

The History of Uranium in Wyoming
by
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Thank you, Mr. Curry:

Probably no one in this room is less qualified to present the "History of Uranium in Wyoming", than I am.

To be an historian, one must be utterly objective and there must be a reasonable lapse of time, a certain aging process, between the time of events of which the historian writes.

Now I am not objective at all about uranium, and I have held a deep-seated prejudice that Wyoming will one day be the world's greatest producer of uranium.

Certainly there is little separation in time in the history of uranium in Wyoming, we are living it right now, the history of uranium is now.

But I am a pretty fair newspaper reporter, I have tried to practice objectivity in my reporting, and I have had the privilege of being right on the scene as some of the exciting events of Wyoming's uranium history have unfolded.

To properly tell the history of Wyoming would require the searching of thousands of files and newspaper accounts and the interviewing of hundreds of people.

Time has not allowed me to do this at this time, nor would I probably be capable of doing it from a truly historical point of view, although someday I would hope to tackle the task.

So today, my history will be one of observations from my vantage point as a co-publisher of the Riverton Ranger. Many of the stories I will recount I have covered myself, but I am indebted, too, to my brother, Bob, of the Ranger, who has been on the scene as much and as long as have I.

I apologize for the many omissions that will be present today, and I do not mean to intentionally overlook the great contributions of some of our uranium pioneers.

We have many uranium pioneers of Wyoming in our audience today -- Dr. J. D. Love, the father of uranium in Wyoming; Cotter Ferguson, Lowell Morfeld and others who staked some of the original claims and made the early discoveries upon which this great industry has been built.

The discovery of uranium in Wyoming is 50 years old this year. In 1918, radium hunters found uranium in the abandoned Silver Cliff mine at Lusk. Their search had been touched off by Madame Curie's famous experiments with radium, and it is said that some of the Lusk uranium found its way into Madame Curie's Paris laboratory.

But at the peak of development at the Silver Cliff a disastrous series of litigation started which lasted five years. By the time it was settled, Madame Curie was getting her radium from the Belgian Congo and the Lusk area has never produced any significant amount of uranium since.

Wyoming's next uranium discovery came 12 years later in 1930 when Mrs. Minnie McCormick, who was a combination amateur prospector and camp cook, found what she at first thought was sulfur on Lost Creek near Wamsutter. It proved to be uranium, and Mrs. McCormick spent the rest of her lifetime trying to put the claims into production without success. Nobody wanted uranium then.

However, following World War II with the advent of the atom bomb, the Atomic Energy Commission launched an incentive program to find uranium and overnight hundreds of people became Sunday prospectors.

The first near-commercial discovery of uranium in Wyoming was made in 1949 in the Black Hills seven miles north of Sundance by A. J. Katches, a Duluth, Minnesota engineer who was looking for fluorides. Homestake Mining soon ventured into Wyoming looking for uranium and further discoveries were made near New Haven, Aladdin, and Carlile, not far from Devil's Tower.

Then on October 15, 1951 the uranium industry in Wyoming began to accelerate when Dr. Dave Love reported the discovery of uranium in the Pumpkin Buttes area of Campbell County. This discovery was significant because it advanced a whole new theory of the deposition of uranium by downward leaching from tuffaceous beds above the host rock, and opened up whole new horizons of uranium prospecting in many of the tertiary basins of Wyoming.

Dr. Love reported his discovery in Geological Survey Circular 176, "Preliminary Report on Uranium Deposits in the Pumpkin Buttes Area Powder River Basin Wyoming," March 18, 1952.

But there were many skeptics who did not accept the report because the uranium occurrence did not fit the conventional ideas in vogue then of where uranium should be. Even after a field trip to view the discovered uranium, the experts refused to believe it. There was passive opposition to the theory of occurrence of uranium in the tertiary sedimentary basins of Wyoming long after the major discoveries of the Gas Hills and Crooks Cap areas of Fremont County in 1953. In those days, many major companies took a look, and left again, unable to believe or comprehend what they saw.

The fact that the experts didn't believe uranium could occur in the basin sediments of Wyoming didn't deter the amateur prospectors who followed the simple principle that "uranium is where you find it".

So to the small prospector, and the scientist Dave Love, goes the credit for finding the major uranium ore bodies of Wyoming that have led to the giant industry we see unfolding today.

Incidentally, the outcrop discovered by Dave Love in the Pumpkin Buttes contained 15% uranium.

Further exploration in the Pumpkin Buttes was shut off when the AEC withdrew 102 square miles of the area for exploration and study before opening it up to prospectors.

The Dave Love announcement, however, brought Kerr-McGee to the Powder River Basin along with Page Jenkins and Darby Hand. In 1953 the first shipments of ore from the southern Powder River Basin were made by Jenkins and Hand. In 1954 and 1955 Kerr-McGee had produced several thousand tons of ore from small deposits.

The Monument Hill area near the Dry Fork of the Cheyenne River, some 40 miles northwest of Douglas has produced uranium almost continually since 1953. Major producers in the 1954-1966 period were Vernon Mrak, Baker and Hornbuckle, and Western Nuclear.

As the Atomic Energy Commission allocations ran out, mining came to a virtual standstill in 1967 and 1968, in the Powder River Basin. Kerr-McGee had left the area in the mid-1950's.

When the AEC removed its Pumpkin Buttes withdrawal in 1956, a tremendous land rush resulted but not much uranium was found that was commercially produceable.

Kerr-McGee and many other major companies have returned to the Powder River Basin in force in the past year. Kerr-McGee had the unique experience of recovering uranium lands that it had abandoned ten years or more ago.

Indications are that a major ore body has been blocked out by Kerr-McGee in the southern Powder River Basin following an intensive drilling program over the last 18 months, but we'll let Mr. McGee and Dick Zitting do their own reporting on this one.

Reports have it that another commercial discovery north of the Kerr-McGee district may soon be announced.

It would not be possible to recount all the present uranium holdings in Wyoming. That's why we have asked Mr. Waatti to put up his maps out in the lobby. But suffice it to say that a great proportion of all Wyoming's sedimentary basins have been located for uranium.

The uranium discovery that caught the eye of Wyoming and the nation came on September 13, 1953 when Neil and Maxine McNeice prospecting on a Sunday discovered the Gas Hills uranium district some 45 miles east of Riverton.

The McNeice's were serious prospectors, and their discovery was not by chance for Neil McNeice had been targeting in on the Gas Hills for some time.

At about the same time that Neil McNeice and his partner Lowell Morfeld were staking the original Lucky Mc claims in the central Gas Hills, Phil House was flying an aerial scintillation survey for Jenkins and Hand and discovered the West Gas Hills, the property mined first by Globe Mining Company and now Union Carbide.

When the publicity telling of Neil McNeice's discovery hit the national press in mid-October the biggest uranium claim-staking rush yet experienced in the country was on.

Alfred Nostrum quit selling International tractors in Thermopolis and rushed to the East Gas Hills where he remembered a uranium occurrence he had seen in 1952, and staked the Aljob claims now producing for Union Carbide.

Cotter Ferguson quit selling men's clothing and staked many of the claims in the Gas Hills now producing uranium for Federal-American Nuclear Partners.

Vern Hughes quit selling used cars and came to the Gas Hills to stake many claims, mostly in the East Gas Hills and his discoveries led to the formation of several mining properties.

Others came too. Bob Diefenderfer, Joe Wentz, John Cummings, the Lander school teachers, Fuechsel and Norton, Jim Wade, Roman Verhalen, and many more.

Floyd Bishop and Chuck Spurlock, Lander engineers and surveyors, went to the Crooks Gap and made the original discovery there with the Sno-Ball Claims. Hepburn Armstrong quit a Washington job to stake claims in Crooks Gap that resulted in Green Mountain Uranium (Phelps Dodge). There were the Harrower Brothers, the Langfords, and many more in Crooks Gap.

And Bob Adams took off his apron at the Adams Cafe in Rawlins, took a look at Ma McCormick's Lost Creek property and founded a company called Lost Creek Oil and Uranium with claims also in Crooks Gap. When Bob was successful in starting Wyoming's first uranium mill, built at Split Rock, his more conservative bankers suggested he change the name of his company and Western Nuclear was born.

The Gas Hills struggled for two or three years while the "experts" convinced themselves there really was uranium there, and just as the AEC buying program was finding itself with more uranium than it could make into bombs, four more uranium mills squeaked under the wire from 1958 to 1960 -- Lucky Mc, Union Carbide, Federal-Gas Hills Partners, and Fremont Minerals (Susquehanna).

Led by the Wyoming Mining Association, Governor Milward Simpson, Senators Frank Barrett and Joseph O'Mahoney, Congressman Keith Thomson, and the Wyoming Natural Resource Board, the State of Wyoming mounted a concerted, cooperative effort before the AEC 202 hearings that resulted in the doubling of Wyoming milling capacity and gave the industry the market it had to have to begin development.

(Byron Wilson story).

Other districts opened up -- the Baggs area, and Shirley Basin.

It is strange that the Shirley Basin mining district which now seems to contain Wyoming's largest uranium reserves, was the last to come into production.

Dick Lisco of Teton Exploration presented a paper to the Wyoming Mining Convention, the first one, in Riverton in 1956 in which he presented evidence that the Shirley Basin was the place to go, but few went.

Karl Meyers and others had been there, too, but their claims lay idle.

Then Teton optioned its claims to Tidewater Oil and while Tidewater was looking them over they drilled a few more holes to the west of the original discovery point, and low and behold it was there and big.

(Claim post story).

In June of 1957 the rush was on and everybody came. Kerr-McGee, Utah Construction, Sasso and Simmons, even some New York City prospectors who carried their claim posts in the back of a Cadillac convertible.

In order to provide some development, the AEC allowed Petrotonics (Tidewater, Skelly, Getty and Kerr-McGee) to build a small mill, and Utah Construction opened an underground mine which

now produces its uranium through in situ, solution mining. Bob Cypert, who now heads the Getty Oil development in the Shirley Basin, has been down there for more than ten years and gets the title of Pappy Cypert.

Now with the advent of the strong private market for uranium developments are moving strong and fast and the district has been extended far beyond its original boundaries. There are new companies like Consolidated Oil and Gas with ore bodies.

The present-day saga of uranium in Wyoming is producing an unprecedented search for uranium, and the dossier of companies reads like a who's who of mining and petroleum companies -- Humble, Atlantic Richfield, Climax, Cleveland-Cliffs, Homestake, Sinclair, Mobil, Kaiser Industries, Union Pacific Railroad, to name only a few.

The history of uranium in Wyoming, its growth and progress, is tied closely to a cooperative effort between responsible industrial citizens, local Chambers of Commerce, County Commissioners, ranchers, school districts, and the State Government.

The Wyoming Highway Commission has worked hard with the industry to find ways to build roads and now there is a paved road almost all the way to the Gas Hills, and soon by breaking down seemingly insurmountable barriers, there will be paved roads into the Shirley Basin and the Powder River Basin.

A new city has been born at Jeffrey City, there are schools in the Gas Hills and in the Shirley Basin. Air strips have sprung up.

The final chapter in Wyoming's uranium history hasn't been written yet, but it's history in the making, and those companies investing their capital in Wyoming in the millions of dollars will find Wyoming people and Wyoming government friendly, helpful cooperators in the building of a strong, successful, long-time uranium mining and milling industry.

We're glad you're here, and we'll help you stay.

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