

# GRITS AND OTHER PREVENTIVE MEASURES FOR BOOM TOWN BIFURCATION

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Rapid development of energy resources frequently results in a phenomenon known by the sobriquet of "boom town" which is defined here as follows:

1. A community experiencing above average economic and population growth,
2. which results in benefits for the community, e.g., expanded tax base, increased employment opportunities, social and cultural diversity,
3. but which also places or results in strain on existing community and societal institutions (e.g., familial, educational, political, economic).<sup>1</sup>

Many authors, from a plethora of disciplines and occupations, have analyzed and described the social consequences and human costs of the boom-town or energy-impacted community.<sup>2</sup> While the experts differ in their definition and classification of these, the bulk of attention seems to be devoted to the following major problem areas:

1. Superinflation from the demands of large numbers of incoming energy-related personnel and families.
2. Demands for all types of services—including human services—exceeding the capacities of local systems to meet them.
3. Increases in the incidence and nature of many "people problems," commonly referred to as the "Gillette Syndrome" and probably associated with stress related to rapid change.
4. Structural changes in the community which change its very nature and which have even been characterized as social and cultural genocide.<sup>3</sup>

These four problem areas are by no means offered as a definitive typology of social and human problems in boom towns. Instead, they are given as a workable framework for viewing such problems.

## BOOM TOWN BIFURCATION

One adverse consequence of extremely rapid growth may be referred to as "boom-town bifurcation." Massey and Lewis examined mobile home living in impacted communities and concluded that, "The bifurcated or divided community is an increasingly well-recognized part of the phenomenon of social impact."<sup>4</sup> The common parlance for this phenomenon is the "we-they split" which is characterized by such dichotomies as rancher versus hardhat;

oldtimer versus newcomer; rural versus urban; young versus old, and westerner versus easterner. Inhabitants of small towns and rural areas which tend to be conservative, homogeneous and slow to change are confronted with a dramatic influx of people who frequently have markedly different attitudes, behavior, expectations, life styles and values. Sociocultural differences may be especially pronounced if a high percentage of local residents belong to a particular religion (e.g., Mormon) or a particular race (e.g., Native American).<sup>5</sup>

Many examples of bifurcation may be found in the professional literature. Gold and associates at the University of Montana Institute for Social Science Research found numerous examples in an ethnographic survey in Eastern Montana and Northeastern Wyoming.<sup>6</sup> According to Gold:

*Miners (in Colstrip, Montana) say this is not as nice a place in which to live as it was when they first came here because of the construction workers who have arrived. Miners do not want too many people around, and they do not like the kinds of people moving in. Because a number of miners are Mormons and are thus, nondrinkers and heavily family and church oriented, they have little in common with construction workers who normally do not abstain or who have had to leave their families behind.*<sup>7</sup>

Gold also found that:

*Some of the established residents are already discouraging their youngsters from associating with the sons and daughters of newcomers any more than is necessary, and in the views of parents and teachers, local girls who date construction boys often find that their old friends distastefully regard them as fraternizing with the outgroup.*<sup>8</sup>

Forsyth, Montana offers additional examples. Locals seemed curious about the newcomers but were not overly eager to meet them or to mix socially—and vice versa—because of differing interests and values. Furthermore:

*. . . all but two of the bars in Forsyth have been "taken over" and, in the view of locals, become crowded and unsafe. They perceive that in most bars they now find themselves subjected to ridicule and the object of provoked fights . . . Increasing numbers of local people are going to Forsyth's country club, "where we have good control of things." Feeling the need to lock up possessions, to keep one's daughters off the street at night, and to avoid favorite taverns are highly symbolic of how locals view the invasion of newcomers. As one informant put it, "Development always brings in a lot of riff raff."*<sup>9</sup>

While violent behavior in bars may occur anywhere, an overview of the news of the 1970's in Wyoming highlighted a January 1977 slaying as symbolic. Two ranchers—Harry Reno and Jack Putnam—were gunned down in the Long Branch Bar in Reno Junction shortly after one of them had clubbed Jesse Collins with a pool cue. "Collins, a welder at an ARCO mine and a resident of the new town (Wright), was sentenced to life in prison—ending a trial that had special poignancy in Wyoming."<sup>10</sup>

Some of the bifurcation may be precipitated, or at least exacerbated, by the actions of a minority of the newcomers. Gold noted that some construction workers act much like tourists in that they are "in but not of the place." These

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workers view the locals as “natives” and make few serious attempts to interact with them. According to Gold:

*In these and in other respects they act like they are on a journey or trip rather than seriously attempting to understand the locals' culture and/or to try it out. "Boomers" (i.e., construction workers who drift in and out at their own pleasure) are the extreme case of those at Colstrip who act like tourists, except that boomers are much more exploitive and contemptuous of locals than actual tourists are apt to be. It is not surprising, therefore, that . . . locals are inclined to view new residents as transients—people who are just passing through.*<sup>11</sup>

Considering these circumstances, it should not be completely unexpected that many local residents are inclined to continue established roles, relationships and activities while avoiding the exploration of friendships with newcomers.

However, it is apparent that the majority of newcomers are not contemptuous of locals. They do resent being labeled and treated as “trailer trash,” “riff raff” and “that element of people.” As one puzzled construction worker commented, “I earn \$30,000 a year and pay cash for everything. What’s wrong with me?”<sup>12</sup> Another worker poignantly asked an interviewer to “tell them we are not such bad fellows; we are doing the best we can.”<sup>13</sup>

At least part of the problem is related to the long-recognized difficulty any newcomer has in gaining acceptance in a small rural community. Experts on rural social work, such as Buxton<sup>14</sup> and Ginsberg,<sup>15</sup> have described this phenomenon as typical of most sparsely-populated areas. This phenomenon is graphically illustrated in the following interview recorded by sociologists Massey and Lewis.

*Interviewer:* Because you’ve lived here for five years, don’t you feel like you’re no longer a newcomer?

*She:* Oh no. I mean, we’re still not real well accepted by the local people.

*Interviewer:* When will you be?

*She:* Never. If you weren’t born and raised here, you’ll never be accepted by them.

*Interviewer:* Are any of your friends local people?

*She:* Well, this women’s husband (points across the street) works with my husband. We’re good friends. And one of my best friends lives in the next block. She’s from a ranching family around here.

*Interviewer:* Doesn’t this friendship mean that you are accepted by the local people?

*She:* No, not really. We’re good friends, but she has other friends, locals that I’ve hardly ever met. I’ve never been asked to join any of the women’s clubs or anything. She belongs to some of them.

*Interviewer:* Does this bother you?

*She:* Well, maybe I haven’t been as outgoing as I should be. With two little ones and Jim working the hours he does, it’s real hard to plan anything regularly. It’s even hard to have people over for dinner since he works four to twelve so much. But I don’t care.

There's so many of us new people now; we sort of have our own friends, circles, you know?<sup>16</sup>

While gaining acceptance in rural areas may be slow at best, newcomers to nonimpacted areas generally move into existing neighborhoods where they have numerous opportunities to interact with people, e.g., over the back fence, and to become integrated into the social structure of the community. However, newcomers to an energy town come in such large numbers that local neighborhoods cannot absorb them. New neighborhoods with new housing, often trailers, must be created. Since the new neighborhoods tend to be on the outskirts of town, the new residents are physically isolated and have fewer chances to interact with locals. Therefore, the physical environment may be viewed as one determinant of behavior and a contributor to boom-town bifurcation.

Another contributor is the process of adapting to and coping with change—especially change created by relocating. Many construction workers and their spouses move from job to job and location to location. Severing ties with close friends may prove so painful that frequent movers may avoid establishing close personal ties and friendships—especially those involving locals.

Massey and Lewis found that mobile home residents in one boom town had relatively few voluntary association memberships; although they had many acquaintances and friendships among their immediate neighbors.<sup>17</sup> Type of housing and length of residence were associated with voluntary association memberships.

Still another factor contributing to the divided community is the status of women in impacted communities. Several conferences have focused upon the trials and tribulations of women in boom towns.<sup>18</sup> Moen, et al, in what is probably the most definitive work on this subject, concluded that women suffer the general consequences of the rural/urban transition plus a loss of relative status through sexual stratification.<sup>19</sup>

This double jeopardy of women reduces their ability to perform their all-important roles of community and social integrators and stabilizers. According to Moen, et al.:

*... women play an important equilibrating role both in the preboom community and the community undergoing rapid growth and change. They do so through informal and formal organizations, through mutual aid societies and networks, by organizing activities for children and families; by providing vital but generally unseen support for men's organizations, and through the volunteer work which not only keeps the community going at a very basic level, but also provides the less vital but equally necessary services that help create and maintain a sense of community.<sup>20</sup>*

Thus the loss of status and other problems of boom-town women diminishes the effectiveness of their integrating roles; retards community and social integration, and contributes to boom-town bifurcation and social disorganization.

Women, however, are not the only ones who experience a relative loss of status. The influx of high-salaried workers results in a change of the socioeconomic hierarchy. Some people, whose preboom income is considered

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high by community standards, fall back in comparison. Their roles and status also change, which, in some cases, results in further resentment of the newcomers. Resentful people make fewer efforts to encourage the newcomers to become an integral part of the community.

Finally, it should be emphasized that the bifurcation, generally associated with rapid growth due to energy development, has a plethora of contributing factors rather than a single cause. These include the differences in values; the usual problems of gaining acceptance in rural areas; the physical environment which tends to separate locals from newcomers; the avoidance of close personal contacts with locals as a coping strategy for a nomadic life style; the loss of status and other problems of women which undermines their ability to function as social integrators, and changes in the socioeconomic hierarchy which results in resentment of and lack of contact with newcomers.

## PREVENTIVE AND MITIGATIVE MEASURES

Since the problem of bifurcation has a number of contributing factors, preventive and mitigative measures must be multifaceted and multi-leveled to be of maximum effectiveness. On a broad national or even international level, greater conservation efforts and/or the development of alternate energy resources (e.g., solar) might lessen the number of boom towns resulting from the development of coal, oil, gas, uranium and oil shale. Fewer boom towns would result in less bifurcation.

National and state policy and regulations could stagger the creation of energy operations.<sup>21</sup> A more gradual and orderly development of projects would lessen the boom and make it more manageable. Employees finishing one project could go to work on the next one. Remaining in the community for longer periods of time provides greater opportunities for social interaction and social integration. Fewer people at any given time means fewer isolated and insulated neighborhoods. Community stability would be easier to maintain.

A greater emphasis could be placed on the employment of locals in energy-related jobs.<sup>22</sup> Educational and training programs, especially for women and minorities, would reduce the need for so many outsiders. Such measures also have the potential of raising the status of these groups which, in the case of women especially, would enhance their ability to serve as social integrators. In other words, a community would have fewer persons to integrate and more persons functioning effectively as social integrators.

Energy companies often have objections to staggered development and training programs for locals since these measures may retard the development of energy resources and involve economic costs. However, the long-range social benefits could outweigh the short-range fiscal costs. Also, a work force consisting of many locals would tend to be more stable with less absenteeism, turnover and attendant costs to the energy company(s).

Consideration of the foregoing suggestions should be, and in some cases is, part of the process of developing a national energy policy. However, communities currently or imminently impacted must act now. A logical place to start is with the steering committee or task force which many communities utilize to plan for growth.<sup>23</sup> These entities generally break down into subcommittees to focus on specific areas (e.g., housing, health). While most residents are aware that their communities will change, and some express concern about

the quality of life, few identify the divided community or "we-they split" as a problem which can be addressed and planned for.

A major part of the blame for this must rest with the people preparing social impact assessments. Social scientists such as Cortese and Jones have noted that the bulk of socioeconomic assessments focuses on the economic rather than the social aspects.<sup>24</sup> They state:

*. . . our investigators clearly show that the social impacts of boom-town growth involve changes far beyond the mere increase in population; strain on municipal services, and the mental health problems usually attributed to such strains and which constitute the bulk of 'socioeconomic' impact assessments. Less visible but considerably more important for the long range are the underlying changes in the social structure and cultural systems that are, and will continue to be, precipitated by energy-related boom-town developments.*<sup>25</sup>

Cortese and Jones believe, as do the authors of this chapter, that communities facing impact should possess a knowledge of the possibility of major social and cultural changes before making a decision for or against development.

If the community's decision based on *all* available knowledge is to proceed with energy development, it would do well to address bifurcation as a potential problem. Consultants, planners and the myriad of "experts" assisting communities have an obligation to point out this possible problem. A caveat to remember is that consultants employed by energy companies are not known for a major emphasis on the negative social consequences of growth. Additionally, the senior author of this article was admonished by one energy company representative that the mere mention of the "we-they split" would create problems where there were none!

Communities faced with bifurcation have several options. One is to ignore or make no effort to combat this situation. Such an approach serves to accentuate differences and intensify friction and hostility. Social integration is retarded. Community support systems do not function as effectively, especially for newcomers. Growth and change are not viewed as experiences which can have beneficial aspects.

A second approach would entail an all-out effort at community integration. Local individuals, organizations and groups would welcome newcomers into their ranks. While this course of action might sound desirable, it does have possible adverse consequences. Locals, who are faced with tremendous changes, may suffer from "future shock." Toffler suggests that one means of combatting this phenomenon is to retain at least some link with familiar patterns, objects, surroundings, etc.<sup>26</sup> For example, membership in a group consisting of familiar faces or the frequenting of the "rancher's bar" may offer much solace and support in a time of rapid change. Attempts to integrate such groups and surroundings may well destroy or impair needed support systems. On the other hand, some newcomers apparently avoid social integration as a coping strategy for their nomadic life styles. Attempts at complete integration, even if successful, could result in additional suffering for newcomers when they move on.

A third strategy, and one preferred by the authors, falls between the two extremes. Locals would retain some oases or refuges while efforts would be made to welcome newcomers into many community activities and organizations. Locals would preserve some continuity with their past, and newcomers,

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if they so desired, would begin to become part of the social fabric of the community. Newcomers would not be pressured to become an integral part of the community and would be free to leave with a minimum of separation problems.

Assuming a community is interested in preventing or mitigating bifurcation, a coordinated and comprehensive strategy is desirable—preferably one originating with the community impact task force or steering committee. However, any concerned group or organization might choose to tackle this problem on its own. For example, if a community had no planning body, or if the local planning entity chose not to address bifurcation, other community groups would not be precluded from working on this problem.

Churches, which are generally influential in small towns, offer great potential for dealing with impact problems.<sup>27</sup> Clergymen are important role models and may serve as instruments of change. Progressive attitudes toward change and messages on the “brotherhood of man” (personhood of people?) can contribute to a climate of acceptance and integration. Out-reach efforts to newcomers may make them feel more welcome. Families may invite fellow members of their church to dinner. Churches with basketball or softball teams could gain new players. Picnics, ice-cream socials and the like can stimulate interaction and further integration. Interfaith activities, possibly sponsored by local ministerial associations, are another possibility.

The local media, usually a newspaper, can do much to minimize bifurcation. Articles and presentations on growth and change may be helpful in preparing for, and dealing with, impact. These should not oversensationalize the expected problems nor downplay them in favor of coverage on economic benefits. Information on how other communities have coped with problems such as the “we-they split” are a constructive step. Editorials emphasizing the benefits of social and cultural diversity are also constructive. Features on newcomers and their backgrounds, which sometimes are quite interesting, tend to reduce social barriers. Interviews with representatives of various factions (e.g., housewife in trailer, elder, rancher, construction worker) provide a personal glimpse at individuals and their lives, thereby reducing at least some of the myths and stereotypes which keep people apart.

Schools are another institution in a strategic position to effect positive change.<sup>28</sup> Administrators, teachers, counselors, parents and students should develop a plan for their school(s). Teachers and students from other impacted areas may be invited in to describe what happened in their schools; what they did right; what they did wrong, and what they would recommend to others.

Student leaders and officers should be heavily involved in the planning process. Their acceptance of newcomers has a carryover effect on their peers. Efforts should be in the direction of encouraging new students to join school clubs and to participate in other activities.

Some classes could deal with topics such as change and how to cope with it. A West coast student might be asked to make a presentation on his/her part of the country in a history class. An Eastern student could discuss authors and literature from that region in an English class. Locals might well be enthusiastic about describing the important events and significance of their area to newcomers. The general mystique of and interest in the old West might be capitalized on to start a Western History Club. A home economics class could experiment with regional recipes. Students from the South might demonstrate

how to cook grits, creole gumbo and the like. Change and differences would be viewed in a constructive and positive fashion rather than something to be feared and avoided. While no one measure will result in utopia, the general thrust of such activities should result in increased integration and less bifurcation.

Human service agencies, such as senior citizen programs and mental health centers, should not wait until social casualties mount. While the need for direct services will in all probability increase, indirect efforts such as education and consultation have much preventive value. Elders may engage in discussion groups on change and their role in lessening the negative aspects. Some may participate in "welcome wagon" activities while others help their churches prepare for growth. Still others could participate in educational efforts, especially those dealing with history. These endeavors could be at the grade and high school levels and even in adult education endeavors. Since elders comprise a high percentage of the population in many small towns, and since they experience many problems with growth, they should certainly be included in community planning efforts. Task forces and committees should have a proportionate representation of elders. Such opportunities for interaction are an added force for social integration.

Community mental health centers have a mandate to provide consultation and education to the community. Consultation could involve pointing out possible problems such as bifurcation and suggesting means of preparing for it. Mental health personnel could write articles and columns for local papers, thereby reaching large numbers of people. Staff members could organize discussion and support groups. Group meetings focusing on change could provide practical means for coping with it while offering members a new support system. Newcomers, who have left previous support networks, may find such meetings a good place to make new friends. The increased social interaction and support systems generated by such groups tends to decrease bifurcation and related problems and increase the likelihood that more of the "everyday problems of life" will be handled informally.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

"Boom-town bifurcation" is a problem deserving of increased attention. This chapter has described and given examples of this phenomenon which may be viewed as both a contributor to, and manifestation of, social disorganization. Several contributing factors were discussed including the differences in values; the usual problems of gaining acceptance in rural areas; the physical environment which tends to separate locals from newcomers; the avoidance of close personal contacts with locals as a coping mechanism for a nomadic life style; the loss of status and other problems of women which undermines their ability to function as social integrators, and the changes in the socioeconomic hierarchy which results in resentment of and lack of interaction with newcomers.

The authors outlined and suggested a multifaceted and multilevel strategy which would include action from the local to international levels. Realizing that communities experiencing problems now cannot wait for policy changes, the primary focus is on means of preparing for, and coping with, bifurcation now at the local level. Suggested measures are aimed at decreasing bifurcation through increasing social interaction and integration. The primary reason for

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Suggestions were derived from professional literature; conversations with human service personnel; interviews with boom-town residents, and recommendations from students—most of whom were from impacted communities. These suggestions were intended to be illustrative rather than comprehensive since each community will develop somewhat different approaches for its problems. Some measures have been tried in one place and others tried elsewhere. However, a coordinated and comprehensive community approach to bifurcation is difficult to find. Concluding, preventive and mitigative strategies for bifurcation need not require large new programs and expenditures; however, attention to and planning for this problem has great potential for reducing the socioeconomic costs of energy development.

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28. The authors are indebted to students at the University of Wyoming who made many of the following suggestions in class exercises.

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