

FIRST DRAFT

Eastern Utah mining camp blossomed...

IN A CANYON NEAR THE BOOK CLIFFS

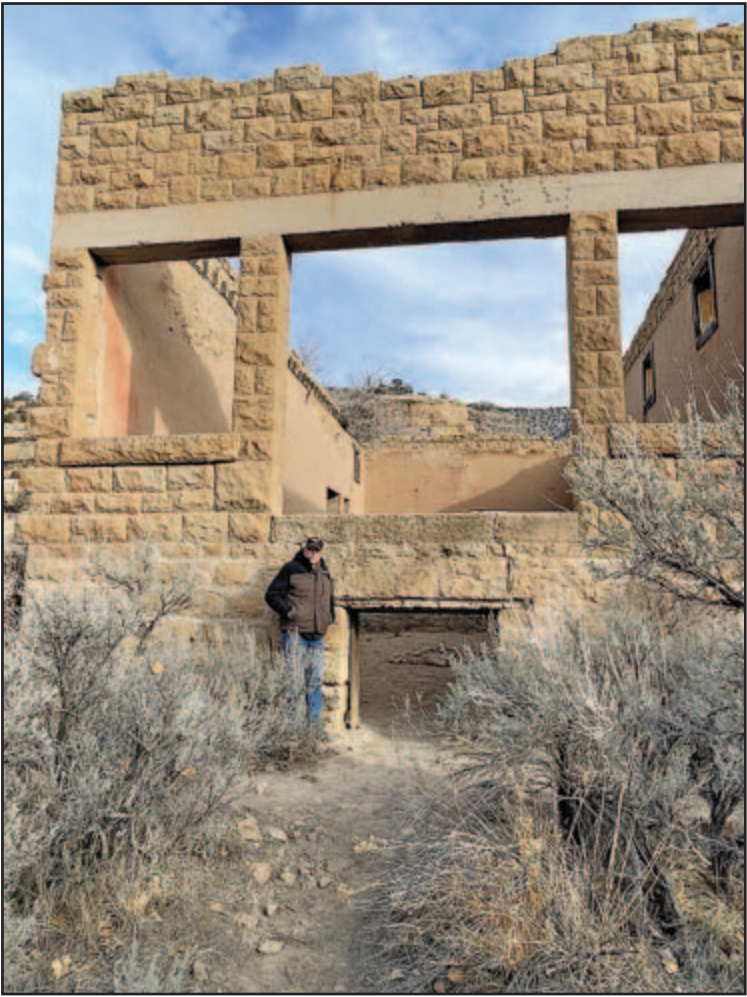


BOB SILBERNAGEL

LEFT: The deteriorating remnants of an old wooden trestle bridge stand not far from the old company store. This bridge likely served the railroad that ran five miles from Thompson Springs to Utah, and may have been repurposed as an automobile bridge after the railroad ceased operations. (Photo by Bob Silbernagel)

RIGHT: The author standing in front of the old company store, showing what a large building it was. (Photo by Judy Silbernagel)

BELOW: The stone framework of the old company store still stands at Sego, Utah. (Photo by Bob Silbernagel)



Prohibition was in full force in February 1923 when Deputy Sheriff R.T. Edwards arrested three bootleggers in Sego, Utah, closed their drinking parlors and confiscated 75 gallons of booze.

That must have been devastating for the many hard-drinking coal miners in Sego, five miles north of Thompson Springs, Utah, at the edge of the Book Cliffs.

Only a few remnants remain today of the once-bustling town of Sego, whose heyday was in the teens and 1920s. For a time, it had its own doctor and deputy sheriff, a large company store and a railroad running south to Thompson.

The town also had close ties to Grand Junction, in part because in the early days of the 20th century, it was easier to travel from Sego to Colorado by rail or automobile than it was to make the rugged trip to Moab, the county seat for Grand County, Utah.

In 1920, The Daily Sentinel reported, that the superintendent of the American Fuel Co. mine in Sego was in Palisade buying mules. And in 1922, “five auto loads of men, some with their families, passed through Fruita on their way to Sego, Utah, where they will work in the mines.”

In 1920, there were 193 people living in Sego, according to official census figures, and more in the surrounding canyons. But they didn’t all live happily together.

“Though it was never large, the town had separate housing for its various ethnic workers – blacks, Italians, Japanese, and Greeks, among others,” wrote Richard A. Firmage in his book, “A History of Grand County.” He added, “Three larger houses



reserved for the mine superintendent, school teacher and company doctor were in their own section.”

For the most part, Sego was a typical mining community of the era. It fielded its own baseball team but had few cultural amenities. Miners and their families were forced to buy necessities from the company store. They could be fired for doing business in Thompson, where prices were often half of those in Sego.

Prior to 1910, there was no settlement at Sego. But there had definitely been earlier inhabitants. Rock art from three different periods adorns several

panels near the entrance to Sego Canyon.

According to Bureau of Land Management interpretive signs, there is rock art from Ute Indians etched in the last few hundred years; Fremont Style petroglyphs that could be as much as 1,600 years old; and Barrier Canyon Style pictographs that date back as far as 4,000 years.

By the turn of the last century, Thompson – or Thompson Springs as it was later called – was a small but important stop on the Denver & Rio Grande Western route between Colorado and Salt Lake City. Cattle and sheep grazing were the primary

activities north of the town.

In 1908, Henry Ballard, one of the founders of Thompson, discovered a promising coal seam in Sego Canyon. Since the railroad was always looking for sources of coal, and this wasn’t far from the main line, Ballard thought he could profitably develop the coal.

He purchased the land, hired some laborers, and by 1910, he had opened a mine and a small mining camp that he called Ballard.

A year later, Ballard sold his mine and camp to B.F. Bauer of Salt Lake City, who formed the American Fuel Company to run the mine. He and Ballard

became partners on the Ballard and Thompson Railroad, which began constructing a spur line from Thompson to the mine. It was no easy task. The rail line crossed streams and arroyos 13 times in its five-mile route. Bridges had to be built for each and washouts were frequent.

Bauer’s company also built a more permanent town where Ballard’s camp had been. It was called Neslen, after the first mine superintendent, Richard Neslen.

The American Fuel Company built some housing for its workers, but it also allowed miners and their families to construct their own homes on unclaimed property. Consequently, shacks and dugouts dotted the upper portion of Sego Canyon. A post office called Neslen opened in 1912.

It was not an easy place to live. As one 1916 Sentinel article said, Neslen “has been the scene of numerous fatalities in the past few years.”

In 1915, a love triangle led a mine superintendent to shoot and kill the wife of another mine employee after she rejected his continuing advances. Then the spurned lover shot himself.

A year later a miner in a drunken rage attacked his bunkmate with an iron poker. The victim of the attack was treated in Neslen, then sent to Grand Junction by rail for further care, but he died the next day. Both men were former Mesa County residents who had jobs in the Neslen mine.

Illness and mine accidents also killed residents.

Miners in Neslen went on strike in the spring of 1915 in an attempt to recover back pay

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Allow me to change the subject: squirrel!

I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again: I’m not here to talk politics. Quite the opposite, in fact—I’m here to NOT talk politics.

It’s not that I’m uninterested or don’t care, it’s that I’m a skosh exhausted. So tie-tie. Just need a little breaky-poo. It’s been a week.

Naturally, this has me pondering the art of changing the subject—the conversational pivot, if you will. Short of starting a fire as a distraction—and believe you me, I’ve considered it—advice is mixed on the best way to change the subject.

My own experience in this area is less than helpful. I tend to rely heavily on three gambits of only intermittent effectiveness:

1. Pretend I misheard and run with it.
2. Pretend that what someone said makes me think of this other thing, because clearly they’re related! (Clearly they are not.)
3. Pretend I just saw something startling and saying, “Weird, now it’s gone” when everyone turns to look.

Here’s how it generally goes down.

Gambit 1:

Someone: (Talks about a subject I’d like to change.)

Me: Oh, man, I’m glad you brought

up dinosaur vomit! I just read about this amateur fossil hunter who found some in Denmark! South of Copenhagen! Apparently, it’s 66 million years old—so we’re talking end of the Cretaceous, no joke—and contained two types of sea lily. Word on the street is a prehistoric fish threw up the parts it couldn’t digest.

Someone: What are you talking about?

Me: Didn’t you say dinosaur vomit?

Someone: No.

Me: Well, anyway, sea lilies aren’t very nutritious, it turns out.

Gambit 2:

Someone: (Says something inflammatory/annoying/on a topic that I don’t consider polite in company.)

Me: That’s so interesting! It really makes me think of how my third-grade students in China would challenge me to ping-pong at recess, because they thought it was the most hilarious thing in the world that I’m so terrible at it. So, even though I was ostensibly on playground duty, the entire playground was gathered around the ping-pong table watching me get my butt kicked by an 8-year-old. It was pretty funny.

Someone: How is that even remotely

related to what I said?

Me: Oh, you know, the back and forth of it all.

Gambit 3:

Someone: (Expounds on a subject that needs changing.)

Me (pointing dramatically): Yikes, what on Earth is that???

Everyone: (turns to look, sees nothing)

Me: Huh. Weird. It’s not there anymore. Much like vomiting dinosaurs!

Unfortunately, the advice I gleaned from the internet isn’t much better vis-à-vis changing the subject. The best of a fairly sorry lot was from CNN, which offered five possible ways to change the conversational subject:

1. Make a pit stop.
2. Use flattery.
3. Enlist help.
4. Play word association.
5. Deflect.

I can’t see any of these being great, but I’m willing to try.

Someone: (Annoying.)

Me: Will you excuse me, please? I ate fish tacos before I came here and the fish didn’t smell bad or wrong, per se, just... not right, if you see what I’m saying?

It wasn’t deviant, but it wasn’t correct, either. So, I gotta go. Literally.

OR

Someone: (Rude, in my opinion.)

Me: That is an opinion that takes real

boldness and intransigence of character to express! I bet you can really take a punch, am I right?

OR

Someone: (Talking politics, even if I agree.)

Me (focusing my laser gaze on anyone else in the vicinity): Let’s ask them! Excuse me! Can you tell me what time it is? Which doesn’t really have anything to do with what this person here was saying, and I actually am wearing a watch, but maybe I’m really asking about metaphorical or philosophical time! Anyway, help.

OR

Someone: (Kind of a jerk, if I’m honest.)

Me: Interesting that you say egg price, which rhymes with so nice, which rhymes with think twice and also head lice – not so nice, am I right? Anyway, I swear I read that back in the day, people used to douse kids’ heads in kerosene to get rid of lice. Am I misremembering this? Do you know anything about kerosene as a lice treatment?

OR

Someone: (Blah blah whatever.)

Me: I think we should turn this over to a higher authority. Do you happen to have Beyonce’s email?

Rachel Sauer is at rs81501@gmail.com and realizes that reducing the awkwardness of her subject changes is the work of a lifetime.



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