

## *Calamity Camp at historical epicenter of uranium mining*



*The bunkhouse was the largest of the occupied stone cabins during the 1950s on Calamity Mesa. Photo courtesy of Museum of Western Colorado*

By Kathy Jordan

Rumor has it that Calamity Mesa, about eight miles southeast of Gateway, got its name when a prospector's burro ate all his grub, leaving him without food for four days until he could get back to town.

Calamity Camp on the Uncompahgre Plateau has recently been placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Before becoming Calamity Mesa the area was the famous Club Ranch. Owners over the years were R.W. Johnson of the Johnson & Johnson Company, Alex Calhoun, Bill Selby, Ed Lavender and Jim Luster and his brother-in-law George Standifird.

According to Jean Moores' book, "Gateway/Unaweep Canyon At Some Point In Time", Calamity Camp sprung up from 1915 to 1925 when carnotite was being mined for the radium that was derived from the ore.

According to Jean the 1920 census for Gateway listed several men from Sweden classified as miners and boarders. She thinks these men were employed at Calamity Camp and were responsible for helping to build the rustic rock houses of indigenous material. The Radium Company of Colorado paid for building construction.

There were five rock cabins, a bunkhouse, cellars for storage, corrals and a rock and cedar post barn.

Using the mule trail built by a Mr. Pickett in the early 1900s, ore was packed by mule or horseback to Whitewater where it was shipped by rail to Denver or East Orange, N.J. In the late 1920s a road up the Niche to the top of Tenderfoot Mesa and on to Calamity and Outlaw Mesa was built.

The most valuable radium shipment ever recorded by the United States Bureau of Mines was in 1925 mined by Jake Lewis. The 180 tons was valued at \$350,000.

In the second boom, from 1936 to 1944 when carnotite was mined for the vanadium used by the steel industry.

This ore went to Uravan and later to the mill at Gateway. During 1943 and 1944 the Metal Reserve Co. (a federal agency) acquired vanadium for an emergency reserve. Tailings from the Gateway mill were taken to Uravan by the Manhattan Engineer District (MED) in a highly secret mission to recover their valued uranium value in 1944. The general public was unaware that uranium was to be used in the bombs that ended Japan's roll in WWII

In 1944 Union Mines Development Corp. (UMDC), a MED contractor, purchased 42 Calamity claims and shut down the mines. The MED became the United States Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) on Jan. 1, 1947.

In 1948 the AEC, based on the UMDC studies, asked the Bureau of Land Management to withdraw six and one-quarter square miles on Calamity Mesa for additional geologic study. Existing valid claims were excluded from the withdrawal.

The AEC contracted with the U.S. Geological Survey to drill areas recommended by UMDC. When drilling discovered lots of ore UMDC deeded the Calamity claim to the United States on Feb. 28, 1949.

The AEC leased the area to the U.S. Vanadium Corp. (Union Carbide) on July 1, 1949. The company mined uranium and vanadium ore through 1960.

Currently the Grand Junction Department of Energy office office has leased the six and one-quarter square-mile area for uranium exploration except for the 37.89 acres in the area of the camp.

Jean Moores and her husband, Vern, and their three children - a three-year-old, a two-year-old and a nine-month old baby - moved into the smallest of the rock houses at Calamity Camp in 1954. Jean's brother, Rodney, and Vern had a verbal lease with Devar Shumway who had contracted with Union Carbide.

Jean gave a description in her book of a not-so-easy life at Calamity.

Water was pumped from a spring below the camp into a storage tank. Although there was a washhouse for use of the families who worked for the company owners Jean as a renter was not allowed to use it. Gladys, who cooked for her mate, his boss and others, let Jean use the company washhouse. This made life a lot easier than hauling water up hill and washing diapers by hand every day.

Jean said the only one window in the house where the afternoon sun shone through was in the front door. Lizards would come out of the rock and lie in the sun shine on the warped board floor. One day she found one next to the baby asleep in his crib.

Jean and Vern drilled until 1957 when uranium exploration started to slow down. They then moved to Gateway where Vern started hauling uranium ore for McFarland and Hullinger.

Saturday the BLM, Museum of Western Colorado and Gateway Canyon Resorts are hosting a celebration which is open to the public. The kickoff will be at 5 p.m. at the Gateway Canyon Resort's theatre with a presentation about the Hanging Flume. Dinner, which will be \$10 at the door, is at 6 p.m. in the ballroom.

Speakers will be John Horn of Alpine Archeology and Dr. Heather Bailey, a State and National Register Historian.