

The Nuclear Bombing of Colorado

by Dennis Payton Knight

Colorado has had its nuclear flirtations. We mined uranium for the first atomic bombs. We manufactured plutonium triggers at Rocky Flats, and later experimented with an innovative oil-cooled nuclear powerplant at Fort St. Vrain that was successful as a pilot for later plants, but a maintenance nightmare, and it was decommissioned in 1989.

In Boulder, we have the Atomic Clock, a brilliant piece of timekeeping science by the National Bureau of Standards that serves as our country's official timepiece. Technically a cesium fountain clock, it is so accurate it will not gain or lose a second in a hundred million years.

But not too many Coloradans know that fifty years ago, on September 10, 1969, we were struck by a 40-kiloton nuclear bomb. Well, not struck, per se, but rocked by one planted 8,400 feet below the surface near the town of Grand Valley, now known as Parachute, in Garfield County, Colorado.

Project Rulison was an experiment to see if natural gas could be easily liberated by nuclear explosion from dense shale deposits in western Colorado. It worked as hoped, except the gas it released was radioactive, making it unusable for cooking and heating of homes.

It was part of Operation Plowshare, a U.S. Government project exploring peaceful engineering uses for nuclear explosions, if you can imagine. It was well publicized throughout the state, and environmentalists from Denver and Boulder were on the scene trying to stop the affair.

Helicopters attempted to disperse the protesters, about two miles away. but they stayed in place, listening to a local radio station doing a countdown of the event from the site. The explosion felt and sounded to them like a giant freight train rumbling under their feet, and, as one protester reported, "We were lifted six to eight inches in the air when the shockwave hit us."

The Texas-based oil company that sponsored the project had high expectations for it, and were continuing to tout its success a year later, pushing for more developments using smaller nuclear explosions with a goal of eventually creating 300 trillion cubic feet of natural gas supply. The project was successful enough that in 1973 Operation Plowshare conducted three more nuclear detonations in adjacent Rio Blanco County.

But the protesters persisted, focusing on changing the minds of Coloradans hospitable to being bombed, and in 1974, brought their movement to a public vote. In the face of that initiative, the government shut the Plowshare Program down in 1975. In the end, not a cubic foot of natural gas was ever sold from the Rulison Well due to radiation, and the later Rio Blanco testing was considered a failure.

On November 4, 1974, with 58% support, the state adopted the Colorado Detonation of Nuclear Devices Amendment which prohibits setting off nuclear explosives in Colorado unless voters approve it.

It's still in effect. Are you paying attention Russia? China? Korea? Don't send your filthy bombs to Colorado. We have a law.