BOOM DREAMS

they come to these overnight towns for the promise of steady work
and a hefty pay check—why they stay is harder to understand.
article By CRAIG VETTER

Somehow I ended up in the lobby middle of the high Wyoming prairie last February. I picked up a hitchhiker who'd been standing for an hour in a blizzard snowstorm, in a wind that was 14 degrees below zero. He looked to be about 55 years old and he was about half frozen when we climbed into my rented oldsmobile. He was wearing a beat-up leather suit, with a rag for a handle, and he'd been on the road for six days from Youngstown, Ohio. He said he was broke and had been out of work for six months and that he was on his way to Jackson Hole, because someone had told him they were building a Holiday Inn there, and he thought maybe they'd have a construction job for him. Said he hadn't hitchhiked since 1962, and he didn't think he'd ever do it again. He asked the police in Moscow if he could sleep in their jail, but they told him
Their insurance wouldn't cover it. So
he'd sleep the night before in an aban-
doned house that didn't have any
windows or doors. Hard times, he said.

One day he knew where some gold was,
and when he said that he looked in a
like I was doing pretty well, I wasn't
sure him not to be fooled by beggars.

Then I told him he had been 'loot-
for so long that I'd just been a work in
a dirty, ugly, cold, stormy little town
where I was reared out of bars and
cities, and even when I was just
begging. Hard times were turned out
in 17-hour saloons; people lived out
of their cars or payroll tents. The popul-
ility was finished, far quadrupled, and in
a little more than ten years, when had been
had an army of towns of 500 people
that would have a wild, delirious crowd of
white young men who came to do the
right. You would remember our ten
times worse.

Gillette, the West's first town, of
course. For more than 10 years, gold
divided into drowsy streets into noisy, roaring
camps, had been increasing tough young
men with their boom dreams. But Gillet-
tone set in one of the very first towns
go up in the new towns, the rush for
energy that began to ride down on the
Knick-Montone towns when the Alamo
decided to make the money doctors live in
the early secretaries. And because I
was predicted that dozens in towns in
the early secretaries were going to be vis-
ding in the same excursive growth in
all of the oil and were pumped and
dug out of them. The social scientist
began to watch Gillette as if it were a
job animal.

Mark Twain could have told them
what they were going to find, and
they found it: murder, robbery, as-
bility, gold, grime, white walking, disease,
abstinence, depression, madness, and
mustard all out of proportion to the
number of the town's origin. They
called it Gillette syndrome, and then,
in the last editions of newspapers, they
began to say that it really existed
was just a little bit too much.

And that's why I went to Gillette to
find out if sickness and ten were any
more rampant in Rose City than in
any other American city of the same size.

I didn't go the answer to that one,
and very well I did just. I didn't
care, because the questions, and changed
from the attention in the cemetery. Could I
make a man's work for as much
as could stand to be a very
strong and very place if it crept into
he could pay off his debts and maybe
even live a few. Every answer, that
was in.

It's a good, three hours from Casper
to Gillette if you drive it; accept the
wide, restless, empty land that is more of
Wyoming, through Medicine, where the
grasshopper jumps starved by the
hundreds, in rows so straight they could have
been lined by fat beavers, and
in cattle tracks that were once the main
breezes around trees. Except for (the oil
tugs), this country has changed much
after the Jackson County wars, since
Riche and Ranchman had not at Hulea-
town. It's still empty of everything
but grass and spectator's, and the new
and the antelope still play in great swag-
ners around trees, though nowadays they
do most of their slaying on the highways.

This man from Gillette, I picked up
the local news broadcast, sponsored by a
roommate, who decided that his promis-
ing to find you not only a roommate but
a friend Gillette police were reporting, a
glass-breaking manner in town, Sunday
night. A shot went out in its window
and was missing above one clouded
of whiskey. Then the sliding glass door at
the upstairs door was hit, and then the
big window at Atlantic Roadheadhead-
quarters. Neither and they didn't know
us, but it was in the room, and it was
told me I'd have to let off and I told him it
was very clean that I was trying to make
a living as a freelance writer. He said he
thought that said pretty well if you did for the big
pictures. I told him how it would probably
if you could write ten stories a week for
25 weeks a year and sell every one
of which they were never seen to do,
or anything close to doing. Then he
gave him the small local epitaph that I had come in the past year as
Poverty is nature's way of telling you
you're in the wrong line.

He said he couldn't argue with that.

Nobody ever went to Gillette, Wyo-
ming, for the hell of it. It was born in
1890 and a railroad spitting from which
the settlers of the Powder river basin
could drive sheep and pick up
 Nottingham. It was named for the railroad
surveyor, Edward Gillette, who was re-
appointed to his job. Gillette was
called the center of the worst gold
rush in United States history because there
was no little town enough for an identity
and a slogan, they made the environment
anyway. They nicknamed the place
Rose City and called it "the dirtiest
State in the Union." The city was
story gone, somebody suggested a stomp
to make the whole thing real. The idea
was to turn an outlying area of one of
the big camps, Long Creek, to Gillette
Avenue, later hung him and shot his
entire body with a Mert Khloe.

Somehow, it never came about, and as it
ended about a year or so, with chamber
committee-take-the-recipe. The town was
sit in the street in the town and
in the street.

It was that, 80 miles wide and 300 miles long.

Canyons called, the first town for-
mention, and when they talked to town
about the heat they resisted to blast
and scrape out of it, the numbers be-
gain to remove the disagree in miles
between stars. There was no under-
measure that, too, and even some queer
in there, and by 1912, all house-town
held broke loose in Gillette. Rough-
ness, misery, railroad men, construction
tongues and workers drove more lawyers,
whereby and were reigned out of bars
and all for streets, and still join west
begging. Hard times were turned out
in 17-hour saloons; people lived out
of their cars or payroll tents. The popul-
ility was finished, far quadrupled, and in
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"You just about have to drink whiskey in this town, anyway," said Scotch. 'Have you tried the water?'  

This neighborhood is authentic; if you need it, that the entire town is made by what it does for a living and by how long it expects to be in business. The frontier that settled this place obviously expected to pass it on to someone, so they built their homes, shops, restaurants and their one hotel out of brick, and they planted shade. New Gillette surrounds the old village like a badly kept garbage pile. Most of what you see on a drive through looks like it could be cracked asphalt almost as easily as it was trucked in, and nobody seems to be planning anything.  

That night, on the way to The Stock- men's last to have a drink, I spotted two bumpkin sisters. The first was a Bobs Paradise girl and it said simply, and almost plaintively, 'sister.' The other one was a Big Cheyenne packet that was driven by a pretty little blonde princess and it said, 'mama.'  

Stockmen's is an old downtown saloon, a large, brightly lit room with musty pool tables and a long bar at which you can get a 30-cent beer. Berry Mike is the manager, and he smiles at me, including a lot of people on the town end of life in Gillette.  

'I have to be either, brother, doctor and shrink,' he told me. 'and there's no president in town, so sometimes I'm all three. But I see dramatic changes of fortune all the time. You spot a guy up from some state, and another one will come in and throw a brand new track, only you're buying drinks for everybody. And I see the other way around as well. But Gillette's not a bad town. There's no scenery, it's the people.  

The rooms of the cowboys here the last hour or two, really. See that guy over there? He's getting on a young woman with long blonde hair, so I'm the next one to lay down. I also told him there's somebody in the room who really knows about the cowboys of the town.  

It was a hard-breaking town, they said, and the bars and liquor stores offered plenty of incentives in case you weren't already inclined to take a little juice at the end of the third shift. The key was in being out of work. Two days, they said, from one of the local stores that gave you a half-bottle of beer for every 8000 you spent with them.  

"Lost of free beer in the bars, too," Bert said. "They sell little gimmicks to bring the women in, because if they get them, they know damn well the rest will be right behind. So a place like the Ramada runs a ladies' night on Tuesdays, and Thursdays where the women all line up for nothing but mint and mild. The hour was at The Moose Saloon at a couple of months, and they had a deal there for free beer for two between seven and nine every night. That got a little out of hand and they had to quit it, though.  

It's not much, but I can smile and look decent. Scotch.  

"You just about have to drink whiskey in this town, anyway," said Scotch. "Have you tried the water?"

"I told him that I had, and he said then made me go.  

"Have you seen the chunks of crap that drop down out of the sky like this in your town? That's bad water. First three weeks it was here, I got it on my feet and they would not heal. When I stopped drinking the water, it cleared right up.  

I asked them if it would be easy for a guy like me, say, to get a job. They pretty much agreed it would be harder this February than it was in most winters. Maybe the really talented men, they said, and it wasn't really snowing, so most of the work he usually took off for a month when the weather got hard in winter. But everyone was always high in a place like this, and they said they used to pull you out of a job if you could afford it, to wait around for a month or two in a town where a trailer rent was $200 a month and up—if you can find one.  

Jobs in the oil patch, they told me, are dirty, hard and dangerous. They called for a while about a friend of theirs who had been killed a month before, and another who had been put on sick leave when the rig they were working on blew up under them.  

"But, the wages is good," said Lee. "Even low man on the rig can make $400 a day, plus you can get all the overtime you want.  

I told him it was a waste, except the pay for the dead guy. "Sounds good, yeah," said Lee. "But I can't say you can always get away from smoke and ash and mud and rain.  

"I don't know one person who works on the rigs who is straight," said Lee. "You get to know them pretty well, and that's not true. I do know one guy who doesn't work on the rig. He was on the rig one night, said he looked like he was going to die. That's one 7—saw he was going cowboys and Indians closing each other all around the top of the thing.  

Then I told me that working for the oil companies was a regular basis compared with oil in the oil patch. Both he and Wild Bill rode some days on the oil-nine road trains that ran from the mines to the Stockyard for 100 miles.  

"Nothing to it," said Wild Bill. "Just jump on the train, smoke some dope, play your guitar, listen to some music.  

I did the job that, thought I said to myself. I don't feel this way, but I can listen to music, and I probably could even find a regular basis if I had to."

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"If you got long hair, you have to watch out for the cowboys... the guys with pointy boots and bowlegs."

"Hardest thing about the job is staying awake," said Burr.

Wild Bill said he thought burglary was probably the number-one crime in Gillette. "Everybody I know has had something ripped off—stereo, that sort of thing. Somebody just stole a Harley engine and transmission from me."

"Out of your garage?" I asked him.

"Out of my living room," he said.

"If you got long hair," said Scotch, looking at my mop, "you have to watch out for the cowboys. I don't mean the urban cowboys, neither. I mean the guys with the pointy boots and the bonnets who drive around in their pickups with a deer rifle behind their head and a 357 Magnum sitting right out on the dashboard. You don't want to fuck with them."

When I asked about the shortage of women, some of them laughed and some of them just shook their heads.

"It's probably only five or six to one these days," said Wild Bill. "Which is plenty bad enough, because there aren't no whores around here. Nothing. So you have to work with what you got, which is one of the reasons there are so many fights. Makes things very tense. You have to see ladies' night at the Ramada while you're here. Definitely one of the high points of the week."

That afternoon, I drove Scotch downtown to the brand-new Campbell County Courthouse and watched as his young lawyer made a deal with the D.A. for a reduction of the charge. It turned out, according to state tests, that the powder he had been using was not heroin, as the sheriff's lab had said, but a brown amphetaminic dust called peanut-butter crank, which is what Scotch had said it was all along. He pleaded guilty to possession of a controlled substance, and a young, bearded judge gave him a $110 fine and 90 days' probation on drug-related offenses. His lawyer charged him a grand.

I was staying at the Ramada, a completely unremarkable set of two-story buildings surrounded by several empty acres of asphalt, and 100 yards from the main railroad line, which roared and whistled with coal trains 21 hours a day.

About eight o'clock that evening, I walked through a cold wind and a light snow to the bar that is called the Gay Nineties. Bordered to the wall just outside the door are four slightly redundant wooden signs, each with a short warning painted onto it. "THREE FELL OUT OR BE PROSECUTED," says the first, and next to it, "NO NITS ON. NOID DRINK SHOES AND BOOTS," and below that, "PLEASE KEEP OTHERS RIGHTS FELL OUT AND DRUMS CODE ENFORCED, SMOKING, EATING AND CLEAN."

Inside the large room, things were still pretty quiet. The women bartenders filled the coolers with beer, while the manager set up a bar without a cash register at the back of the room. Small groups of men wandered in, looking as if they had just shaved, showered and picked out their best shirts. The few women who came in early were dressed in designer jeans and tops, and they moved as if they had been through this before. While the men watched them, they watched the men, being careful not to catch their eyes.

By 11:30, the flashing lights under the floor of the disco-style dance pit had been turned on and the stage was being set for the crush. A man on an elevated platform began to play rock'n'roll records, but nobody got up to dance. Next to him on a small stage, a six-piece
Terra said, "The guys grab you, and pinch you, and holler at you, to the point that you have to spill a whole tray of dinks on their heads just to end them down. And every time a light turns red, I swear I'm right in the middle of it."

Rosal was laughing, "It's like the wild, wild West," she said. "It's really the one time, some fool hurls his trick to The Lime Shaker sign, took off, ripped off the corner of the drink and ran."

Both of them told me that if I moved from California to Wisconsin, it would be like going into slow motion. They said the people talked slower, that the air was thin in town along and that the movie and the clothes were two years behind things on the Coast. But both of them said they liked it that way for a change.

When I asked them what it was like to be outnumbered the way they were, both of them laughed as they could have talked for a week and told me only half of it.

"Some of the guys can handle it and some can't," said Terra. "I'd say most of them are hard enough to deal with more than one guy. For some of them, though, it's their first time away from home and they go out with girls in every store. These guys have no girlfriends, relationships, and they aren't even sure what they're doing."

"It's like going into slow motion," said Rosal. "It's so much easier to get along with these guys."

The move from California to Wisconsin, Terra told me, would be like being surrounded by a crowd of people.

Terra said, "You'll get used to it. You'll get used to being drank on at work, at home, on the street, and even in bed."

"It's like a huge crowd on the floor," said Terra. "The guys grab you, and pinch you, and holler at you, to the point that you have to spill a whole tray of dinks on their heads just to end them down. And every time a light turns red, I swear I'm right in the middle of it."

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my shoulder and saw the butterfly I have three and he says, 'Only whores have tattoos.' So I said, 'Only cowboys suck the big one: or something like that, and this guy grabbed me by the arm, spun me around and jacked my jaw. I mean, laid me out. I couldn't believe it.'

'She got home,' said Robin, 'and the whole side of her face was puffed up, her eye was closed. We laughed. Sometimes we look at each other and just break up. We're still here,' we say, 'What the hell are we doing?'

'But it's an adventure,' said Terra.

'A one-time thing,' Robin put in. 'Not like anyplace I've ever been. Something we'll remember all our lives. Something we can tell our grandchildren about.'

'This place is right out of a Western movie,' Terra said finally. 'You think these things don't happen anymore, but they do. Right here.'

Wyoming ranks last in the continental Union if you like the states up by population. In fact, even with the energy boom, there are fewer people in the whole state than there are in the city of Tucson, Arizona, and now and then during my week in Gillette, that emptiness was made graphic. One morning, Lee and I rode east out of town toward an oil rig. I'd asked to see. We were on Interstate 90, a four-lane freeway, when we passed a guy with a bandanna for a hat who was skateboarding happily down the slow lane. Now and then, he made a casual glance back over his shoulder, but he didn't seem very worried. He waved when we went by.

Ten miles from town, we turned south onto a well-graded dirt road, then for another ten miles we dragged a huge rust-colored plume behind us as we rolled past barbed wire, sagebrush, cattle, horses, windmills and power poles.

'Real dirt and brown grass,' Lee said. 'You'd think it would be pretty, but it sure ain't.'

Lee had friends on the rig we were headed for, and when it came into view, we turned off onto a short access road and parked among the pickups. The wind was up and it was cold. The foreman crew was dressed in insulated jump suits and hard hats with ear flaps. They were cementing when we arrived, and Lee's friends were on the ground under the deck, smacking the thick gray overflow with shovels. We sloshed through the awful mud, then climbed a ladder onto the deck, where Lee had to shout over the roar of two big G.M.C. engines as he pointed around at the big pipes, chains, collars and clamps that remind you these men are essentially plumbers. The air on the deck was rotten with diesel fumes and the smell of earthy gases coming up from the hole, and by the time we had been on the rig for 20 minutes, I couldn't feel my fingers for
the cold, and my head ached from the noise and the smell.

Back in the car, I grumbled about the mud I couldn't shake, or bang, or scrape off my boots.

"You don't wear any clothes into the patch that you want to use for anything else," Lee told me. "If you go into the landmats in town, you'll see big signs on certain machines that say: Caution, because if you put your regular clothes in a machine that's washed off clothes, they come out looking like dirt and smelling like diesel."

I told him I thought getting that dirty every day would take a lot of getting used to.

"I don't mind getting dirty," he said, "because I guess I never had a job where I didn't. But you do it for the money. Last year, I worked as a worm and a chain hand, the bottom two jobs on the rig, and I made $25,000. Of course, I went home to Minnesota and my father said, 'What have you got to show for it?' and I didn't have anything. I keep telling myself I'm going to get one more big check and take off, but I never do. Still, I hate to think of myself growing old in that patch."

On our way back to town, we made another dirt-road detour to a rig where Lee thought he might be able to get some work. When we got there, the driller told him yes, chances were good. He was exactly one man short, he said, because that morning his chain hand had been blown across the rig in a minor pressure explosion. They weren't sure how badly he was hurt, but he was in the hospital, having his ribs checked and his head X-rayed.

I dropped Lee north of town in a subdivision of hurry-up houses called Rawhide Village. On the way in, I said something about prefabricated houses being in houses when TV dinners are to diners.

"You can stand in the basement of one of these places," he said, "and if you talk in a normal voice, they can hear you perfectly in the living room. And last summer, I brought a girlfriend of mine out here from Minnesota, just a little girl, no power to her at all, and we were sitting in bed and I said something funny, and she threw her head back laughing and punched a hole right in the wall."

"We're not here to rape, pillage and burn the prairie," Ed Calahan told me as we drove down a meticulously kept dirt road into the huge pit they call the Belle Aye Mine. Calahan is the manager of Belle Aye, the largest coal mine in the U.S. and one of 16 near Gillette. He was pointing out the window at 500 acres of hilly grassland that had been returned to its original topography and ecology after the coal had been mined out from under it. "We
Belle Ayr shipped 1,500,000 tons of coal.

Calahan drove us slowly and carefully through the pit. We were in a large four-wheel-drive station wagon, but it felt like a golf cart up against the traffic of the awesome earth movers. The drivers of these trucks sit in a cab that is 15 feet off the ground, and the blind spot behind them is huge. They will tell you that when one of these machines accidentally backs over a pickup, they sometimes don’t even feel the bump.

As we stood on the bank of the pit, watching the massive operation, it was obvious Calahan liked his job. He compared it to leading an orchestra or playing in a masters chess game. “Sometimes I like to just sit here and watch,” he told me. “Every once in a while, I’ll even drive a truck for a time, just to get the feel of it again.”

Earlier that morning, in his office, I asked him if he thought the election of Ronald Reagan was going to make it easier for coal companies like Amak to do business. At which point he smiled the biggest smile of the morning and pointed to a jar of jelly beans that was sitting on his desk.

On the way back into town, I stopped at Amak headquarters for a talk with one of its public-relations men, Geoff Emerson. I badgered him for a while about the fact that the roads in the coal pit were better maintained than the roads in town. And I asked him if he thought the energy companies were doing enough to help Gillette with its boom-town troubles.

He said yes, then he told me about the 179 softball teams that the companies sponsor every year, and about the piano they had donated to the old folks’ home at Christmas. When I told him it sounded like peanuts to me, he said it was much more than the coal companies in the East ever did for their towns. I went on with him about it for a while, and then, when I felt enough like a golf cart among the earth movers, I stopped.

Just before I left, I asked him if he liked living in a town that was almost without trees.

“When you move into town,” he said, “the first thing you notice is the absence of trees, and it bothers the hell out of you. But when you’ve been here for a while, you almost get to like it. That sounds funny, but I’m serious. I’m from Indiana, and when I go back there now, I almost feel claustrophobic, because I can’t see anything. You have all these trees in the way.”

By the time I left Gillette, the weather had turned nasty and they were about to get some of the winter they had been missing: but whatever petty complaints I’d had about the place were gone. Finally, it seemed like an honest town to me. All the people I met seemed to be getting exactly what they wanted out of the place, and if they weren’t, I suppose they could always break a few windows and go home.

I never got around to any of the hard-core cowboy bars, and I never did meet any real cowboys. My hair was a little too long for an appointment like that, and I couldn’t help thinking that there might yet be a slaving down on Gillette Avenue, although if there is, it will most likely be a bunch of cowboys with buck knives who go to work on an oil field or a railroad man.

I’m not sure what I’ll do when I get back to Wyoming—drive a cab, work on the rigs, ride the trains, charge a fee to write letters home for the illiterate. I’m not sure what I’ll do without trees, either.

But who knows: once I have a few of those big pay checks in my account, once I’ve paid some of my debts and have a pickup truck with a nice tape machine in it, my horticultural perspectives could swing all the way around the way Geoff Emerson’s did. And if worst comes to worst, I hear there’s a place about 30 miles east of town where you can go and visit some trees. Under the circumstances, that may have to do.