

THE BIG BOOM

For better or worse, the smell of oil is in the air. Words & photos by Tim Findley.

Hot fresh tar on a red-lined road, brand new signs on old motels, open lots “available,” and heavy trucks in town. It felt a little like the week before Christmas this springtime along the western slope Rockies. Something big was coming, better than just another tourist season. A boom—a burst of

economic growth expected to be bigger than most locals have seen before—is about to erupt like a volcanic piñata from Grand Junction to Rawlins. Already cushioned with unprecedented royalties on natural gas, Wyoming will surely get even richer. More state schools and public services will plug in with the best of new tools for the 21st century. In Colorado, the money will peel off like onion skin, finding its way into jobs, services

and lemonade stands. It's coming, just you watch.

At least, that's what a lot of people in these rural regions believe. President Bush, following recent tradition of chief executives in their final two years of office, seems to have chosen a legacy for himself. Clinton did it with executive authority to create monuments and wilderness areas. Bush evidently means to cast his name in energy. Quietly apart from con-

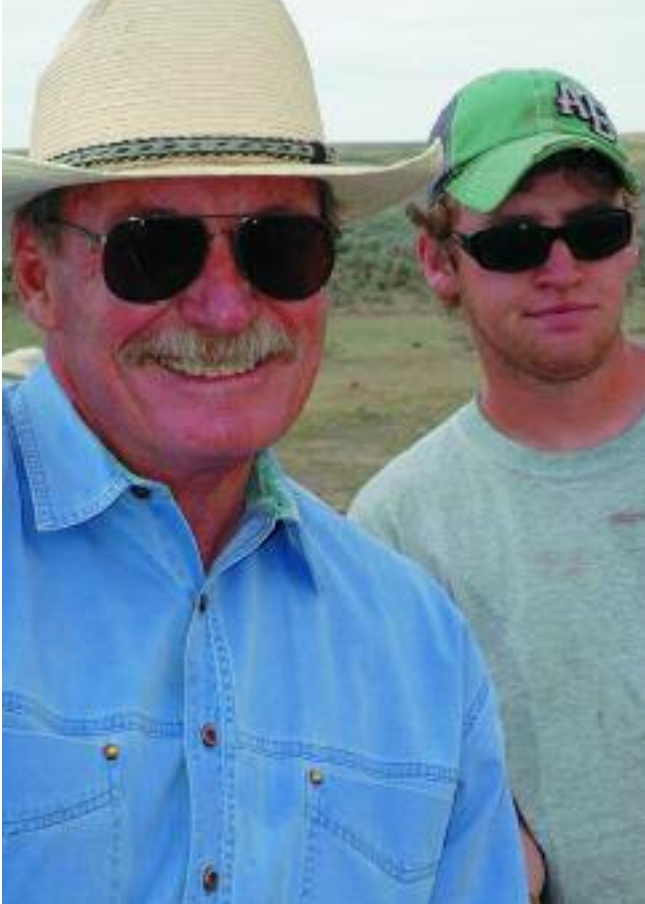
troversy, but with seemingly unstoppable momentum, the administration is clearing the way for exploration and extraction of home-grown fuel. The first of it is already being pumped out from gas finds in Wyoming's Powder River country, but another mother lode of coal-bed methane gas is waiting along a vast stretch of the Atlantic Rim on the Continental Divide. And in Colorado, long-fabled layer-cake deposits of oil shale in the Green River formation are marked at last for cost-effective conversion into fuel.

The oil companies promise the work will go on for 20 years at least, but in some regions they say it may last for 40 years or even longer. Never mind spring with its slightly disappointing runoff this year. Grass only used to be king in these vast grazing regions. Gas is already on the throne, just waiting to be crowned.

* * *

Patrick O'Toole, president of the westwide Family Farm Alliance, allowed himself an unusual few moments just warming in the sun as he stepped out on the nook of a deck





Pat O'Toole with 20-year-old son, Eamon, who says: "We've never watched much TV, but my dad has just about every book ever written." OPPOSITE: Ladder Ranch branding, a family affair.

behind his ranch house along the Wyoming and Colorado border.

Most of his family was at church that Sunday morning, but what soared up and all around O'Toole was like an awesome blue-and-green stadium formed by the Little Snake River, where people have worshipped for centuries. The Ute, the Shoshone, the Sioux, the Kiowa and the Cheyenne, and even the Crow from the distant Big Horns saw this valley of the Little Snake as more than just another mountain cathedral. To them, it was a legendary Eden more bountiful in its variety of game than even Yellowstone. The tribes would set aside their own differences on this "war ground" to fight mountain men like Jim Bridger and Jeremiah Johnson for control of its wealth. When the white men finally won, they made it a hallowed haven for other hard men like themselves, some of them renegades and outlaws, including Butch Cassidy and the Wild Bunch. Those who finally worked to settle it had to be as strong as the mighty moods of the peaks pouring a winter's treasure each year into its first run west off the Divide and eventually to the Yampa, the Green, and the mighty Colorado itself.

From his deck, it's like a press-box view on a season opening in jade and green and coming to conclusion in a short six months with a celebration of jeweled Aspen canyons and the

first blankets of closing snow.

Life has always come easy on the Little Snake, even if living it was sometimes hard. O'Toole watches only for a moment before he grows restless, like a player wanting back in the game.

His father-in-law, George Salisbury, grew up on the shoulders of one of those hardy pioneers who founded the Ladder Ranch in 1898, and when George returned from World War II as a decorated tank commander, he took over the ranch. George tirelessly cared for more than 10,000 patchwork acres of the Ladder, using rotation and conservation techniques that earned him his reputa-

tion as one of the finest and most innovative ranchers in the West. He served on the county commission and later for several terms in the Wyoming state legislature.

George is 85 now and still active in the business, although his bowed legs speak more about the best years he remembers than more recent times when he has gone back to a tank of sorts in his ever-ready All Terrain Vehicle (ATV). Pat O'Toole is his willing protégé, which might explain in part why Pat seldom lets himself be frozen for long in the warm sunshine.

"We need more rain," O'Toole says like a prayer to no one in particular. Beneath his deck, an early gaggle of geese is honking its way through the lightly flooded marsh that slopes down to where the Little Snake roars on in silvery silt-thickened turns of horseshoe curves. Too much, too soon, O'Toole is thinking.

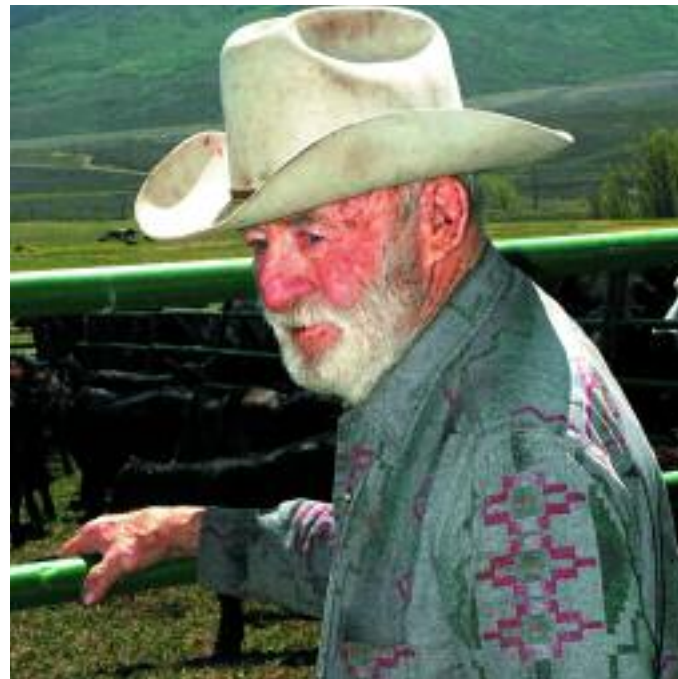
O'Toole also served in the state legislature, and was appointed to the Western Water Policy Review Advisory Commission where he built credentials not only as a much

admired holistic rancher using the techniques he learned from George, but as a calmly guiding negotiator, able still to open most doors on marbled floors even in Washington, D.C. A Democrat once delegated by the governor to meet with President Clinton, he is nevertheless not entirely opposed to the energy program backed by Bush.

What concerns him is the same basic thing that binds him and his family to their gorgeous land. The water.

"Right now, Anadarko [Oil Company] says it can pump out the water holding the gas in the coal beds and then reinject that water back into the aquifer after the gas is extracted. The problem is that it hasn't worked very successfully so far on the Powder River, and nobody is sure how well it may work here. On the Atlantic Rim, if they pump out millions of acre-feet of 'fossil' or old water from the coal beds and can't get it back into the aquifer, we will be left with an enormous new river. And studies show the geology just won't hold all that water."

It poses a science fiction scenario just to imagine the enormity of a "new Colorado" pouring off the western slope with little or no knowledge of what damage might be done or what toxicity the "gas water" might carry. But O'Toole knows from practical experience that



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Sharon O'Toole takes a short break to check her daily planner, which is always close by.

when water becomes “a problem” in the West, it is inevitably the agricultural user made to suffer for urban needs. That’s one reason why he’s worked so carefully to help fashion western water law, especially along the Colorado.

Now he and some of his neighbors have quietly offered Anadarko an alternate solution in a joint venture using re-osmosis to purify water pumped from the coal beds and then stored in reservoirs or wetlands, like water banks, just in case it can’t be reinjected. It could produce undreamed of drought protection and ease an obstacle for the gas boom itself.

But the oil company is in a hurry, and so is President Bush. So far, Anadarko has willingly listened to concerns of the Family Farm Alliance, but politely rejected O’Toole’s idea on water banking, saying they could not accept the liability, and that they remain certain reinjection will serve better.

O’Toole is patient, but restless. The valley of the Little Snake at the very border of Wyoming and Colorado is stunning, no matter when you see it, but it is just the postcard portrait of the Ladder. There are other parts ranging off north and east into the high plains grazing country that to O’Toole and his family are like a generous old uncle directly in the path of changing times.

“To us, it’s an issue of conservation and saving this way of life,” he says. “To the oil companies it’s a question of disposal. We’ll figure a way. We have to.”

First though, as the Sunday begins to melt away, are the portable gates to be loaded for tomorrow’s branding. And in the knee-deep grass north of the ranch compound, sleek quarter horses, some of them descendants of others bred by George himself, are waiting to be rounded up for the job. O’Toole announces it like he expects an “Amen” out there somewhere. “Sure wish it would rain,” he says to nobody in sight as he heads off to the barn.

Sharon, George’s daughter, is on the road up to the branding pasture in the first crease of morning. She carries water and sodas and tarps in her pickup for the job they expect to last until afternoon. Waiting for Pat, she sits with her back against an old fence post in a rolling bright-green meadow streamed with flows of buttercups. The heavy table-sized book on her lap seems to suggest an impressionist painting. But the volume is her daily planner, another chore never overlooked.

Sharon, still a writer [see her piece on slaughtering horses elsewhere in this issue], was an editor of the student daily newspaper at Colorado State University when she met

O’Toole. He was a philosophy major from a southern university with a headful of Camus and Kierkegaard and a puzzled sense about where the rest of his 1970s generation was going. Whatever clear ideas she and Pat had about that were at least well studied in the first six winters they spent living in a blizzard-battered homestead cabin on the plains. If they missed much out there, they didn’t really notice it. O’Toole learned about ranching and politicking and just about anything else he could read. “We’ve never watched much TV,” admits his 20-year-old son, Eamon, “but my dad has just about every book ever written.” He says it jokingly, but with admiration.

They are shorthanded this season, and the whole family pitches in even more than usual. Behind the high rise of the meadow, Eamon has recruited his girlfriend from the University of Wyoming to help with the roundup. She is the beautiful daughter of another ranch family near Ten Sleep, the Stocklins, who named her Meghan, same as Eamon’s oldest sister, who while still a teenager followed her grandfather’s steps in becoming the youngest member of the Wyoming Board of Agriculture. This branding day, however, Meghan O’Toole Lally, now the wife of a sheriff’s deputy, is entrusted with even greater responsibility in bringing up Siobhan (pronounced “Chivon”) Mary Lally, the two-year-old controller of Pat O’Toole’s heart. Giggling, always cheerful, she bounces through the tall grass, her bright blonde hair making her seem a buttercup on her own. Before the day is out, another daughter, Bridget, currently in New York, will call at least twice with more details on her planned Labor Day wedding at the ranch. A little skeptically, George dismounts his ATV to look over the new spring-loaded gadgets supposed to make it easier for two men to brand.

It is a rather significant Irish crowd Pat gently takes control of as they assemble the corral and begin the work of separating cows from calves.

“Up there,” he gestures behind him with one of the irons he is heating, “just along the horizon where you see those mesas, that’s the Atlantic Rim for about as far as you can see.”

It seems miles away, across rolling grasses that finally end in a sort of crew cut at the eastern horizon. But to the O’Tooles it is closer than it looks. Pat doesn’t scowl, but a shadow of something crosses his face when Sharon tells him she noticed they were putting up street signs in the tiny town of Dixon for the first time. “Instant infrastructure,” she suggests with a smile. He had not

noticed the street signs, but he did see the two new trailer “man camps” being hauled in to a wide spot off the road some 20 miles from Baggs. “It won’t be long,” he says, clanking the iron in the propane heat. “Closer and closer.” It’s like he’s keeping one eye on the start of a prairie fire.

Nearing lunch, just as they had planned, the O’Tooles have managed with whoops and jumps and snapping ropes to complete this branding. Even George expresses some approval for the at-last-mastered spring device. Fed well with a good lunch from the tailgate of the ranch cook’s four-wheeler, Pat will have time to resupply his herders on another range before the next day’s shearing.

The Ladder ran against the grain of some Wyoming stock growers for a time by grazing both cattle and sheep. But it was always part of George’s careful planning to work out rotations that carried the ranch through some often-wild fluctuations of the livestock market.

For years, the Ladder has contracted with Peruvian nationals as herders. They work under an agreement involving their own government that requires they be trained and tested before being offered a contract for a monthly wage, room and board, and full health coverage. Skilled and experienced, Peruvians have replaced Basques on many sheep operations. Working in remote camps periodically re-supplied by the rancher, they seldom visit a town during their three-year contract. They do not speak English, but have a strong ethic and an esprit among themselves that proudly makes it customary that they address their employer only as “Patron.”

It seems mildly inappropriate for the easy-going O’Toole, but he returns their respect, and they work well together. He has a full truckload of food and supplies as he heads up to a sheep camp some 60 miles from Baggs.

But along the way, he turns into a fresh brown road shaved through the grass and crests a hill to view what seems a busy playground of new roads winding in and around pump sites and pipelines and storage buildings. O’Toole has heard the 30-ton Thumper trucks that roll around on one of these 80-acre sites, but this one has yet to begin work. “Nothin’ yet,” says a watchman who has greeted O’Toole before.

The rancher smiles and wishes the workman a good day. “We used to

graze sheep there,” he says. “No more.” In Colorado, he muses, they say at least 400,000 acres of grazing land have gone out of production, and in Wyoming there are no longer enough cattle to pay a brand inspector by the head. Those numbers alone trouble O’Toole.

At the sheep camp along high grass hills that roll like tsunami waves across the plains, the Peruvian gives him a week’s account. He has killed five rattlesnakes, he says, an unusual amount for this time of year. And among the flock, the news is not good either. At least 50 ewes and lambs have been lost to coyotes this season. Sitting in the back of O’Toole’s truck, the Peruvian says he has noticed that ravens have begun to work with the coyotes.

Bird-watchers call a group of the blue-black ravens a “murder.” Soaring and circling above the flock, the ravens have been watching as the new lambs are dropped, then diving down on the newborns to pluck out their eyes, leaving them as helpless victims of the carrion-sharing coyotes.

Just the thought of it makes O’Toole angry. He sees a shiny black cloud of the birds circling down the hill. “Juan, mi rifle,” he tells the Peruvian.

“Si, Patron,” he replies, bringing out the .223 scoped weapon.



Lawyer Frank Cooley, water-law expert. No one can match his 55 years of experience in watching oil shale. “This time, the companies can make money. That’s the difference.”



Sharon Day, Meeker town administrator, prepares again for a boom. “Black Sunday” came in May 1982 when Mobil-Exxon announced oil shale production “not viable.” Meeker had built a ghost town, “but,” Day says, “that’s not going to happen again.”

It would be an almost impossible shot, and maybe even a violation of some protecting law, but O’Toole mostly wants the satisfaction of firing a blast to scare them off and ease his own frustration. He is just loading a round when his cell phone rings. Not Bridget this time, but a pestering rich neighbor who recently bought an estate south of the Ladder on the Little Snake. The owner’s manager has cut off a bridge allowing O’Toole access to one of his pastures. Removing the round from the chamber, O’Toole shifts into agreeable negotiations that he hopes will avoid trouble with his neighbor. Down the hill, Juan runs at the ravens, chasing them away in noisy shrieks.

Wealthy outsiders, so common today in the West, have only lately discovered the Little Snake with opulent vacation homes and new fishing resorts. They are not a serious problem for the Ladder, but neither do they take part in the “roots” concern of other ranchers who drop in to see O’Toole around dinnertime. The others like O’Toole whose livelihood and family depends on the future in agriculture know they can’t completely stop what’s coming, and they’re not sure they want to, but they ask O’Toole, “Do the oil companies really care about the heritage and the water?”

“They’ll have to,” O’Toole tells them. There are environmental-impact studies still to be done, mitigation data to be released. “It can’t happen until we’re sure about it.” He has dealt with government promises before and knows it won’t be easy. But you can’t save Eden in your sleep, and he tries to



Three dogs and a view of the Little Snake River from the deck of the Ladder Ranch, which was founded in 1898. To the Ute, the Shoshone, the Sioux, the Kiowa and the Cheyenne this valley was a legendary Eden, more bountiful in its variety of game than even Yellowstone.

leave it behind him as he turns in. Tomorrow there is shearing to be done.

In towns like Meeker, Colo., 100 miles southwest of the Ladder, some folks have dreamed of it happening for generations. This time, the talk of oil shale production has a solid ring of promise.

American and foreign oil companies have known for nearly a century that gargantuan deposits of oil are locked in a layer of deep black shale that can be seen in the strata of mesas cut away by weather or road excavation. As much as 1.5-trillion barrels, five times the known reserves of Saudi Arabia, exist in the formation, enough to free the United States from dependence on any foreign oil. But locked in the shale it is stiffly unfinished oil, like hard taffy candy, and the process to heat it sufficiently to bring it to the surface has been seen as not cost effective or environmentally friendly. Aware of the potential, the federal government long ago set the deposits aside.

And just the same, the oil companies have held on to their properties and leases in the Green River formation all these years, knowing the time will come.

"This time we're sure," says Meeker town administrator Sharon Day. "It's coming; we just have to be prepared." They were prepared once before in the 1970s when Middle East countries attempted to hold the United States hostage by reducing oil production. With the

urging of President Jimmy Carter, the oil companies announced they would go after the national treasure in shale, using new *in situ* methods to heat the deposits and extract a thick crude without tearing down the mountains. Germans in World War II had successfully produced a similar synthetic oil, it was said. Within months, the town of Meeker pumped itself from a mere village of 2,200 into a town rapidly building housing, new businesses and infrastructure to meet an anticipated 5,000 new residents.

Then, international politics changed, and what Meeker residents remember as "Black Sunday" came in May 1982 with the announcement of Mobil-Exxon that oil shale production was once again "not viable." Meeker had built its own new ghost town.

"That's not going to happen again," says Ms. Day. "We're more careful now, but we're ready. We're still about 300 citizens short of what we planned for 25 years ago."

In an old brownstone building of what used to be the farming and mercantile center of Meeker, attorney Frank Cooley, a water-law expert, grumps that no one can match his 55 years of experience in watching oil shale.

"This time the companies can make the money, that's the difference," he says. So, he is asked cautiously, will Meeker get rich? Cooley lowers his head and fixes a glare.

"I said this time the oil companies can make money," he answers, as if ending the lecture.

Nevertheless, south of Meeker all the way down the Green River formation, through Rifle and Parachute and into Grand Junction, the word is out. Sheep and cattle and hay no longer have command of the economy. Oil shale is coming. The boom is on.

Patrick O'Toole is somewhere in the middle, between shale and gas, driving his pickup past the tall slope of a prairie hill where one of the Peruvians rides the crest, looking for ravens. ■

Investigative reporter Tim Findley lives in Fallon, Nev.



Area torn for roads on the Atlantic Rim. President Bush, following recent tradition of chief executives in their final two years of office, seems to have chosen a legacy for himself. Clinton did it with executive authority to create monuments and wilderness areas. Bush evidently means to cast his name in energy.