

BEST MAGAZINE

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Singing a Happy Tune**



A young girl and her mother cross the busy intersection of East Main Street and Highway 200 in downtown Sidney, Mont. With the large influx of truck traffic and people with the recent oil boom, residents of these small Montana towns are having to cope with the fast changes that are taking hold of their communities.

Money from the Earth

The oil boom is changing towns in eastern Montana and North Dakota faster than basic services and infrastructure can keep up. But once the dust settles, will the payoff be worth its price?

BY SCOTT McMILLION • PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE GREENER

EASTERN MONTANA HAS THE OIL BOOM BUZZ. It's big and smelly, loud and wealthy. Nobody knows how big it's going to get, but few think it's going away. This boom grew big legs in North Dakota, and it's looking west, where it's already got people scrambling just to keep up.

You can smell it in the diesel exhaust from all those trucks, in the garbage Dumpsters of the shabby new trailer parks, in the occasional waft that escapes an oil pump, a reek of sulphured eggs, the odor of money being pulled from the earth.

You can hear it in the backup beepers of all those machines shoving all that dirt around, in gears grinding on the highways, in the bars and cafes where men talk of oil prices and fracking crews and lousy roads, bosses good and bad, wages earned and money spent.

You can see it in the miles of oil tank cars, riding the rails to distant refineries. You can see it in the gas flares that light up the ridges and coulees, shooting skyward or bending before the prairie wind, a smear on the lip of the giant maw that is our American appetite for fuel.

And everywhere, you see people working: hauling, fixing, digging and pumping. They use shovels and gauges, trucks and drills, computers and Caterpillars. The labor starts early and runs late. In Sidney, the heart of Montana's slice of the massive Bakken oil play, even the barber is clipping hair by 7 a.m.

Oil booms have come and gone in this region, but unless somebody starts tossing nukes or invents an electric car that can pull a horse trailer, the smart money says this one will stand for a decade or two, maybe more.

And it has demands, this boom. It needs water and sand, gravel and lumber, sweat and cement. It needs sewage systems and restaurants. It needs roadwork and plumbers and people who can string wires or drive a semi truck, load it with oil or tainted water or chemicals or sand. Unload it, too, spilling nothing, hopefully.

And for that to happen, and keep happening, it needs beds. Thousands of beds.

All of this is giving Brett Smelser a headache. He's the mayor of Sidney, and his town is packed. Money is flowing. The place is hopping.

"The bottom line is Sidney wants to welcome everybody who wants to come out here and earn an honest living," Smelser told me in City Hall. "And we want to do our best to make that happen. But we can't just wave a magic wand and say 'poof!' these things are in place."

If you're good with tools or machines (computer skills help), if you can pass a drug test and your background checks out,

even have to sleep in shifts, sharing a mattress with somebody.

Apartments fetch big city prices, if you can find an empty one. A one-bedroom unit in Sidney can run as much as \$1,500 a month. (They were \$300 a couple years ago.) Double-wide trailers can fetch \$2,000 a month. A place to park a camp trailer or an RV can cost \$1,200 a month. For \$20 a night, you can park a semi, sleep in it, and grab a shower, watch a little TV. Gas and diesel run about 30 cents a gallon higher than most places in the state.

But people are coming anyway, drawn by the wages, or the hope of them. All over Sidney and all around it, as well as in the villages of Fairview and Bainville and Culbertson, I found clots of camp trailers and motor homes. They're in the beet fields, along river bottoms, on ridgetops and in coulees. They cluster in farmyards and residential driveways. Developers scrape out new trailer parks all the time, filling them before the scars of construction heal. Shipping pallets often serve as sidewalks and the trailers are close enough for people to hear their neighbors snore, once the summer comes and forces the windows open. Greenery and shade are somewhere else, as are women and children, mostly. Sidney's trailer parks, like similar structures all over the oil patch, are nearly all male.

Nobody knows for sure how many guys are living in trailers around Sidney. Smelser told me he figures about 1,300, maybe more. Hundreds more are in motels, and new ones are popping up and filling quickly. Others live in their vehicles, unwilling or unable to pay for something better. The vast majority behave themselves, working 12-hour shifts, bracketed by long commutes, grabbing sleep when they can, saving money for their families back home, where money likely is scarce.

But not everybody in the camps is squeaky clean.

"From what I know, there are 10 or 12 pedophiles in these campers around town," Smelser said. Those are the ones he knows about. He suspects there are more. (The violent and sexual offender list for Richland County contains 56 names. Neighboring Custer County's list, by comparison, contains 36 names, though that county has 2,000 more permanent residents.)

His town, Smelser said, needs more police. It needs \$15 million worth of sewer work and needs it now, so it can accommodate the new houses and apartments that will allow people to leave their cramped trailers, bring their families, start paying



Pipe layer Dan Sherer of Molstad Excavating, a 24-hour construction unit out of Fosston, Minn., quickly shovels in dirt around a water pipe as his crew works to build a much needed housing complex outside the city limits of Williston, N.D.

chances are you could make serious money in Sidney or one of a dozen other oil patch towns in the Bakken. About \$90,000 a year is realistic. But to do that you'll work incredible hours, maybe in dangerous conditions, surrounded by noise and dirt. Some employers offer housing, but if they do it's cramped, rudimentary and could come with a roommate not of your choosing. You might



property taxes and add to the community. It needs new and bigger roads, lift stations, water pipes, the list goes on. It's likely his town will double in population over the next five years. To accommodate those 5,000 newcomers, maybe more, city infrastructure needs \$47 million worth of improvements.

And the city of Sidney doesn't have the money, though Smelser has done all he can to find it.

"I've raised the water rates," Smelser said. "I've raised the sewer rates, the hookup fees, the zoning and variance fees. We've done everything we can, to the point that this is all I want to put on the back of the local citizens. The rest has to come out of the oil industry. And the oil industry hasn't stepped up and offered anything voluntarily. Though I've asked."

Industry spokesmen point out that they pay about 10 percent of their Montana revenues in severance and other taxes, a total of \$220 million in 2011. But the money pie gets sliced in Helena, and cities get only crumbs.

In Montana, state government keeps 52 percent of oil revenues. Impacted counties get 23 percent. Schools get 20 percent and transportation gets 5 percent. Impacted cities and towns get .01 percent. So while people are cashing in all over the patch, towns like Sidney — where traffic backs up for three or four

Dakota Farms Restaurant waitress Priscilla Meador, of Bonners Ferry, Idaho, races pasts breakfast regulars Jay Charland, center, of Kalispell, and local state plumbing inspector Al McFarlane, far right, during her non-stop rush of oil and construction workers coming from the numerous man camps around town, hoping to get a hot meal before the start of their work shifts in Williston, N.D.

blocks at times — are left with hat in hand.

"I'm just totally frustrated at this point," Smelser said. "I bang my head against the wall and either the wall is going to cave in or my head isn't going to work any more."

Smelser isn't the only person in Sidney with a headache, according to Marie Logan, associate director of the Eastern Montana Community Mental Health Center.

"There's just a chronic elevated stress level in the general population," she said. "Everything is more complicated. You wait in lines. It takes more steps to accomplish things. People feel tired and overwhelmed, because there's nothing that says this will be better in a year or two."

While a small percentage of newcomers are bringing families, there isn't enough daycare for people who do. Volunteer ambulance crews and firefighters see their duties grow week by week. Workloads expand for county and state offices, but staffs

don't, so employees cram more into a day, yet people needing services still must wait. Groceries, gas, everything costs more, so some locals are working extra jobs to keep up, putting in shifts at grocery stores or restaurants desperate for willing hands but unable to compete with oilfield wages. Classroom loads are growing, but teachers worry about landlords suddenly spiking the rent.

"What teacher can afford \$1,500 or \$2,000 a month for rent?" Logan asks.

The same problems affect hospital employees, police officers, city and county workers. Though drug and alcohol crimes are up, the counselors who help people deal with those problems recently lost their office lease. The hospital they had rented from needed to convert the space into living quarters to house the people who tend the sick and injured, both the locals and the newcomers.

Cindy Eleson feels the pinch, too. She runs Richland Opportunities, Inc., a nonprofit group that takes care of developmentally disabled adults, some of our most vulnerable citizens. Of her clients, 37 need round-the-clock care or monitoring. State formulas dictate her duties, but they also dictate a formula that means she can pay people only about \$10 an hour.

"McDonalds pays more than that," she said.

And the McDonalds in Sidney often closes its lobby. There, too, workers are scarce.

Eleson needs six full-time employees and six part-timers and doesn't have a lot of applicants for what can be a difficult job. She can't afford to be as choosy as she'd like to be.

"If they show they have some empathy and can be trained,"



Local Sidney resident Cindy Eleson, executive director of Richland Opportunities Inc., a group that assists mentally disabled adults and helps put them to work, is struggling to staff and find funding to pay for employees who can get better wages working for oil companies nearby. Eleson says the state needs to realize the negative effects the oil boom is having on her small community and how the lack of infrastructure, the huge increase in truck traffic and the boom's effect on the town's standard of living is crippling businesses in the area.

she said, and if they can pass a background test, she'll give them a shot. But most of them don't stick around long, maybe a week or two, until they find something that pays better. By then, her organization has spent \$300 for each new hire on mandatory first-aid training, a course that cost \$45 just a couple years earlier.

In the meantime, her existing staff puts in all kinds of overtime. One man worked 36 nights in a row. She asked the oil companies for help.

"It's pretty much an echo out there, when you reach out to the oil companies," she said.

She didn't have any better luck from the state legislature.

"I walked out of the human services subcommittee and cried," she said.

In the past year the streets of downtown Sidney have transformed from a sleepy, small town environment into an artery of heavy traffic and busy trucking routes, bringing in supplies and bringing out the bounties of the Bakken Oil fields.



SAFETY

IN THE FIRST QUARTER of 2012, crime in Richland County grew by 31 percent from a year earlier, most of it the kind of crime you would expect with a sudden influx of hard-working men living on their own: fights, DUIs, disorderly conduct, some dope. But sometimes, a crime comes along with the potential to change a place, make a community rethink itself.

That's what happened when Sherry Arnold died. The popular high school teacher disappeared Jan. 7 on a pre-dawn jog. Two men, both new arrivals to the oil patch, are facing possible death sentences if convicted of murder and kidnapping charges.

Media accounts sometimes describe them as oilfield workers, but drifters and junkies might be better words for them. Fueled by crack cocaine, they abducted Arnold, murdered her and buried her body along one of the countless rows of trees that protect soil from the wind in nearby North Dakota, prosecutors say. Lester Van Waters, 48, had promised Michael Keith Spell, 22, that he could earn \$100,000 a year in the oil patch. Such earnings are possible, but to get a job like that you must pass a drug test and a background test. And you must have some useful skills. Spell doesn't even know how to read.

Sidney reeled from Arnold's death.

"Today I'd bet you that one of three women are packing pepper spray," Smelser said. "And one out of five or 10 is probably carrying a handgun. That's not the answer. We know that's not the answer. But at the same time, these women need to feel safe."

Normally a fast talker, Smelser slows down and takes a breath when he speaks of Arnold.

"Our families have been friends for three generations," he said. Now he hopes to build something from the death that took so much. He's been trying for seven years to get the state legislature to change how it distributes oil tax dollars. He hasn't gotten anything but a bunch of words.

"The county hasn't stepped up as much as they should have, and the state hasn't stepped up at all," he said. "I have to be sensitive with this, because we were friends. But because of Sherry's death, maybe we'll have a front row seat at the Legislature."

Sometimes it takes something like that to get a politician's attention.

OVER THE LINE

WATERS AND SPELL JOINED tens of thousands of people hoping for big wages in the Bakken oil patch. Lots of them are finding it. Walk through the parking lot at any restaurant or motel in the 200,000 square mile Bakken Formation, cruise slowly through any of the trailer parks or man camps — often just refurbished shipping containers on skids that offer a narrow bed in a narrow

room, a communal shower and a roof for \$90 a night or more — and you'll see license plates from every state. From Alaska to Florida, from California to the Carolinas, they're all there, testimony both to the promise of the Bakken and the miserable economy in so much of the country.

People often compare the Bakken play to a frontier gold rush. Others say you don't have to look that far back.

"It's kind of like *The Grapes of Wrath*," said Bozeman developer Mike Barrett, who plans to expand the town of Culbertson by 30 percent with a housing project he's working on. "These are people just trying to get back on their feet."

I met one of them in Williston, when a man named Les offered me shelter from a morning drizzle, a space in the cab of his overstuffed pickup where he lives with a rancid hound named Blue. We were in the parking lot of a day-labor place called Bakken Staffing, a company that organizes hands for jobs like digging holes, cleaning up construction sites, unloading cargo. Every morning at 6, as many as 50 men line up, hoping for a day's wages, usually at about \$15 an hour, about what you could earn at a fast food joint in Williston. Like me, most of them appeared



Sidney mayor Brett Smelser says he's raised infrastructure rates in his town to the point that he can't ask more from local citizens in keeping up with oil boom related impacts.

to be living in vehicles filled with sleeping bags, camp stoves and water jugs.

Les was surprised I'd been allowed to sleep the previous night in the Walmart parking lot.

Travelers and people who live in their RVs know they can generally pull into a Walmart lot and spend a night for free. But in Williston, where motel rooms cost \$200 a night or more, if you can find one, people treated the Walmart lot like a campground,



Elise Boyce, in back, along with her son Miles, 12, and her husband Mike, not pictured, of Anaheim, Calif., host new-found friends Les Owensby, left, Glen Forcier, center, of Carson City, Nevada and Ramirez Jesus, right, of El Paso, Texas, for a dinner of sub sandwiches in their trailer parked in the parking lot of Albertson's Grocery store in Williston, N.D. where she works. "All of us here are all trying to run away from poverty," says Boyce, whose husband came here in January to find work as a carpenter in the oil boom. "The message out there on the Internet is that there are tons of jobs out here on the Bakken, but when people like us arrive it's nothing but high fees or the locals are trying to ban sleeping in cars or trailer parking."

sometimes staying for weeks. The company finally put a stop to it late in January.

"Guys were changing transmissions in the parking lot," Les said. "It got out of control."

Bakken Staffing lies within sight of the Chamber of Commerce, the Amtrac Depot, several bars and a couple strip joints in downtown Williston, the heart of the Bakken play, a place that rumbles day and night with the vehicles of international corporations like Halliburton and Schlumberger, plus dozens of smaller companies that are investing billions of dollars, spelling out with their money their hopes for the longevity of the Bakken.

"He's my heater," Les says of his dog, pulling him closer. Day labor has been hard to find, he explains. Gravel roads are thawing in the spring warmth and heavy trucks have been banned for a while, slowing the demand for mundane tasks. Les says he's a journeyman pipefitter and isn't impressed with some of the other men loitering in the lot.

"A lot of these guys can't even read a tape measure," he says.

A compact man with thick glasses, he offers more advice: where to spend the night without getting hassled, how to stay inconspicuous, how to find free food.

"The Salvation Army, over behind the titty bars, gives out bread and sweets three days a week," he says. "Fruit if they got it."

Back in Michigan, he lost his wife to cancer, so he and Blue took to the highway. He tried North Carolina, then the shipyards in Mobile, Ala., but they didn't want to pay journeyman wages. "Nobody wants to hire anybody over 50," he said. Apprentices are cheaper.

So, like John Steinbeck's famous Joad family, he moved west.

He snagged a couple days work last week, but that meant long drives to the job site. By the time he bought fuel for his gas hog of a Dodge, he could put \$120 in his pocket. That's not much, in the patch.

"Still, it's \$120 I didn't have before."

He tells of an acquaintance who took a serious beating in a case of mistaken identity. Five

guys jumped on one. Nobody stepped in to help.

"Nobody wants to get involved," Les said, snubbing out a half-smoked cigarette, saving the rest for later. "It's kinda like Detroit that way."

WHAT IT TAKES

COMPANIES THAT PROVIDE housing often book blocks of rooms in motels or man camps, some of which provide meals.

Brian Sparks, a former Presbyterian minister and museum director, at the age of 58 landed a job with one of them, a fracking company that pumps a mixture of sand, water and chemicals a couple miles underground, then a couple miles horizontally, and applies enough pressure to unlock the oil in the Bakken shale, which spreads out for 200,000 square miles across Montana, North Dakota, Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

For 14 months he worked for 15 days in a row, then got six days off, during which he drove from company headquarters in Miles City to his home in Livingston. His crew worked 12 hour days and put in commutes of as much as 2.5 hours, each way, depending on where the job was and where the company could find some beds.

"Some nights you were lucky to get five hours of sleep," Sparks said. He compared the food at man camps to military mess hall rations, and said the foreman acted like a Marine Corps drill sergeant. The crew came from all over the country. Some had family elsewhere, some didn't. His description of the crew didn't surprise me: lots of vulgar language, significant racism, guys passing pornography around. It didn't sit well with a former minister.

Landing the job required him to obtain a commercial driver's license, and the coursework cost about \$5,000. His first year on the job, which included the worst winter in memory and lots of icy roads for a rookie driver in a big rig, earned him \$92,000 in wages and production bonuses. He said he earned every penny of it and he's not going back.

He said he had few impressions of the local people. He simply didn't have time to meet them.

Much of Williston looks like a man camp, swimming in testosterone.

At 6 a.m., the Dakota Farms restaurant is moving a lot of eggs and bacon, but the breakfast crowd contained only one woman.

At the busy city library, the crowd is 75 percent male, mostly guys using the computers or charging their laptops, jobseekers

with computers but no electrical outlets.

At the Job Service office, the clientele is entirely male, and a one-question survey greets all visitors: "Do you have housing?" Of the first 20 men on an April day, only six claimed a roof.

Some were unintelligible and slovenly, others well dressed and well educated, glancing over long resumes, looking to rebuild a life that had fallen apart somewhere else. Most were blue-collar guys with thick knuckles and work jeans, victims of the economy. I sat at a computer next to a guy named Jeff, from Iowa. His resume said he had operated backhoes and the like for 20 years, but a company looking for guys like him wanted a cover letter with his resume. Composing one proved daunting on a strange computer. A kindly staffer tried to help, but she had a lot of other people to assist, so I moved to his computer and wrote the letter for him, showed him how to save it on his email account. It only



After serving 17 years in the Navy and Marines and then another 29 years building automatic machinery in Detroit, Les Owensby, along with his blue tick hound dog Blue, decided to try their luck finding work in the Bakken Oil Field in Williston, N.D. Owensby, who lives out of his truck while sleeping in local parking lots, has spent every early morning since mid-February waiting in line at the local day work hiring facility with the hopes of finding temporary employment.

took a couple minutes, but by then some other job hunter had commandeered my computer space. I didn't say anything. He needed it more than I did.

I had no doubt Jeff would find a job eventually. He had skills to offer. Housing? That could be tough.

Williston city government is considering a ban on sleeping in

motor homes or camp trailers in city limits while Williams County, which surrounds Williston, has enacted a moratorium on new man camps. With 9,000 beds in the camps, and more permitted but not yet built, the sewer system can't handle any more. A flyer in the library notified job seekers they could shower in a city recreation center, but that's been restricted. Too many people were leaving a mess. Somebody even left a turd in the hallway.

Still, Williston is trying hard to catch up with the boom, with some help from state government. So far this year, 231 new housing units have been permitted, nearly half of them prefab housing, and the school district is trying to figure out how to educate at least 1,500 new students who will arrive once housing is available. And it will have to find teachers and pay them enough to live there.

Other towns in western North Dakota show the same pattern: small communities built mostly around a farm economy, trying now to cope with the boom sweeping over them. In tiny Alexander, where the latest census found 223 people, at least that many trailers surround the town. Amazed at the traffic, I stopped beside a tiny church to take a count: In one 15 minute period, 59 semis growled past, shifting gears and either accelerating or braking to negotiate a small hill.

Two ladies stopped to see what I was up to, if I needed help.

"Just counting trucks," I told them, pointing to the road, raising my voice above the racket. "Doesn't this bother you?"

"We get used to it, I guess," one of them said. "Isn't that what people say when they live next to an airport?"

I encountered this attitude all over the oil patch: People see both good and bad. There is the traffic, the noise, the destruc-

tion of roads. Then there is the influx of money and the chance to grab a bunch of it, to turn a marginal rural business into a beehive. And there is the inflow of people and ideas and excitement in a region that has been battered for decades by unreliable ag prices and an exodus of young people.

"I see more positive than negative," said Don Josephson, pastor of that little Nazarene Church by the roadside, the one with all the trucks grinding by. Alexander's school was shrinking (the census lists just 16 people between the ages of 5 and 19 in 2010) and his congregation had dwindled to less than a dozen, most of them elderly. Some of the oil people attend services when they get a Sunday off.

"It's nice to have them when they're there and we miss them when they're not," Josephson said.

HOW LONG WILL IT LAST

MOST OBSERVERS SAY the Bakken oil play will last a long time, partly because it contains so much oil and partly because of the technology that made harvesting it possible. Drilling a well requires maybe 100 people and hundreds of truck loads of pipes and water and red scoria, a soft local stone used to build roads and berms. Then comes fracturing, or fracking, a process that lets crews use millions of gallons of water, sand and chemicals in a high pressure mixture that breaks apart layers of rock that hold oil. People have known for decades that the Bakken formation contained oil, but they didn't know how to extract it.

Now they do, though fracking is a labor intensive and expen-

sive process. It takes a crew of 16 to 24 people to frack a well, and some wells have to be fracked two or three times. Oil prices have to stay around \$60 a barrel to make it profitable.

Once a well has been fracked, harvesting the oil requires pump maintenance, oil truck drivers, water truck drivers, and people to support those jobs. And nobody knows for sure how much oil the Bakken can produce, though they agree it's a lot. The federal government says four billion barrels. Some oilmen say as much as 24 billion. New technologies could emerge and boost the numbers. Some speculate that Williston could, in a few years, house about 50,000 people, making it roughly the size of Casper, Wyo., another oil town. (If current housing patterns hold, Williston will be about half trailers or prefab houses.)

If the Keystone XL pipeline is built, linking Canadian tar sands to Houston refineries, an "onramp" near Baker will allow the pipeline to take Bakken crude, which currently fetches about 25 percent less than similar high-quality oil because it's so expensive to haul by truck or rail. The onramp could eliminate much of that discount, adding profits to the Bakken and opening up more possibilities.

Politicians of both parties are calling for more drilling. Montana Gov. Brian Schweitzer helped make the onramp possible. Sen. Jon Tester, also a Democrat, recently called on the federal government to "cut red tape: speed up energy permitting" in the Bakken.

As the sun sets over Williston, N.D., an oil well operates on a 24 hour cycle pumping out the black gold from the Bakken Oil Field. The industrialization of the Great Plains is well underway here and oil wells have become a common addition to the horizon.



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Charles M. Russell (1864–1926), *Watching for the Smoke Signal* (detail), 1907, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas



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Back in Sidney, Smelser said plans call for another 1,000 wells in Richland County, with an average of three long-term jobs attached to each of them, with most of those people and their families living in Sidney or nearby. That's what he's trying to prepare for, why he wants the money for roads and sewers and water pipes. He knows his town won't be the same, but he wants it to be a livable place. He's a little nervous about it.

"That's probably the biggest fear in Sidney, losing our identity as a small rural community, where everybody left their doors unlocked and nobody locked their cars," he said.

In Culbertson, Mayor Gordon Oelke said he's looking forward to Barrett's planned 130-unit subdivision, which will provide permanent housing where empty rentals don't exist and housing prices have doubled in 18 months. A new motel is planned, plus a 100-unit man camp, the second one in town. He estimated that about 80 percent of the 750 long-term residents support the influx of oil money and



Members of the First Church of the Nazarene gather for a sloppy joe dinner and Bible study at their small church in Sidney.

people. He said his own business, a gas station and repair shop, has doubled over the past 18 months. In a sprawling build-

ing across the street, a former truck stop now converted to offices and sleeping rooms for employees, JNS Logistics manager Kendall Craig, a Louisiana native with 30 years of experience in the oil business, said he and a partner showed up there a year ago with one heavy truck and a Honda Civic. Now, they employ or contract with 66 people, hauling materials and renting equipment and managing finances.

"As an employer, I'm looking for family men who are going to be here for a while," he said, men who might bring wives who can teach or do accounting or offer other skills a community needs. The man camps and trailer parks are just temporary, places to sleep until the infrastructure catches up. He said he's been to oil towns all over the country. Some are nice places. Some aren't. He urged state and local government to plan ahead, not just react.

"People need to be proactive," he said. "It's not going to stop. It's just too big an animal."

Around much of the state, there's been a boom in oil leases and exploratory drilling. Jordan, Lewistown, the Blackfoot Indian Reservation, the Fort



Local Williston, N.D. landowner and retired high school teacher Jerry Langseth walks through the old Twin Butte school house on his family's homestead where he attended grade school with his siblings and cousins. Now years later after he inherited his father and grandfather's land with his three siblings, Langseth has traded in his teaching cap for negotiating with oil companies seeking mineral rights to drill on the 1,120 acres of farmland. "Why waste your time bitching about all the changes, increased traffic or the influx of people around here," said Langseth. "This oil boom is happening and we as a town can't change it."

Peck Reservation, the Rocky Mountain Front are all seeing landmen offering to buy mineral leases, trucks with decals on the door, a fair number of drilling operations.

Some have found oil, according to Tom Richmond, who runs the Montana Board of Oil and Gas Conservation, but so far, nothing looks like the Bakken.

Still, communities are concerned. Smelser travels the state, "singing Kumbaya" and telling people to get serious about protecting their communities before oil booms arrive. Be proactive, he tells them. It beats playing catch up later.

"We should have had impact fees five years ago," he said. "Figure out where you want the industry to be and try to funnel the development into the areas where you feel comfortable. Start trying to develop the infrastructure there."

Richmond says it's hard to say how far the boom will spread. The Bakken extends for hundreds of miles, but it thins out in the west. Yet people are crossing their fingers, sometimes with opposing purposes.

"Everywhere I go," he told me, "half

the people I meet are afraid the oil boom will get there. The other half are afraid it

won't. Maybe they'll both be disappointed." Or maybe only half of them will be. ❏

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