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“When the tears dry up”: Economic Dependency in Rural Southern Colorado

Walsenburg, Colorado is blessed with scenic views, endless sunshine and the majestic presence of the Spanish Peaks, which serve as an everlasting reminder of Huerfano County’s position in history as a *punto de encuentro* between the northern most reaches of New Spain and the expanding Western frontier. The county’s rugged past of frontier ideals lives on in spirit and practice, as is evinced by the county’s webpage, which offers a “Code of the West” to “help the citizens of Huerfano County who wish to follow in the footsteps of those rugged individualists by living outside city limits.” Since the 19th century, Walsenburg has served as the district seat of Huerfano county. The city is located between exits 49 and 52 on I-25, which functions as a modern day *Camino Real* by connecting El Paso and Albuquerque with Denver. Walsenburg also sits astride U.S. 160, the primary east-west route in Southern Colorado. Just east of La Veta Pass, the town serves as the gateway to the San Luis Valley and Great Sand Dunes National Park. Each year over 4 million vehicles roll past the dilapidated store fronts that line Walsenburg’s main street, many of which are dressed with “For Sale” signs and cracked windows, in route to the Southern Rockies. Few, however, stop in to visit the town’s transient businesses and even fewer stay the night.

Like most small towns in Southern Colorado and Northern New Mexico, Walsenburg has never been consecrated with economic stability. The town's history is marked by fleeting moments of economic boom followed by long entrenched periods of economic downturn, such as the one currently affecting Huerfano county. According to a local café owner, who has been opening the doors at Alpine Rose Café on main street for more than thirty-nine years, business is tough. "Young people don't patronize a place like this," claimed the business owner as she served coffee and handed out non-descript menus to a table of senior citizens. Sometime later, once the owner had prepared the seniors their meals and returned to the bar to refill coffees, an older gentlemen at the table could be overheard explaining to another customer, "Young people don't hang around here very long. There's nothing for them to do. They usually take off and if they come back it's not until later in life, after they have found economic success somewhere else. Most just don't come back though."

True to local speculation, according to the 2010 census, Walsenburg's city limits is home to some 3,068 hearty souls, down from 4,182 in the 2000 census. Though not as severe, Huerfano county has also experienced a heavy drop in population over the last ten years, registering just 6,711 residents in 2010, 1,151 less than in 2000. According to locals at the Alpine Rose Café, however, times were not always bleak for Huerfano county. "Walsenburg's population was over 10,000 before the coal mines closed back in the 1980s but the government shut us down. Once they moved in on the industry local miners just couldn't keep open. The government shut the doors on us," explained the owner/cook/waitress as her only customers of the morning headed for the door.

Walsenburg's economic woes are nothing new. The cycles of boom and bust that have affected the county since the arrival of Spanish settlers in the mid-19th century are evidence of the region's dependence on the economic whims of national and world markets, which locals have very little control over. The town was originally settled as *La Plaza de los Leones* in 1852 by Don Miguel Antonio Leon but the settlement is named after Fred Walsen, a businessman who settled in the area *circa* 1870 (<http://www.cityofwalsenburg.com/>). Mr. Walsen opened the first coal mine in the county just west of town in 1876. Walsen Mine was the largest and most productive coal mine in Huerfano County. Through the years, the region's mines produced over 500 million tons of coal and according to some historic references, the population of the county reached as high as 20,000, with immigrants from all over the world, including: Austria, Germany, Italy, Scotland, Slovenia and Mexico (http://plazadelosleones.org/History_of_La_Plaza.html). Colorado Fuel and Iron Company (C F &I) managed the mine until the company officially closed Walsen camp on November 9, 1965 due to the mine's unfavorable cost-production ratio. At the time of the closing, eleven families still lived at the camp. They were forced to leave their homes, many after decades of occupancy and all but one family moved into Walsenburg. Today, little is left of the county's most productive mining camp. Slag piles and the old powerhouse serve as the lone remembrance of the mine's heyday. The mines became "nonproductive" when Colorado began to enforce the state's mining safety regulations and with the rise of oil and natural gas as the fuels of the choice in the U.S. and the world (<http://www.kmitch.com/Huerfano/miners.htm>).

C F & I's rise and fall in Colorado reveals Huerfano County's fragile dependence on economic developments taking place well beyond the county's desolate, high mountain grasslands. C.F. & I. was established in 1880 by John Osgood. The company came to fruition via the consolidation of Colorado Coal and Iron and Colorado Fuel Company in 1892. The company's grip on Colorado's energy supply was evident from inception and as early as 1893 the company produced 75 percent of Colorado's coal. In 1903 C F & I was acquired by the Rockefeller family and Jay Gould's financial heirs. By 1906 it was estimated that 10 percent of Colorado's population depended on the company for their employment and the company, alongside other large fuel providers like Victor-American Fuel Company, exercised formidable political clout in early twentieth-century Colorado (<http://www.library.hbs.edu/hc/lehman/index.html>). In all, between the late 1870s and the 1980s over 90 coal mines registered with the county (<http://www.kmitch.com/Huerfano/miners.htm>) and many were under the control of C F and I. Still, despite C F & I's success, by the 1980s the company was floundering and in 1990 C F & I filed for reorganization under Chapter 11 bankruptcy. Since then the company's assets, which are largely inactive, have changed hands several times and currently, they are held by Evraz Rocky Mountain Steel Mills (<http://www.steelworks.us>).

Huerfano County's dependence on the mining industry is evident in the area's population decrease following mining closures in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1960 Walsenburg alone had a population of 5,071 and Huerfano County registered 7,867 total residents. However, by 1970 the county recorded merely 4,329 inhabitants, a figure that decreased even further to 3, 945 by 1980 (<http://www.census.gov>). As previously

mentioned, by the new millennium Huerfano's County's population had increased to 7,862 but by 2010 the county's population had fallen back to 6,711. In turn, by 2010 Walsenburg's city limits was home to some 3,068 hearty souls, down from 4,182 in the 2000 census. As in the past, the county's most recent population exodus is due in large part to economic forces well beyond the control of the county's inhabitants.

Following the closure of the region's coal mines, Huerfano county fell upon a period of economic despair. Then, in 1997, the county experienced an economic facelift when the private prison company Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) elected to open the doors to a new correction facility in Huerfano County with an inmate capacity of 774. In over a decade of operation the private correction facility came to be the county's second largest employer behind the regional hospital. In its final years of operation CCA filled the prison's cells with Arizona criminals due to the neighboring state's willingness to pay a higher price per head than Colorado. Then, in 2010, the state of Arizona decided to discontinue its contract with CCA and as a result, in April of 2010 CCA closed the doors on Huerfano County's correction facility. 188 regional employees were affected by the closure and the announcement came with Huerfano County's unemployment rate already ranking among the highest in the state at 8.1 percent as of November of 2010 (<http://www.chieftain.com>). According to city administrator Alan Hein, Walsenburg stands to lose up to \$300,000 a year because of lost utilities, taxes and fees paid by the prison. Prior to the closure the city had already laid off a fifth of its staff of 50 due to recession-related budget shortfalls and following the prison closure, City Hall was forced to let five more employees go, including two police officers (http://www.denverpost.com/ci_14735948).

Consistent with Hein, Walsenburg's Mayor Bruce Quintana said that with inmates gone, the reality of the closure has begun to set in. "Our community is rather numb to this now because we have been through several closures over the past 30 years," said Quintana in the months following CCA's departure from the community. "It's like when you cry too much and you finally lose that ability to cry and your tears dry up." (<http://www.chieftain.com>). Still, while those that remain in Walsenburg may be stoic in front of the economic recession facing their community, it is evident that the region's businesses are less resistant to the departure of one of the areas' largest employers. Anyone that happens through the community cannot help but notice that the nicest facades in town belong to antique stores and funeral homes. The unfortunate relationship between the two businesses could not be more clear and as the future of Southern Colorado's rural towns hit the auction block, it's unclear what business, if any, will step in to bring about the next economic boom. What is clear, however, is that economic success in Walsenburg, like the rest of Southern Colorado, is dependent on outside forces.

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