobby fruit trees a homeowner may keep, since they are rarely sprayed and become sources of infection for nearby commercial orchards. Politically, the growers were an organized group of opponents.

Although fruitgrowing is coming back, Palisade is hurting. "There were eight active real estate offices here at one time." Now most of them are gone. "I love it. And people are leaving the ranchettes (two or three acres with a home). The weeds are growing up. You can't even see the 'for sale' signs."

A drive around Fruita's business section shows empty stores, offices, gas stations and lumber yards. Other remnants of the oil shale boom include public works built with Oil Shale Trust Fund money. "Palisade is still thrashing around. They built a facade on the Legion Hall and an (outdoor) swimming pool which can be used only three months of the year."

Like elsewhere in the rural West, the emphasis in Mesa County and Palisade is on economic development. "We're like a chicken that's had its

head cut off -- you get a lot of activity for a while." Talbott theorizes that people are using their savings to open businesses that take in each other's laundry without bringing new money into the area.

The answer, he suggests, is to develop truck stops and the like to attract travellers off the nearby Interstate; to establish small plants which produce skis, mountainwear and other articles associated with the Rockies; and -- most important -- to process local agricultural products here. "The sheepmen shouldn't be selling sheep -- they should be selling sheepskin and leg of lamb."

Although he saw the Mesa County Commissioners a few years ago as acting in deliberately destructive ways, he sees local officials now as hapless, unable to chart a new course. The last election saw the same kinds of political figures elected and Talbott suggests it will take a generation -- he compares it to the Israelites having to wander in the desert for 40 years after escaping Egypt -- before a new breed will take charge.

"For many years to come, lots of houses and stores will stay empty or underused here. Palisade literally shot itself in the foot when it chose to work against the fruit industry. They put our land under a lot of speculative pressure. They took our labor. They raised our costs with sales and property taxes. And now they pester us to death looking for work."

