

HISTORY

June 18, 2023

MOAB'S OTHER WILD RIDE — CHARLIE STEEN'S 1950s URANIUM BOOM — by Maxine Newell

By **Jim Stiles**

PLUS...CHARLIE STEEN COULD THROW A PARTY & FORTY YEARS LATER, WHEN MOAB HONORED CHARLIE—THE “DISCOVERY DAYS” EVENTS OF JULY 4, 1992



The Steen Family's camp, before the strike

NOTE: If you don't know who Charlie Steen was, you've probably never read this publication, or visited Moab, or heard of uranium. In a nutshell, Charlie Steen was a Texas geologist who had a theory that uranium could be found in a geological formation that had never previously been considered. Almost unanimously, the

world of geologists said he was crazy. But Steen and his family carried on; they were down to their last few bucks, when he found exactly what he was looking for, set off a mining boom unprecedented, before or since, in Utah, and made the geologist experts eat crow. For a more detailed profile of Charlie Steen and his life, check out this article at Wikiwand.

Maxine Newell was a story by herself. Soon I hope to repost an interview I conducted with my old friend more than 20 years ago. Maxine was born and raised in Dove Creek, joined the WACS in World War II and saw service in Alaska during the construction of the Alcan Highway, when Americans feared the Japanese might invade the United States via the Aleutian Islands. She lived through the uranium boom, was a reporter for the local Times-Independent and finally went to work at Arches National Park. Though at first she thought I was a damn “Ed Abbey loving hippie,” (which I was), she came to be a dear friend and infected me with her love of history. Maxine passed away in 2015, at the age of 95.

Uranium fever became a national affliction when Steen announced his strike. Go-for-broke prospectors poured into the little town of Moab by the thousands, lured by the \$100 million bait. The town was besieged by a boom which was to surpass the gold rushes of the previous century.

Hopeful investors, loan sharks, and promoters followed the prospectors in. New businesses set up wherever they could find room, on the Main Street drag, in private garages or in tents. One realty firm operated from a tiny log cabin which was the revered historical home of an early-day pioneer. Moab’s new slogan, “Uranium Capitol of the World,” was splashed on store fronts, stationery and souvenirs. The town sported a Uranium Building and a Uranium Days Celebration. The term “uraniumaires” was coined to identify the new mining magnates. Someone finally got around to dubbing Charles A Steen the “Uranium King of the World,” and the title stuck.



Mi Vida fared about as well in the nomenclature. “The Miracle of Mi Vida,” one headline blared. Steen named a street “Mi Vida” in the subdivision he built for UTEX employees, and the Mi Vida mine became known as the “Miracle Square Mile and a Half.”



An ore truck lumbers down Center Street. Few remember that Main Street ended at Center Street until the late 1950s. To go through Moab, you turned East on Center, to 400 East. Then the highway curved south along what is now Mill Creek Drive. If you look closely, the highway went to the left of Milt's Stop n' Eat, not to the right as 400 East does now.



Ore truck headed north on Main Street. Mid-1950s

The boom was a near catastrophe for the little town. Population exploded from 1200 to 7000 in less than a year. There was a shortage of almost everything, and no funds to buy more. There weren't enough homes, schools, restaurants or motels. Water, sewer and parking were overloaded. Whatever goes into the making of a city, Moab had less than enough during the years it played host to the world's first uranium boom. To make matters even worse, Mi Vida Mine was located just over the line in the adjacent county. San Juan County collected the taxes; boomtown Moab got the people.

Newcomers, the Hulen Family, parked their travel trailer south of Moab. 1955...Photo credit: Brett Hulen



A telephone shortage was part of the boomtown dilemma. Equipped to handle only three long distance calls at a time, Midland Telephone Company was wondering what to do with 1500. It was not unusual to wait days to place a long distance call. More than one busy industrialist found it quicker, and much less frustrating, to drive the 240-mile round trip to Grand Junction to place a call. More frustrated yet were those unfortunates who waited three or four days to place a call only to get a lousy busy signal at the other end of the line. A 3-minute limit was placed on all local calls. Oddly enough, people liked the new regulation. The 3-minute buzzer was a good way to cut off a long-winded caller. When improved equipment allowed the restriction to be lifted, the company was besieged with calls asking that the time limit be retained.

The eventual modernizing of the telephone system is a credit to J.W. Corbin, who had gambled what he didn't have in the 1920's to update the family telephone enterprise to its 100-telephone system. But the much bigger investment to enlarge the system to handle the boom load paid off, and the Midland Telephone Company served the town well until, much later, it was sold to CONTEL.



Before the Boom. In June 1950, Moab was a sleepy little town. Herb Ringer and his parents spent the night here, and the next morning, he snapped this photograph of Main Street, looking south.

Correcting one problem often complicated another. New subdivisions taxed the overloaded water and sewer systems. New motels added to the overload of the

utilities. School was the most discouraging situation. Before the uranium boom, all 12 grades were comfortably taught in one building. As student enrollment skyrocketed, two more schools were built with federal funds, but both were outgrown before they were finished. Triple sessions failed to handle the boom load, even when doubling up on books and seats.

Many transient children were undernourished. Hot school lunches were improvised to see they got at least one good meal a day. School Superintendent Helen M. Knight recalled a constant fear of fire in the old Bell Tower school library where the lunches were served, but the building didn't burn down until the boom was over.

Trailers were the housing solution, or at least part of it, for Moab during the Uranium Boom.



The housing shortage was critical. Many residents took in roomers. The few small trailer parks were filled; trailers were sandwiched in yards and vacant lots from one end of the city to another. A big, new, modern facility, Holiday Haven Trailer Park, was built, but it took the city years to get all the trailer houses legally parked. Prospectors used their cars for home base; used-car dealers all over the country had a run on old school buses for living quarters in Moab. Cardboard shacks lined the ditchbanks, clotheslines stretched from tree to tree up and down Main Street. It is a miracle that the city escaped an epidemic. For a time, it appeared that Steen had lifted the lid off Pandora's Box and let the troubles out.

It was an exciting boom, nonetheless. If the city had a cartoon appearance, it also had a carnival atmosphere. Nights were filled with partying and laughter. The plush new Town and Country Club was booked to capacity each evening, but no matter where the night of fun began, celebrators ended up at the Uranium Club on

the hill, where Utah's no-liquor-by-the-drink law could be ignored for a \$100 membership.

Law enforcement problems were few—people were too busy to make trouble. In the heat of the boom, Swaney Kirby brought his rodeo to town with wild horses, long-horn cattle and brahman bulls that had never been ridden, but there were no cowboys to ride them. The regular bronco busters were all out in the hills, hunting uranium. Swaney loaded up his bad horses, wild cows, and brahma bulls and headed for Texas.

There was standing room only at the two local pubs. Mining deals were consummated over tables in crowded cafes, while hungry customers stood in line waiting for a meal. Geiger counters and ore samples took up so much room on the tables, waitresses had problems finding room for the plates.



The Ides Theater, a few years before the Uranium Boom.

The Ides Movie Theater increased its shows to three a night and left a waiting line outside each time the “no room” sign went up. Mrs. Elberta Clark and daughter,

Neva Kirk, threatened each night to close it down. A new drive-in theater took off some of the pressure, but in the middle of the boom, Mrs. Clark sold the business that she and her husband had opened when silent “flickers” starred Mary Pickford and Rudolph Valentino, and background music was pumped on a player piano.

The post office added 384 new boxes and it still required a full-time clerk to handle general delivery. They built a new building and outgrew it before it was completed. Postmaster Russell Carter recalled people still pushing mail under the old post office door long after the move. Finally, when annual receipts increased from \$8,000 to \$80,000 the post office was given first class status, and an Assistant Postmaster, Gene Gibson, was transferred from Helper, Utah to help out at Moab.

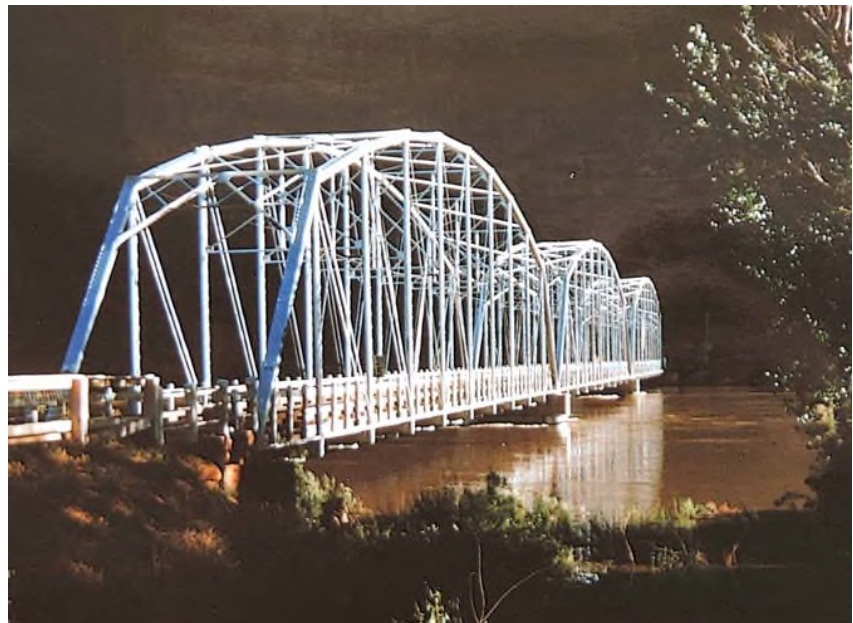


The Boom led to major improvements in the area highways. Until 1955, the road just north of the Arches Headquarters looked like this...

Moab Main Street (U.S. Highway 163) was hard put to handle the car load, let alone the continuous stream of ore trucks enroute to and from the mill, north of

Moab, and mine, south of town. One of the most illustrious loads to travel the Main Street highway was the riches single load of uranium in history. The truck load of high grade ore from the Nixon claim in the Lisbon Uranium Company qualified for the Atomic Energy Commission bonus of \$10,000, a standing offer since 1948 for the riches load of ore delivered, an effort to encourage more prospectors to hit the uranium trail. The load barely got under the wire before the offer was withdrawn. The government no longer needed an incentive to lure prospectors into the field, and Steen could have topped the record at any given time.

The first Colorado River Bridge was especially feeling the strain. The bridge literally sagged in the middle as the heavy ore trucks crept slowly over it. The new bridge was completed in 1955.



There were no commercial parking lots in town, and curb parking space was filled from morning until night. Business owners complained because customers couldn't find room to park. The city council attempted to solve the problem by installing parking meters—but that just made everyone mad, so the city took them out.

The most over-wrought person in town was the County Recorder, Esther Somerville. Before the boom, she filled one county record book in about 16 years. She filled one a week during the boom, and then never caught up. When claim location filings reached 4,000 a month, she vowed she'd quit the \$3,000 a year job.

The ratio of men to women was 20 to one. A pub owner estimated there were only 50 eligible women in town. Yet Moab was not a typical mining boom town. There

were no lewd honky-tonks, no scarlet ladies, and no tin-horn gamblers. The busiest place in town may well have been the new Dairy Freeze.

The city was saved by federal funds and officials who knew how to use them: Businessman-Mayor Ken McDougald, City Recorder Darrell Reardon, a dedicated City Council, which often worked the clock around solving problems, and by Charlie Steen himself. Steen did his best to right the upheaval. He built a subdivision for UTEX employees to relieve the housing shortage. Its streets were named after Steen's family—Juan, Carlos, Marcos and Andrea Courts, (for sons John, Charles, Mark and Andrew;) Rosalie Court, (for his mother;) McCormick Blvd, (for William McCormick, Steen's UTEX partner,) and Mi Vida Drive. Steen donated land for churches and schools, built a mill, which added a permanent payroll and tax dollars, and built a motel to replace the old "Starbuck" he had remodeled into the UTEX office complex. He took active part in civic affairs, both local and state.



The UTEX Mill (later Atlas Minerals) north of Moab. 1960s

Uranium was a get-rich-quick virus that quickened the gambling pulses of man. Hollywood stars carried Geiger counters to patio parties; Humphrey Bogart, June Allison, and a host of superstars invested heavily in uranium stocks. In New York,

a would-be prospector took Charlie Steen's advice, "Uranium is where you find it," and staked a claim on the fringe of a military firing range. He started a run on the place, and the National Guard had to be called out to prevent the dude prospectors from being shot.

Charlie with his discovery jeep.

A hoax started a mad claim-staking spree in the Indian Creek Mining District. Moab Drilling Co. crews detected signs of scavenger probing of their drill holes during weekend recesses, and, as a practical joke they planted some rich uraninite from Mi Vida in the holes. As planned, the mystery probers made their "strike." The incident set off a midnight claim-staking free-for-all that plagued National Park Service officials years later, when the land became a part of Canyonlands National Park. Superintendent Bates Wilson said endless hours were required to clear the records of defunct claims. No mentionable quantities of ore were ever found.



It was every man for himself during the Moab boom. One armchair prospector hired an amateur surveyor to stake his claims, but with no Surveyor's Licence at risk to bind his word, the surveyor staked the property in his own name. The boom had its share of swindlers. Ore was planted on ground completely out of the uranium strata and sold to claim-starved lease hounds.

"Where can I stake some claims?" was an introductory greeting when novice prospectors rolled into town. Some took bad advice, and while they pounded their

stakes into road rights-of-ways, jokers had their laughs in pubs. City engineers warded off prospectors as they surveyed city streets.

Fortune hunters from all over the nation combined vacations with a chance to strike it rich in Charlie Steen's country and went on two-week claim-staking sprees in the hills. Their country was so criss-crossed with claims it took years to straighten it all out. The perplexed County Recorder did her best with the thankless job. Professional geologists complained about the amateur hunters; the amateurs stood on their rights.

The country became a lawyer's paradise. It was predicted that attorneys would wind up uranium millionaires without touching a pick, but most of them didn't. They too were novices at the game. "Seven Mile Thornberg," boomtown ID for the Seven Mile Mine owner, hit the nail on the head when he said, "Nobody can tell you what's wrong with this business, cause nobody knows."



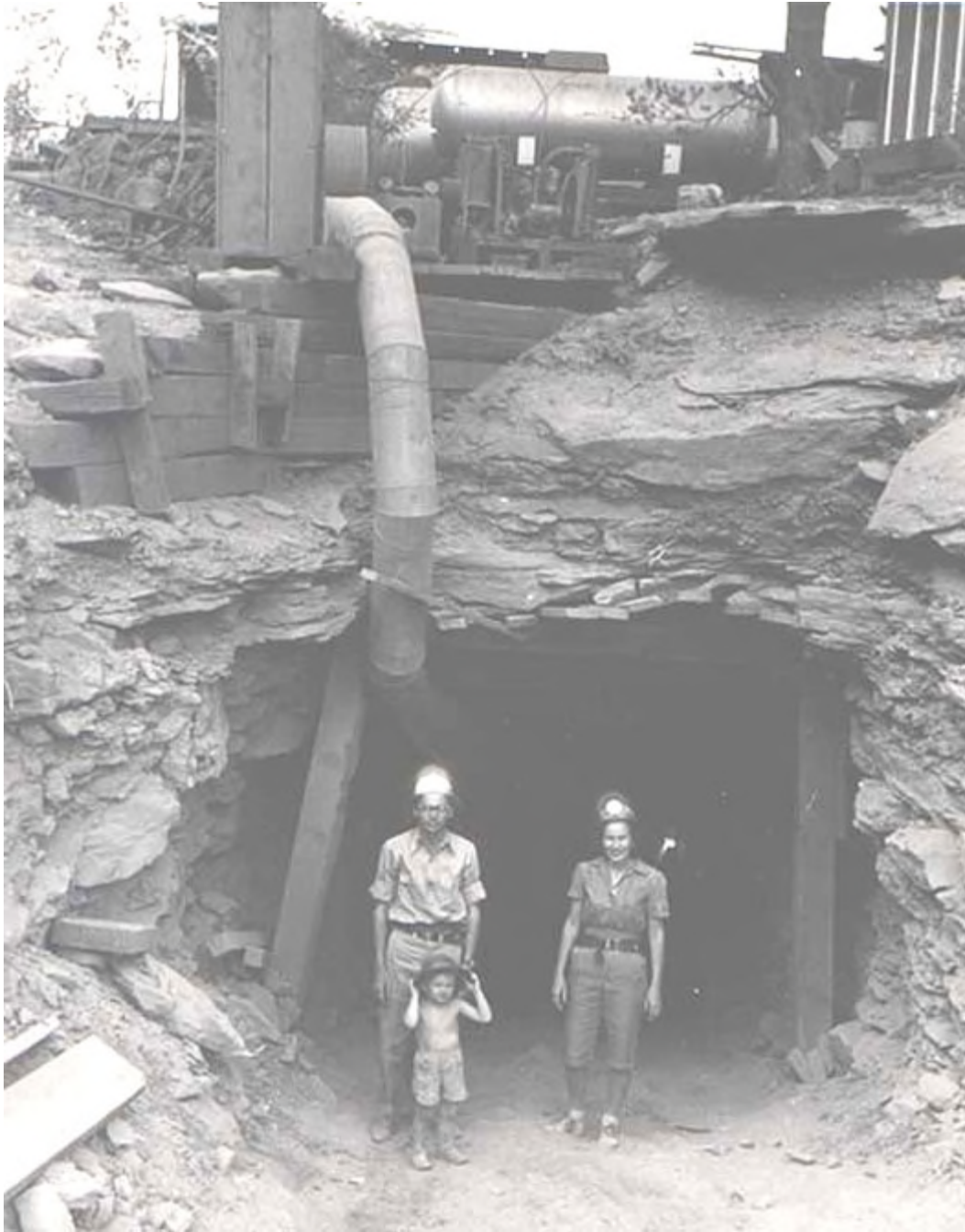
Charlie and ML supervise the construction of their hilltop home, on the cliffs above Moab. They named it "Mi Vida." For decades it's been one of Moab's favorite restaurants.



Charlie & ML and the kids at their new Moab home...plus Butch

Like the millionaire in the classic play, *The Happiest Millionaire*, who believed “if I have a million dollars and don’t spend it, I’m as poor as the poorest man in town,” Steen put his money to work. Once a year he contributed to the excitement of the boom by hosting a free-for-all party to celebrate his Mi Vida strike. The largest guest count was 8,884. They came from all over Four-Corners area, for drinks and food served in the old Moab Airport hangar by imported caterers. They came for entertainment by well-known artists, which many of the guests would never have another opportunity to see and hear.

Mostly, however, the guests came so they could say, “I was there, at Charlie Steen’s party!”



The entrance to the Big Indian Mine. Charlie, ML & Mark.

CHARLIE STEEN COULD THROW A PARTY—Maxine Newell

The clock on the mantle was set at 5:05, and the bar was always open. Charles relished the role of party-giver, M.L.'s role was hostess. She played it graciously and sometimes enjoyed it. Once, in defiance, she served a buffet of cold cuts to Elliott Roosevelt, E.L. Cord, and Joseph Frazer (Wall Street financiers and automobile manufacturing executives.) They declared it the best meal they'd had in years. The tycoons may have felt they received better treatment from M.L. than from Charlie; they offered him \$10 million for Mi Vida and were turned down flat.



Charlie (center) and his pals on poker night.

Hilarious incidents happened so close together at Steen Hill, some are hard to recall. At one party, Betty Bowen, a pretty lass from Texas, disrupted the festivities to salute her fellow Texan. She confiscated the two bands hired for the occasion, arranged them with the guests around the pool, then took a precarious position on the end of the diving board to lead them in song, “The Eyes of Texas...” Charles led the cheers.



One of the annual city-wide parties Charlie and ML liked to throw



Another year, another party. According to Maxine, "... guests often numbered in the hundreds. Expense was no object. Famous caterers were flown in for major events."

Steen Hill parties were lavish; guests often numbered in the hundreds. Expense was no object. Famous caterers were flown in for major events. Noted entertainers were brought in. Champagne flowed freely; guests danced the Tango and the Cha Cha. A Salt Lake City club owner “walked on water;” (someone was always getting dunked in the pool.” Entire filming casts cavorted. Susanne Paulson, Miss Utah of that era, signed the guest register. Joe Fitzpatrick of Walker Bank distributed harmless methylene blue pills “for hangovers” and created a bathroom panic.



CHARLIE STEEN'S 40th birthday, with his wife M.L., Andy McGill, Bill Hudson and Bill McCormick, In Moab, Utah



CHARLIE STEEN and his faithful grubstaker, BILL McCORMICK. He provided the last loan on the drill rig when Charlie struck uranium and Bill became a charter member of the UTEX Corporation



Charlie loved to fly his Texas friends up to Moab, to see the mine and their incredible hillside home. Here he poses for pictures at the old Moab Airport, south of town.



Charlie and his beloved Dalmation, Butch, in the company plane.