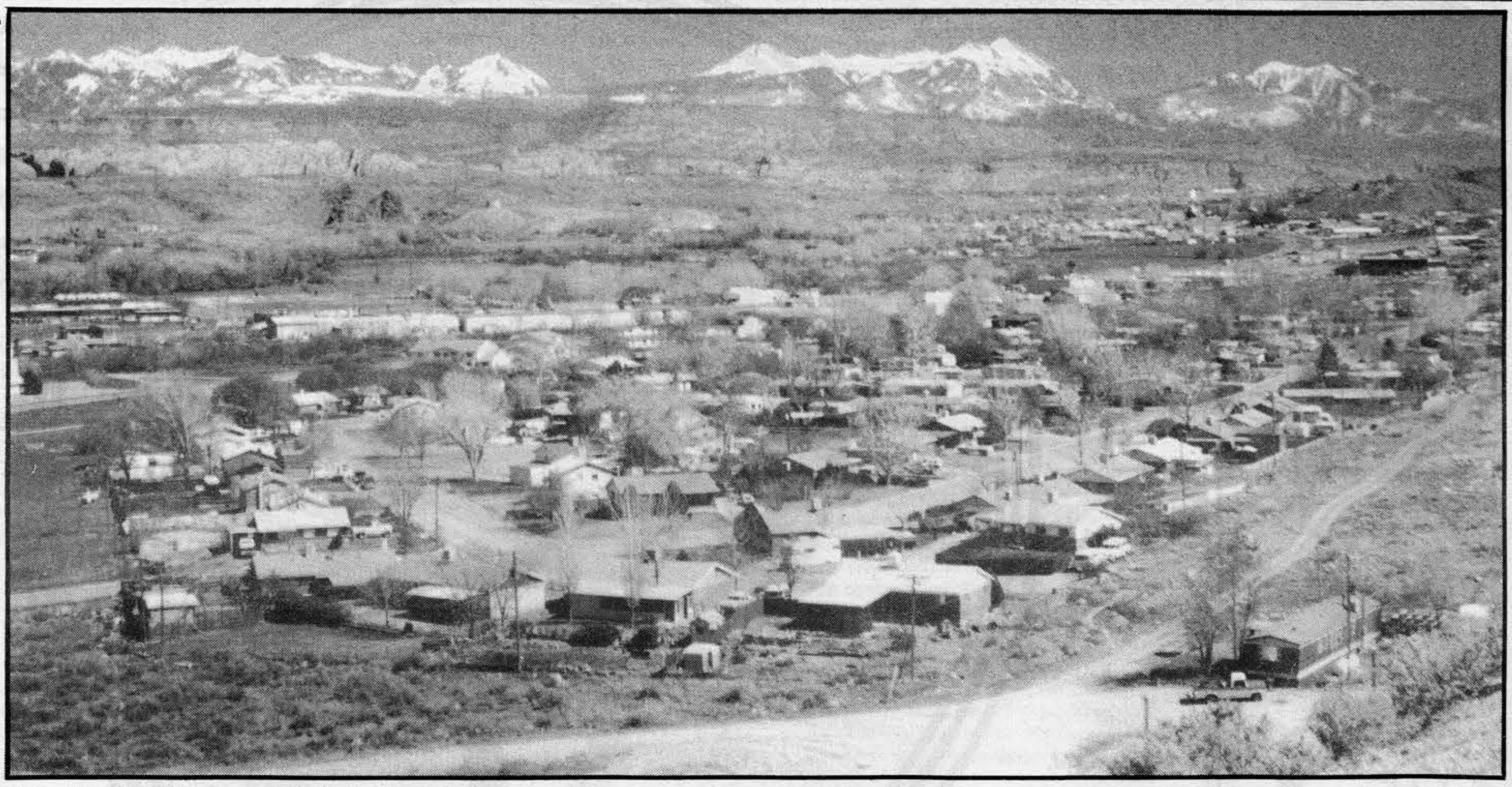
Norm Shrewsbury



Suburban Moab, Utah, and the La Sal Mountains

Whither the Colorado Plateau?

Until the early 1980s, southern Utah was a battleground between extraction and preservation. Now, Ray Wheeler writes in the conclusion of his four-part series, the struggle is between industrial tourism, typified by Lake Powell and its several million annual visitors, and the more modest homegrown tourism centered on the region's beauty and its small communities.

by Ray Wheeler

What kind of a place might southern Utah be if it were not run by a handful of powerful businessmen?

What kind of an economy might be possible if outsiders were welcomed rather than scorned? What kind of future might be possible if the political leaders of Moab, Monticello, Escalante and Kanab would recognize and accept that the surrounding public lands are a scenic resource of international significance, that the silence and wonder that they hold is not merely a powerful economic asset but something more valuable still — something worth preserving and protecting forever whether or not it can turn a profit every day of the year?

Here and there throughout southern Utah, I discovered the answer to that question poking up out of the ground like the first green shoots of spring.

Ever since 1979, Sagebrush Rebels have been preaching a kind of doomsday gospel — a fire and brimstone prophecy that the residents of Moab would be doomed without a mining economy to bring in the bread. But when the doomsday cry went out, someone forgot to tell Robin and Bill Groff.

During the 1970s, the Groff brothers were miners. Bill worked as an underground miner and a helicopter pilot for exploration companies; Robin was a mining engineer. By 1980, both brothers were making $20,000 to $30,000 per year. Then with the bust, they were out of work.

"We'd been here for a long time," recalls Bill, "and instead of uprooting and moving somewhere else, I somehow talked Robin and my father into opening a bike shop."

In July 1983, the Groffs opened Rim Cyclery with a capital investment of $4,500. Today it is a booming success. "They're not making millions of dollars," says Moab resident Craig Bigler, "but on the Moab scale, they're doing well."

Like so many southern Utah businesses, the bike shop is rooted in the magic and beauty of the land. In recent years, the country around Moab has become a mecca for mountain-biking, and the nearby Slickrock Bike Trail, originally designed as a motorcycle play area, now draws 10,000 mountain bikers a year.

But the success of Rim Cyclery is also attributable to the skill and energy of the Groffs. There is, says Craig Bigler, a "symbiotic relationship" between the family and their customers. "These guys are miners. Bill is — a redneck. And that, perhaps, makes it easier for him to get along with bikers who are yuppies or would-be yuppies or something. Somehow they just really click.

"If a couple of hotshot bike shop owners had come down here and opened one up, it probably would have failed. It had to be indigenous — yet somehow there had to be an openness to these kind of people coming in that hardly any of the leftovers from the mining industry could possibly achieve."

After visiting the shop several times in the spring of 1987, I noticed that a great many Moab residents and visiting bikers came there simply to hang out. There is a special energy in the place, the very same kind of energy, in fact, that I felt radiating from Alfred Frost, the pinto bean farmer who began backpacking at age 60. If there were just one word for it, the word would be *joy*.

I asked Robin Groff whether he would go back to mining if the uranium market revived.

"No. Probably not," he replied. "I enjoy what I do down here. You make all the decisions here — right or wrong. I enjoy that a lot more than mid-level management. The thing about a small business is you do everything from empty out the garbage cans in the morning to filling out your financial reports in the afternoon. And everything in between — work on the floor, fix the bikes, and if a tool breaks, fix the tool. Make the coffee — everything. I like that."

Ninety percent of Rim Cyclery's business is from out of town, yet the Groffs have an extraordinary sensitivity to the needs of their customers.

"If they're happy, they come back," says Robin. "And we try real hard to make everybody happy. When people bring in a broken bike off the street, we try to get it up on the stand right away to fix it for them. Most people are down here having a vacation, and they've driven five or six hours to ride in this area."

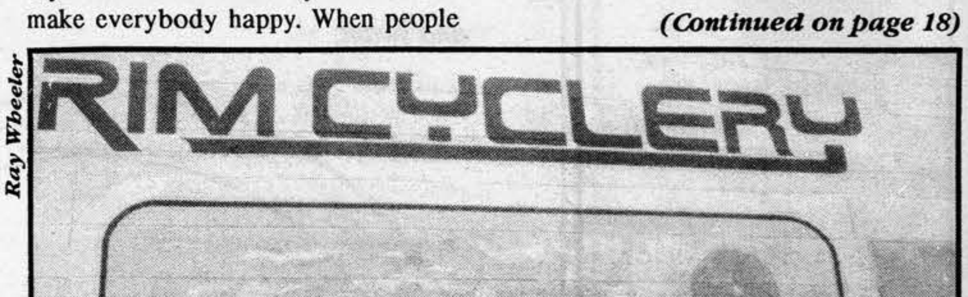
That attitude is repaid by a consumer loyalty that can only be described as fierce. "We have people from Vail that bring their bikes down here to be serviced," Robin told me. "People just keep coming back. We're actually competing with Denver, Phoenix and Salt Lake bike shops."

After the shop was destroyed in a fire, the Groffs received calls and letters of support from bikers all over the country. "There was a guy in Chicago that called us and said, 'I heard you guys burned down. I'm coming out there on vacation — If you need help, I'll spend my whole two weeks there, helping you.' That amazed me," recalls Bill.

Surely the Groffs must be some kind of fluke. Two former uranium miners hustling to provide quality service for out-of-state tourists?

(Continued on page 18)

Ray Wheeler



Robin and Bill Groff

Colorado Plateau...

(Continued from page 15)

"I don't think it's unique, other than that we work hard at it," says Robin. "It's just a matter of realizing what's going on in the world. It took about six months to realize that the mining industry was not going to come back, and it was either move or find something else to do.

"And if you look around, it doesn't exactly take a soothsayer to see that Moab has resources — and that's the scenic beauty. Other than Jackson Hole, Moab's one of the only towns in the West that sits at the entrance to two national parks. It's a renewable resource."

Coming from a former Moab mining engineer, that is indeed a profound statement. Even more profound is what came out next: "Moab has not catered to the tourist business at all. People come here and they go to Arches and Canyonlands national parks during the day; they come in in the evening and there's nothing to do. They have money to spend and no place to spend it. There's a lot of room for entrepreneurs that want to provide a service to these people."

It is indeed ironic that while Moab residents have been leaving town for lack of employment, tourists stream through, wallets bulging with money, "and nowhere to spend it." I asked Robin Groff to explain this paradox. Why has the town not moved swiftly to fill the need?

"The government, the older sector of town — they were involved with mining all of their lives. They feel that we need industry in here to make this a viable community. I think we do need some light industry.

"But you're not going to attract it the way the town is right now — it has nothing to offer, basically. It's off the beaten track. There's no railroad, no highway. I think we need a more grassroots approach to develop a recreation industry."

While Sagebrush Rebels are searching for the next massive taxpayer-subsidized construction project or the next real estate or mining claim speculation deal, a few of their neighbors are prospering the old-fashioned way — through hard work, ingenuity, and a love for the beauty of the land and for cultural traditions that by far predate the first big mining boom of the 1950s.

In Blanding, a firm called Cedar Mesa Products produces hand-painted pottery for sale to tourists. In 1982, its first year, the store grossed more than $90,000. Today the firm, owned by Blanding native Joe Lyman, brings in well over $500,000 a year.

In many ways, Lyman and his pottery shop epitomize the enormous untapped economic potential of southern Utah. Lyman produces a product that draws on native American cultural tradition. He employs 30 Navajo and Ute Indian artists, and his attitude toward his employees is revolutionary: "Why should I hire these people and force them into my mold?" Lyman asked *Utah Holiday* magazine in a recent interview. "Instead, I'll put them in an environment where they can succeed."

Recognizing that many Navajo and Ute Indians are torn between cultures, Lyman goes out of his way to provide them with flexibility on the job. He pays them by the piece and allows them time off when they need it.

"They can come and go when they want, leave when they want, take two or three weeks off when they want, and still have their jobs."

Melvin Heaton is a native of Moccasin, Ariz., population 70, where his family has lived since 1886. As a boy, Heaton grew up riding bareback, herding cattle and performing as an extra at the movie ranches in nearby Kanab.

Like many southern Utah natives, Heaton has supplemented his income from ranching with a government job, working for the National Park Service at Pipe Springs National Monument. All his life, Heaton has nurtured three loves: horses, Western history and the spectacular landscape of the Colorado Plateau.

In 1976, he hit upon an ingenious means of combining the three. As a bicentennial event, Heaton organized a group ride over the historic Mormon pioneer trail between Pipe Springs National Monument and St. George, Utah. As icons for the event, Heaton designed and constructed two Conestoga wagons. Public response was overwhelming. Some 250 people signed up for the ride.

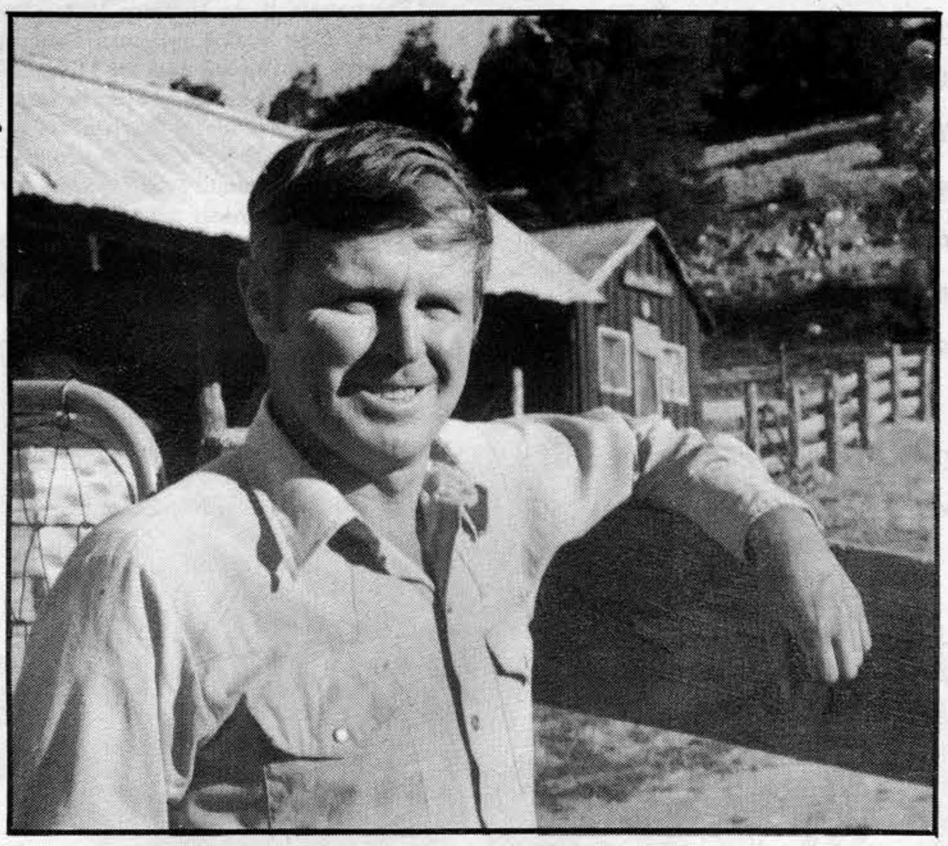
When *Arizona Highways* published a story on the event, about 2,500 people wrote for more information. Heaton promptly took out a $26,000 loan and began building more wagons. Today he makes his living as a guide.

In addition to the Honeymoon Trail ride, which Heaton rides once a year with 100 people, 30 horses and 10 covered wagons, Heaton runs guided horsepack trips that are among the most ambitious of their kind anywhere in the world.

His "Three Park Spectacular" winds 230 miles across the heart of the Colorado Plateau, threading the narrow slot canyons of the Paria River, traversing the forested ramparts of Bryce National Park, skirting the cliffs and domes of Navajo sandstone bordering Zion National Park, slicing through the Vermilion Cliffs and finally winding among the plateaus and volcanic mountains of the Arizona strip to the brink of the Grand Canyon.

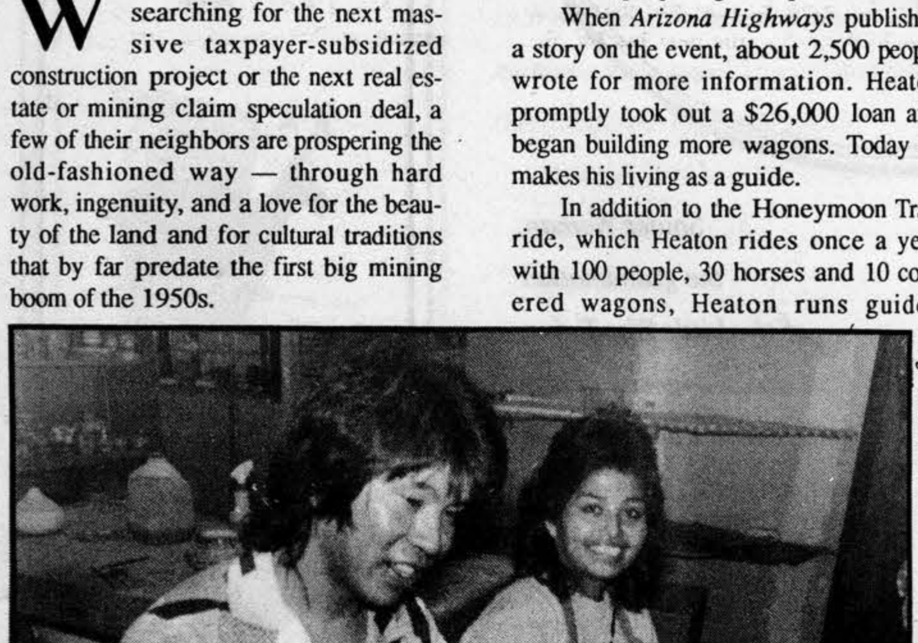
Heaton's success is attributable to his native skills, his ingenuity, and a powerful marketing tool — the Colorado Plateau. "People who ride all over the world have told me that you can't find this kind of country anywhere else," Heaton says.

His clients include a French trail-riding association that makes annual ex-



Ray Wheeler

Melvin Heaton, canyon guide



Ray Wheeler

Ceramic artists Nelson Maryboy and Ellie Yazzie at Quality Productions shop in Blanding, Utah

Reflections: Ranching as diversion

There is a myth, which we native Westerners not only tend to accept but to peddle wholesale, that the West is mainly in the hands of independent, self-sufficient, neo-Jeffersonian yeomen in sweat-stained Stetsons.

That's horseshit. The pioneer West was quickly dominated by those who had the capital to go into cattle, mining, logging or railroads. The very existence of the national parks, forests and public domain lands is due to the desperate mess these pillagers had created by the century's turn. Today, states like Wyoming are still politically dominated by large landowners, industry, banks and other entrenched interests. Many of these represent investors from outside the state.

There are neo-Jeffersonian ranchers, crusty but lovable in their battered cowguy regalia, but most of them either inherited their ranches or bought them with money earned in banking, defense or other lucrative fields, and then took up ranching as a genteel kind of working retirement.

The only aspiration open to a simple cowpoke is to get a job managing a ranch for the real owners or to marry a rancher's child and share the inheritance. Most of the small ranchers in Sublette County, Wyo., have day jobs to support their ranching habit. A man might drive a grader for the county road crew, a woman work as a clerk or schoolbus driver.

Ranch work is done early or late in the day or on weekends. So goes yeomanry in cow country.

Most of the large ranches bought in the last 10 years have gone to investors: people with no background in ranching and no intention of working on their own land, except as it might occasionally prove entertaining.

Most of these toy ranches gain flashy front gates, deluxe fences and new trucks with the brand gold-leafed on their doors. Toy ranchers tend to stock their newly bought land with exotic cattle and registered horses, which are greatly admired by weekend guests. Western romance is worth a lot in the slim, grim late 1980s.

While the temptation is to regard these wealthy rancheros as fools, the fact is that most of them know cattle raising isn't worth their time, except as diversion. What is worthwhile, from an investor's point of view, is cheap land, tax breaks and water rights.

Ranching condos has made many fortunes. With three-fourths of the West's people in cities, there's a demand for commuter developments and second homes. A lot of erstwhile cow and mining towns depend on real estate hustles for survival.

Ranches around Pinedale, Wyo., at the head of the mainstem of the Colorado River system, are now worth more for their water rights than for all the cattle they've raised in the last century. Toy ranchers are, at heart, investors. A cowboy hat sits lightly on their well-barbered heads.

Eighty-six percent of the wealth held by families in these United States is the property of 10 percent of the families. The West is not exempt from this formula, despite our popular fantasies. Land ownership, wealth and control of resources have been concentrated in few hands, while many others have been dispossessed.

— C. L. Rawlins

cursions to places such as Kenya and Argentina. But in the canyon country of southern Utah, Heaton's clients have found something unique. "We can ride for five days on this route," says Heaton, "and never see anybody."

When doomsayers began lamenting the fate of the Western rancher, someone forgot to tell Melvin Heaton the bad news. In addition to guiding, Heaton draws income from ranching and film production work. His pack trips are so profitable that he runs just four a year. He spends much of his time in the backcountry, scouting new trails for his clients. His net profits from guiding alone exceed $25,000 per year.

By Moab standards, Ken Sleight is a one-man chamber of commerce. Between commercial river trips in Grand Canyon and horsepack trips in the Escalante canyons, Sleight somehow finds time to manage a bookstore and a guest ranch. Indeed, in his younger years, Sleight helped organize the Escalante Chamber of Commerce and served as its first president.

Yet for 30 years Sleight has been an outspoken environmentalist and a target for the wrath of Sagebrush Rebels. In 1979, when Sleight was campaigning against a Trans-Escalante highway, Rebels ran his pickup truck off a cliff.

Like many who have spent their lives in the outdoors, Sleight radiates infectious joy — except when he is discussing the development of Lake Powell.

Sleight was one of the first environmentalists to oppose the flooding of Glen Canyon, and for 20 years he has watched, with increasing dismay, the transformation of Glen Canyon into one of the West's most intensively developed recreational playgrounds.

"All along the bank of the reservoir it's polluted," he says. "Writing on the wall, they're desecrating Indian ruins — writing on Rainbow Bridge itself. You can't hardly get off your boats to camp on a beach; it's all covered with human excrement."

With more than 2 million visitors a year, Glen Canyon National Recreation Area is the most popular outdoor tourist attraction in the state. When Sagebrush Rebels talk about tourism, Lake Powell is what they have in mind. This kind of tourism is easy for Sagebrush Rebels to understand, since it is little different from the mining and power plant projects of the1970s.

This is industrial tourism, wholly dependent, now and in the future, upon large construction projects. This is campgrounds, marinas, gas stations, stores, restaurants, ferries, RV parks, airports, motels and, most important of all, condominiums, which is to say, whole cities.

The distinction between industrial tourism and the tourist trade plied by Joe Lyman, Melvin Heaton and Ken Sleight (let us call theirs "dispersed" tourism) is a distinction of economic caste. While dispersed tourism creates jobs in the small towns ringing the wilderness core of the Colorado Plateau, the industrial tourism of Lake Powell creates wealth for those who are already wealthy.

As usual, most of it flows out of Utah into the corporate coffers of Del Webb Corp., the Phoenix construction giant which built Sun City and operates a fleet of casinos in Las Vegas.

"We're subsidizing Del Webb," says Ken Sleight. "The government puts up a lot of things, campgrounds and so on. And then Del Webb puts their money into restaurants and promotion." Not the least of the Lake Powell subsidies is the proposed paving of the Burr Trail — Garfield County's link to Bullfrog Marina on Lake Powell.

San Juan County is also providing subsidies to Del Webb Corp on Lake Powell. When Del Webb announced plans for a new motel at Hall's Crossing, San Juan County promptly awarded Del Webb its annual allotment of tax-exempt industrial revenue bonds to stimulate investment in the project.

Why would San Juan County pour its resources into Del Webb Corp. rather than into the small towns of Blanding, Monticello or Bluff? That is a question San Juan County Economic Development Board director Peggy Humphries has asked herself more than once.

When county commissioners asked her to allocate a large chunk of her $43,000 annual budget for a brochure depicting Lake Powell as the geographic center of San Juan County, Humphries balked. Del Webb Corp., she observes, has an annual advertising budget of $2 million and annual gross revenues of $40 million.

"Why should I emphasize Lake Powell, for heaven's sakes? I have a hard time promoting that. I'd rather promote Arches or Canyonlands than Lake Powell. If you're pulling a boat, or if you're going to the lake, everything else is going to be secondary."

Reminded that San Juan County benefits from sales tax and transient room tax revenues generated by Hall's Crossing Marina, Humphries replies, "Yes, but you'd have a hard time convincing a motel owner in Blanding or Monticello. And I can definitely see their point."

The massive complex of corporate tourist development surrounding Lake Powell has transformed the small towns of Moab, Monticello and Blanding from destination points into "pit stops," says Sleight. "We're being bypassed. We're putting our emphasis on Lake Powell instead of our small towns."

Elsewhere in southern Utah, industrial tourism follows a familiar pattern. Taxpayer dollars help to subsidize the creation of golf courses, new roads, and the expansion of water, sewer and power systems. Then the real estate and construction barons move in and begin building condominiums. At present, at least three southern Utah towns — Moab, Kanab and Springdale — are moving to construct golf courses.

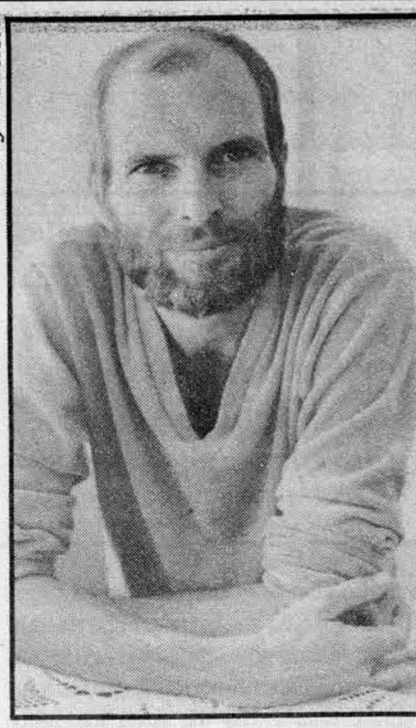
For Springdale, the new golf course has been a traumatic affair. To acquire property for the golf course along the Virgin River, the City Council condemned the "backyards" of a number of long-time residents.

"A lot of the old-timers in town feel like everything is being taken out of their hands," says Springdale restaurant owner Michael Parry. "All of a sudden, it's big money talking here, and people, especially a lot of the old-timers, feel a sense of helplessness."

Parry's business, the Bit and Spur Restaurant, has a reputation as one of the finest restaurants in southern Utah. It was one of the few businesses in town to take a strong public stand opposing the golf course.

"I just hate to see this town slide downhill," says Parry. "You can see this town going the way of Sedona and Taos — places that are completely out of touch."

On a bright November morning after the summer tourist trade has quieted down, Springdale regains for a moment its native charm. Morning sunlight rolls down 3,000 foot cliffs of rose colored sandstone, and a cool fall breeze sends cottonwood leaves scuttering in the streets. But this tranquility, one must remember, is soon to be lost — buried under condominiums, RV parks, billboards, putting greens, helicopter tours, convention centers.



Ray Wheeler

Michael Perry

"What's the use of doing a quality project here if you're going to be surrounded by trash?" asks Parry. As developers move in, natives like Michael Parry are quietly moving out.

"I've chosen to leave," he says. "I'm tired of being angry about it. Springdale was my last move in southwestern Utah. I will come here as a tourist, but I probably will never live here again."

The last thing former economic development expert Craig Bigler wants for Moab is the kind of prosperity that he sees in the town of St. George. "Prosperity?" says Bigler, "I think it's hideous. St. George is built to defy the environment, rather than to be compatible with it or take advantage of it."

The problem with industrial tourism, says Bigler, is not merely that it destroys the beauty or tranquility or the culture of a community like Moab. What is worse is that industrial tourism can hook a community or an entire region on an addictive cycle of deficit spending.

To pay for the expanded infrastructure needed for industrial tourism, communities like St. George have "begged and borrowed money from the state, from the federal government," says Bigler. He says they are like junkies, always looking for the next big hit. For Craig Bigler, it is a syndrome that is all too familiar.

"The liberals — Lord, I know, because I was part of it — had this attitude that growth is good, and as long as you can make growth happen, then things are going to be O.K. But what they never faced up to is the costs imposed by that growth. For streets, for water, for schools, for police — these things increase disproportionately, and so you have to have more the next time around. And then you still have to have more to cover your costs. You always have to have more. There's never enough."

What in the hell do people like Craig Bigler and Michael Parry want, anyway? They don't like the mining economy because it destroys the beauty of the landscape. But they don't like industrial tourism either because it can so often be equally destructive.

If they are opposed to mining and opposed to industrial tourism, what then aren't they opposed to?

"The only thing that will work for a small town in southern Utah, in my mind," says Bigler, "is a minimalist approach where you say, 'Hey, we don't want to have the kind of development that requires these kinds of massive investments. We only need two grocery stores in Moab. We only need one or two hardware stores...' You either accept limitations or you're stuck with this endless need for growth.

"You can't just grow, willy-nilly, without exceeding the capacity. And there's really a capacity to how many people can live here. There just isn't space. This valley is so narrow. Where would you put the freeways? The noise, the congestion, would be horrendous."

What Bigler wants, in other words, is for the town of Moab to do something revolutionary — to do what few other communities in the nation have been able to do since the arrival of European immigrants on the American continent: to live within its means.

Rather than finding creative new ways to feed growth, Bigler wants Moab to learn to control growth.

In 1986, Bigler completed a study of Moab's economic development prospects. In his report to the community, Bigler urged the townspeople to "establish Moab/Grand County as a diversified, four-season destination resort area" by creating for the town a "destination resort image ... to attract investors and employers who want to own property and/or live in such a place."

At the end of our interview, I asked Bigler whether creating such an image for Moab would not destroy the charm, the very character, of the town.

Wheeler: Are you possibly creating the seeds of your own disaster? Is that a paradox?

Bigler: Uh huh.

Wheeler: Building up momentum, making Moab an attractive place to visit and an attractive place to live. Creating pressures for development which will create a Moab which is bigger than you'd like it to be, personally?

Bigler: Uh huh.

Wheeler: So how do you get around that paradox?

Bigler: *(silence)*

Wheeler: Cross that bridge when you come to it?

Bigler: Yeah. I've fussed with it an awful lot. If you want Moab to be just like any other urban area, then you let it grow, willy-nilly, endlessly trying to go back and recover from the mistakes of the past.

Or you orient the growth and development so that you get a very specific, selfish clientele that wants it for itself, drives the prices up so that no one else can afford it — which is the Vail route.

Or you oppose all kinds of development and you control growth through poverty, which is what we're doing now. We can't afford to grow; we're not growing. That's the preference of a lot of people in this town. The "minimalists" and the retirees.

Wheeler: Is that your preferred alternative?

Bigler: (silence)

Wheeler: Off the record?

Bigler: (silence)

Wheeler: You're in a bit of a bind, Craig.

Night had fallen around Bigler's house. A warm, gusting spring wind was shaking the windows and stirring the cottonwood leaves.

As I stared down into a beer mug, watching the bubbles rise off the thick bottom, I realized I had at last found the path to the future of the Colorado Plateau. The future will be precisely what we who live here are willing to believe it can be. With the collapse of the mining economy and the rise of the environmental movement as a political force, the Colorado Plateau is up for grabs.

□