

Montana Rancher Tells Gunnison Cows and Coal Don't Mix

by Gary Sprung

Wally McCrae...third-generation rancher, poet, rodeo announcer, chaps manufacturer, amateur archeologist, peddler of antiques...a man with an intimate knowledge of the classic Western way of life.

Wally McCrae came to Gunnison County to warn us of danger. Industrial development, he says, is not good for ranching. Rapid development is not good for kids, not good for peace and tranquility, disruptive of the social fabric.

Wally McCrae experienced a large-scale coal mine and powerplant development at his home in Rosebud County, Montana. Now, 12 years after the beginning of that development, Wally says, "I can't think of one rancher in my county who likes one aspect of any coal-related industrial development."

Wally went to grade and high school in Colstrip, Montana. His mom and dad grew up only eight miles apart. The town was traditionally a company town, owned by the Northern Pacific Railroad, supplying coal for steam engines. Wally has already witnessed one economic bust—when the railroad switched to diesel engines his town almost died.

The coal mines, and most of the town, wound up later in the hands of the state's big utility—Montana Power. The ranchers welcomed the company and anticipated good relations with the new company. The board of the utility is made up of all Montana residents—"hometown boys." The president of Montana Power had been a farmer.

But the ranchers quickly learned otherwise. They asked the utility to build a school because the railroad had built one, and now 6000 to 10,000 people were expected to relocate in Colstrip.

"But they laughed at us," says Wally. "They told us, 'You were spoiled by Northern Pacific. We're not gonna do that for you.'"

Another disillusionment came to the ranchers when they discovered that the lawyer who had been working for each of them was also working for Peabody Coal Company, developer of many mines in their area. AMAX Coal Co. is also present in Rosebud County, with a lease about 4½ miles from Wally's ranch. But they have not mined yet.

Wally was dissatisfied with the Montana Stockgrower Association's refusal to oppose the development, which was harmful to ranching. So he got together with many Montana ranchers and formed the Northern Plains Resource Council. They per-



Wally McCrae

sued the state legislature to pass a 30 percent severance tax on the gross value of coal at mine mouth. The money goes to help mitigate the impacts of development. They pushed through a tough reclamation law.

Social Impacts of Coal Development

But the costs are still high. Wally's 16-year-old niece was killed by a coal train. He says, "I'm hated in my own community...Montana Power carefully tried to get construction workers to take out their frustrations on the ranchers."

The schools are "chaotic and terribly overcrowded." His 16-year-old daughter did not know the location of Spain.

"You remember," she explained, "The year I took geography we had eight different teachers."

One of her classes was held in a shower room. Another was in an empty grocery store. The store housed 100 students from four classes, all in the same room, divided only by blackboards.

Jobs...the company promised employment. But, McCrae responds, "Yes, we got jobs: law-enforcement jobs, divorce lawyers, guidance counselors..."

Wally knows the worst impact is yet to come. He is sure a bust is inevitable. The coal will run out and the powerplants will shut

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down—within 30 years. He wonders if Colstrip can survive. Presently 92 percent of the assessed valuation for taxes comes from coal development; that money will disappear.

Although McCrae is disliked in Colstrip, he is happy with the value of this experience for his children. "My kids may be wise beyond their years because of this controversy. But they have a good set of values, and they know what I do. It's not like the fathers who go to the office and the kid doesn't know what they're doing or saying."

Wally has been offered a huge cow outfit—66,000 acres—for his ranch, which sits over a rich seam of coal. Another friend, Boyd Charter, has been offered a blank check from Peabody Coal for his ranch. Boyd told Peabody Coal, "No matter how much you offer me, it will still be \$4.60 short of the price it would take to buy me out."

Wally feels the same. When Peabody offered the 66,000 deeded acres, Wally asked the salesman, "How soon do you want an answer?"

"As soon as possible."

"How about today?"

"O.K."

"The answer is no."

"Well, think about it for a



Walter Redden, local rancher

while."

Not an "Environmentalist"

McCrae prioritizes his concerns:

1—Most important is the social effect of the development—changes in church life and community ties;

2—The long-term economic effects, the boom/bust cycle;

3—Political—the imported new constituency, beholden to the company for employment;

4—Environmental effects. He dislikes the name, "environmentalist," which

people give him just because he opposes development.

"Sometimes I feel like dragging a dead coyote around."

When and if all four coal powerplants run at full capacity, they will emit 23,700 tons of sulfur dioxide per year, and this will often blow directly over McCrae's ranch.

Wally suspects this would hurt him and his cattle, but does not believe he can prove this. Still, he uses environmental tools—laws which regulate specific amounts of pollution—because they are the most sub-