The Road to Gas Hills Uranium

With the atomic bombings of Japan by the United States that ended World War II, the world saw for the first time the power of the unleashed atom. In 1949, the Soviet Union responded by detonating its first nuclear device, Joe 1. The nuclear arms race began. It--coupled with technoutopic dreams that nuclear power could create peaceful, abundant, safe, and inexpensive energy--created a massive appetite for uranium by the United States Government, which explored both military and peacetime uses of nuclear material. The government had established a civilian organization, the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), in 1947 to promote and oversee uranium mining and the development of nuclear technologies. The AEC set itself up as the sole legal purchaser of processed yellowcake uranium, promised a healthy price for uranium, and even offered a $10,000 bonus on initial delivery of “20 tons of ore or concentrates that assay 20 percent or more in uranium oxide, provided that the material comes from a new, previously unworked deposit”.

In Wyoming, these incentives led to a major uranium discovery by Neil McNeice, a machine shop owner/operator; his wife, Maxine; and their friend, Lowell Morfeld, an oilfield worker. “We both [McNeice and Morfeld] were reading about uranium and geology,” explained Neil McNeice. “...[W]e talked about uranium prospecting and made a verbal agreement to be partners in uranium prospecting. Our agreement was simple, if one of us found it, we were both there.” On a warm Sunday, September 13, 1953, the McNieces loaded up their lunch, their hunting rifles, and the Geiger counter that Maxine got for Neil as the previous year’s Christmas present into their Dodge Power Wagon pickup truck and headed from Riverton to the desolate Gas Hills. Morfeld, who had
worked late the previous night, stayed behind. A Lucky Mc company newsletter from early 1962 describes their outing as follows:

Approaching the Gas Hills from the west, Neil tried out the Geiger counter on many of the eroded exposures but no rewarding “clicks” came through. After eating their lunch on what is now known as Picnic Hill, a small shaley knob, […] Neil idly swept the surrounding country for antelope signs, meanwhile studying through his field glasses each rock exposure coming into his field of vision. He noted one particular spot, about one-half a mile away, near the base of another small erosional remnant, whose color appeared to be somewhat different than the surrounding area. He and Maxine strolled over, looked at the oddly colored sandstone, placed the Geiger counter on it – and the needle went off the dial! The seed was planted for the great Gas Hills industrial complex.iv

That day, the McNieces filed eight mining claims, with more the following week. Morfeld and the McNieces named their company Lucky Mc (pronounced “Lucky Mack”) because of the Lucky McNieces.

As Lucky Mc continued to expand their claims portfolio, they sought a business interest with the experience and equipment necessary to develop the claims. They soon attracted the interest of Utah Construction Company, a well-established and successful construction firm known for its work in such projects as the Hoover Dam and the Alaska Highway. Utah Construction had slowly begun to branch out into mining. They agreed to spend at least $300,000 to develop Lucky Mc uranium assets, and the two companies eventually merged.v

The uranium operations controlled by the Lucky Mc division of the newly-renamed Utah Construction & Mining Company were so successful that the company went public on the New York Stock Exchange in 1969 and, in the largest corporate merger in US history up to the time, merged with General Electric in 1976. The uranium assets in Wyoming were instrumental in this merger because they gave GE a direct source of fuel for the nuclear power plants that they were developing.
Meanwhile, a restaurant owner in Rawlins, Wyoming, Robert W. “Bob” Adams, became fascinated by uranium when he read about Charlie Steen, whose uranium discovery in southern Utah became the famous and extremely lucrative Mi Vida mine, in a 1952 edition of the Saturday Evening Post. By the time he heard about the Lucky Mc discovery in 1953, he decided to start looking for uranium himself. As he searched, he quickly burned through the $5,000 he had saved, along with an additional $70,000. Finding uranium had become an obsession. “A doctor's specimen, I'm sure, would have sat a Geiger counter to ticking,” he said. In March 1955, he founded a stock company called Lost Creek Oil and Uranium. By selling shares at 10 cents apiece, he raised nearly $300,000, which allowed him to continue his search. He located viable deposits of uranium about 30 miles south of Gas Hills in the Crooks Gap area and felt that the surest way to be profitable in the uranium business was to mill and mine the metal.

In August 1956, Adams secured a contract with the AEC to build Wyoming's first uranium mill, and he found financial backing to the tune of roughly $5,000,000. These backers included a prominent Rawlins physician, Dr. C. W. Jeffreys, who had made a small fortune investing in oil. On September 12, 1957, Adams dedicated Wyoming's first uranium processing mill and the town his company built to support its mining and milling operations. Adams named the town Jeffrey City to honor Dr. Jeffreys. Adams' financial backers insisted that he change the name of his company to Western Nuclear, Inc., which occurred in December 1959.

A machinist, oil worker, and restaurateur were not the only unlikely prospectors to strike it rich in Wyoming's uranium rush. Cotter Ferguson, a traveling clothing salesman, and Irv Marshak, a clothing dealer, also founded what would become a uranium-based empire in the Gas Hills. Ferguson's wife sent him newspaper clippings about uranium while he was working in Washington
State. He and Marshak returned to Wyoming with a Geiger counter and, with the help of some friends from Illinois, they staked claims in the Gas Hills and formed the Gas Hills Uranium Company, Inc. In 1957, Gas Hills Uranium and a subsidiary of Federal Uranium began a partnership that became known as Federal Gas Hills Partners. Together, Federal Gas Hills Partners contracted with the AEC and built a uranium processing mill in 1959. They provided uranium for the Tennessee Valley Authority’s nuclear power activities. Later, in 1967, Gas Hills Uranium changed their name to American Uranium, and the partnership became Federal American Partners.

Throughout the history of uranium production in Wyoming, Federal Gas Hills Partners (later Federal American Partners) was one of the three most prominent companies, behind only Lucky Mc and Western Nuclear in production and importance.

Between the 1950s and the early 1980s, the uranium industry celebrated highs and suffered downturns, but it generally dominated Central Wyoming’s economy. The importance of uranium for Central Wyoming was apparent, even from the very beginning. Less than a year after the McNiece discovery, the June 29, 1954, Riverton Ranger editorialized,

> People who have become interested in the Fremont county uranium boom are playing a part in one chapter of the great story called the Atomic Age. [...] The excitement found in the discovery and conquest of uranium is just as thrilling as the Gold Rush fever of a century ago, and the rewards may be just as lucrative for the successful, the heartaches as real for the disappointed.

In January of 1956, Riverton opened an AEC buying station. Within two years, Fremont County would have its own uranium processing mill; within a decade, it would have five. The state quickly became one of the major uranium producers in the country, and dozens of companies, both established firms and hopeful startups, muscled in for a portion of the country’s newest, promising uranium market. These companies brought thousands of people—workers and their families—to these once isolated areas in search of employment.
The growth of the uranium industry in these isolated areas of Central Wyoming put uranium producers in a similar situation to extractive industries of previous generations. Companies that began extractive activities in desolate areas of the West often had little choice but to build and manage company towns: housing for their employees; stores for food, clothing, and other necessities; recreational opportunities; and other amenities. As the American West modernized, these company towns began to either disappear or incorporate and diversify. The decline in company towns occurred especially after World War II with the development of modern transportation and communication networks, which connected the once-isolated Western United States to the Eastern states. Historian James B. Allen argued in his 1966 book, *The Company Town in the American West*, that “the growth of cities and towns in the West, together with the development of modern roads, highways, and automobiles, has largely eliminated” the necessity of the company town.xiv

Wyoming’s low population density meant that it continued to exhibit many characteristics of the traditional American West. Its uranium industry in the 1950s was a newborn industry, and uranium deposits were located far away from population centers because the economic motive for large-scale economic activity had never previously existed in these areas. Even though Wyoming’s uranium was far less isolated, both economically and physically, than resources that bred company towns of previous generations, the industry’s appetite for manpower made building company towns prudent. Lucky Mc, Federal Uranium, and other mining operators built camps in the Gas Hills which came to function as one town, complete with a school and, for a time, a privately owned and operated grocery store. Western Nuclear built Jeffrey City in the Crooks Gap area to support its mining and milling operations.

In agreement with Allen’s thesis, the arrival or existence of transportation infrastructure influenced the culture and management of these towns. Built on a paved secondary state highway,
Jeffrey City residents’ main cause of isolation was distance and climate. Traveling to Lander, where most of the town’s residents did major shopping, normally took just over one hour. This highway traverses Beaver Rim—a high-altitude plateau extending from the Wind River Mountains to the Gas Hills. Winter travel was dangerous, sometimes even impossible, which made commuting an unpleasant proposition for Jeffrey Citians. Even though there was no obligation from the company to do so, the vast majority of people employed in the uranium industry in the Crooks Gap area preferred to live in Jeffrey City.

In contrast to Jeffrey City, Gas Hills sprang up in a much more isolated region of the state. Though geographically closer to population centers, the whole region completely lacked infrastructure of any kind, including improved roads. When the McNieces discovered uranium in the Gas Hills, getting to the area from Riverton required taking a “faint wagon and oil truck track, winding its torturous way over sand hills, sage brush flats, and dry sand washes.” Improving these roads quickly became a major concern. The new industry depended on access to roads for two reasons. First, Wyoming’s first AEC buying station was located in Riverton, requiring companies to haul truckloads of unprocessed ore from the Gas Hills area to Riverton. The first processing mills in the Gas Hills would not appear until 1957. Second, without improved roads, moving machinery and men in and out of Gas Hills could be very difficult. In February 1955, a dozen men in three different groups “[s]pent an uncomfortable night […] after their vehicles became trapped in deep snow as they tried to make their way into Riverton from Gas Hills.” One group of Lucky Mc employees, including Neil McNiece and Lowell Morefeld, was forced to abandon one of their two vehicles. Just one week later, a similar spring storm stranded 21 people in 13 vehicles for three days and two nights. This group was rescued by the coordination of a bulldozer, whose owner happened to be staying in the Gas Hills, and a chartered airplane.
Almost as soon as mining activity began, mining companies pushed for the construction of an improved road to link them with Riverton. In January 1955, the AEC announced in a letter to the Riverton Chamber of Commerce that “insofar as there now appears to be reserves and potential to warrant construction of a road [to the Gas Hills,] plans are being made toward that end.” Once approved, the AEC would ask congress to appropriate necessary funding to the Bureau of Public Roads, and construction could begin. The project proceeded, the AEC allotted funding, and construction on a $300,000 leveled and graded two-lane gravel road began in spring of 1956. The AEC program that funded roads such as this was not designed to provide hard-surfaced roads, but simply to provide access roads sufficiently graveled and drained as to provide year-round access to the region.\textsuperscript{xviii}

The AEC-funded gravel road was completed in 1957. Upon its completion, some workers began to commute. Starting in 1959, high-school students from the Gas Hills traveled in excess of four total hours every weekday to and from Riverton to attend classes.\textsuperscript{xix} This road was an important first step, but it was already insufficient upon completion. Shortly after construction ended, the Riverton Ranger observed that traffic on this narrow gravel road “now resembles the Pennsylvania Turnpike with its churning traffic.”\textsuperscript{xx} Within one year of its completion, nearly 400 vehicles traveled the 40-mile road daily.\textsuperscript{xxi} The population of the area increased rapidly. In 1955, the community of Gas Hills consisted of just “eight trailers […] parked around the headquarters building” containing a bunkhouse, kitchen, and mess hall.\textsuperscript{xxii} By the 1960 census, the population had swelled to 1129, becoming, for a time, the third largest town in Fremont County.\textsuperscript{xxiii} The Wyoming Mining Association, in a September 1957 letter to Governor Milward Simpson, encouraged swift action on improving the road’s condition:
“[..]With the influx of workmen to these growing operations, it is evident that the situation will become progressively worse. It is not only a problem in the transportation of workmen and supplies, but also one of school and medical facilities for workers and their families, as well as providing the necessities for life.

"The companies concerned have the problems of transporting large quantities of materials. Each has his own roadways to maintain but it does not appear reasonable that the main road used by all should not be adequately constructed and maintained as a public highway. To us, it appears that the main road is heavily traveled. Those using it pay the usual gas tax. In addition, the uranium companies are heavy users of gasoline and diesel fuel for off-highway purposes and pay the usual gas tax on this fuel.xxiv

Governor Simpson, who had visited the Gas Hills and Crooks Gap area just a month earlier, lent a sympathetic ear, but initially deferred action to the County Commissions of Fremont and Natrona Counties, who were already planning on meeting to discuss the issue.xxv

After nearly a year, with no apparent movement on the road issue, A.V. Quine of Lucky Mc, and Chairman of the Operator's Road Committee in the Gas Hills sent a lengthy memo to the Governor, again urging swift action on the road. Quine claimed that “time is of the essence: we cannot wait ten years or more to get a road,” and that gravel roads are too costly to maintain at an acceptable level, so a paved road is necessary. Quine hoped to help the State find a way to pave not only the Riverton to Gas Hills Road, but also the road from the Gas Hills to Jeffrey City. He recognized that such an expensive undertaking could be politically hazardous, but hoped that:

Our ingenuity and political perspicacity would find a way, especially when we are talking about an industry whose products will be worth more than $500,000,000 within the next decade, the bulk of which would no doubt circulate in Wyoming.xxvi

His principal suggestion to spend roughly $4,000,000 to build a paved road. To pay for it, Quine suggested leveraging federal/state Mine to Market funds wherein the Federal Government contributes 65%, leaving the state to contribute $1,400,000. Quine proposed building the road immediately and allowing mining companies to repay the State by using $600,000 in estimated fuel
taxes over the next four years, combined with $800,000 in a special fee that mining operators in the region would pay the state over the next four to eight years.

This proposal intrigued Simpson, who began to take a more active role in the project, believing that “the future of the industry and the future of Wyoming is hinged on this [the road] project.” Responding to Quine, he wrote, “Your delineation, pointing out all of the ramifications of this gigantic project, has my head awhirl! I am not going to go off half-cocked without a full interpretation of your suggestions as applied to the law.” Simpson felt that “the answer lies in approaching the oncoming session of the legislature, which meets in January 1959,” but committed to do what he could sooner to find a solution:

> Without committing you or your company, and without revealing the source of the information, I am shooting [the memo] along to various avenues which enable us to come up with something that will be realistic. Believe me, my friend, I am most grateful to you for your valuable assistance in this undertaking.

The Governor forwarded the memo on to several advisors noting his belief that “our plans and legal specifications are archaic and outmoded when it comes to assisting a new and enterprising industry in such areas as this.” In his letter to J. R. Bromley, Superintendent of the State Highway Department, he wrote, “The thing I would like you to do for me is for you and Thorm and the boys over there to put your slide rule to this matter and come up with a suggestion as to how we can get this job done.”

In response to the Governor, the Wyoming Taxpayer’s Union concluded that there “numerous fallacies in the memorandum” which made its suggestions “impractical.” Their response stated that they knew of “no simple solution, and unless the Fremont County commissioners [were] willing to change their priorities, […] the only other recourse [would be] political action.” Thomas O. Miller, the Attorney General elaborated on these fallacies – essentially explaining that Wyoming
law prohibited a taxation scheme that would allow a specific industry to be taxed in a nonuniform way in order to repay a specific project such as this. He further noted that Wyoming’s balanced budget requirement would make this road difficult to construct as proposed. Miler concluded, as did most, that the only recourse was legislative action.xxxi

Though Mining operators and state, county, and local governments understood the importance of good roads, none of these entities possessed the proper mechanisms to act quickly and unilaterally to improve transportation. No mineral boom in Wyoming had yet occurred that involved such a time-sensitive, valuable natural resource in such an isolated area. Winning AEC contracts depended on the ability of mining companies to get their production to the market. The ideal for them was to complete the whole road immediately. But the statutes governing funding and construction of roadways in Wyoming required much slower, more deliberate action. Though road construction would eventually occur, it would take more than a decade for the full road from Riverton to the Gas Hills to be paved, while the road from the Gas Hills to Jeffrey City and the Crook’s Gap area would always be gravel.

Throughout 1959, problems with the road continued to cause headaches for mining companies in the Gas Hills. In February, ten foot high snow drifts closed off all travel to and from the area for a few days.xxxii At the end of March, Fremont County Commissioners met to discuss the county’s road needs and priorities for road construction projects. Noticeably absent from the agenda was the Gas Hills Road.xxxiii In response to this meeting, Quine again aired his frustration at the lack of progress on the road: “We have labored under the apparent naive impressions that roads were built for the public good.” He noted that despite more than two years of struggling to find a
solution to improve the roads, “one of the greatest industrial enterprises is left to wallow in the mud.” xxxiv

In spring of 1959, the tide began to turn slowly towards progress on the Gas Hills Road. In late April, Fremont County placed five road graders for a few days on the road and installed several culverts to improve drainage and prepare for the busier months. Upon completion, one grader was designated to work the road full-time. At the same time, members of the Lander Chamber of Commerce wrote to Wyoming Senators Joseph C. O’Mahoney and Gale W. McGee and congressman Keith Thompson seeking federal aid to improve the road. xxxv Later in May, the county added a second road grader to maintain the road full-time. June brought with it yet another, more realistic plan to pave the road, which would essentially designate the Gas Hills road a State Secondary road, place it in second priority behind the another road in the county – the Lander-Diversion Dam road – and split funding with that road. In discussing this new plan with the Lander Chamber of Commerce, Quine stated, “We can't depend entirely on Uncle Sam for help, unless we subscribe to the Big Brother philosophy.” This was an apparent response to the Lander Chamber having no recommendation “other than to ask for federal help.”xxxvi Finally, on June 4th, the County Commission passed a resolution asking the State Highway Commission to declare the Gas Hills Road a secondary highway, essentially following Quine’s plans.

The Highway Commission, in turn, dealt another setback to the Gas Hills Road. Though the Diversion Dam project was a primary road, the Highway Commission ruled that that project must be finished using State secondary funding before any additional secondary designated road work in the county could begin. xxxvii In response, Gas Hills residents, “long frustrated by broken springs,
blown out tires, and aching sacroiliacs, finally blew a well-deserved fuse […] over the condition of their road to Riverton.”

They directed their anger at the two largest towns nearest them – Riverton and Lander – and at the County Commissioners upon whose shoulders rests the prime responsibility for the condition of their road. The frustration took the form of a petition threatening economic boycott at Riverton and Lander if something wasn't done for the Gas Hills Road and its dust, wash boards, chuck holes, blind curves, and sundry other ills. Lander took one look at the petition and according to their radio station, chucked the petition in to the waste basket, referred to as "file 13" by the president of the Lander Chamber of Commerce. xxxviii

Despite the treatment given this petition by the Lander Chamber, the petition seems to have been a turning point in the struggle to complete the road, and things began to move more quickly. Highway Commissioner Harold DelMonte announced in November that Federal aid for State Secondary roads would no longer be used for the Diversion Dam road, releasing $320,000 annually to the Gas Hills Road project. This funding could potentially be combined with a total of $180,000: $90,000 annually from mining companies in the Gas Hills, and an additional $90,000 in matching state-county highway funds.

The potential availability of $500,000 annually to construct the road to Gas Hills concerned some Wyomingites, undoubtedly familiar with the boom-bust cycles common in the history of Western mining towns. They worried that there was “not much sense in building a first class road if, about the time the road is finished, the ore is all mined out and the mills standing idle.”xxxix People speaking in favor of the road argued that, with the end of AEC contracts coming in 1966, a private market will emerge, but with uranium prices that could be higher or lower than the current guaranteed rate. However, “efficient, low cost production areas with latest design mills will be in the best position to compete in a free market for uranium.” They argued that a good road would ensure the competitiveness of the Gas Hills area in the private market. “In short,” they argued, “the
industry is looking for a good 20 years full-blast operation. A good road into the area will put local industry in a better position to produce uranium and yellowcake over the next 20 to 25 years.\textsuperscript{xl}

Operators in the Gas Hills, with the funding available, obviously wanted the road built as quickly as possible with as little cost to themselves as possible. Since matching funds had to be acquired before survey and work could begin, operators sought was to quickly match those funds. Quine presented a plan that would begin the survey and construction immediately, where the state would be allowed to count the roughly $100,000/year that the companies spend on maintenance of the AEC-built gravel road as their $90,000 matching contribution to the county/state fund.\textsuperscript{xi} The Fremont County Commissioners rejected this proposal, removing their matching $90,000 from availability for the project, which would have to proceed on only the $320,000 in annual state Secondary road funding.\textsuperscript{xlii}

Nevertheless, in February of 1960 surveys for the paved roadway began with the assurance that “every obstacle has now been cleared for start on the road.”\textsuperscript{xliii} During the rest of 1960, the Highway Department surveyed the first twelve miles of the road. In October, with surveys on going, but no contracts open yet for bidding, and no dirt work done on the road, State Superintendent of Education made a plea for quick action. Superintendent Velma Linford, who had recently visited the Riverton school district which also served Gas Hills, wrote to the Governor, now J. J. Hickey, and Highway Commissioner J. R. Bromley. She emphasized the negative impact of bad roads on the area’s high school students: “With the present road conditions, the trip requires two hours and 15 minutes at best and children arrive at school in the morning and home at night battered from a hard ride.”\textsuperscript{xliv} Her letters were joined in late October by an additional pair of petitions: one from around 500 Gas Hills residents and one from around 100 Riverton residents
who worked in the Gas Hills, wondering why it was taking so long to get started on the road’s
construction.  E.R. Record promised that construction would occur “just
as fast as secondary money accrues to Fremont County.” Furthermore, Governor Hickey
promised to explore all possible funding options to speed construction of the entire road.

Unfortunately for Gas Hills residents and operators, no additional funding would ever be
secured, State Secondary funds alone constructed the road in stages over the next several years (See
table) Once construction finally began, operators and residents continued to occasionally petition
for more quick action on the road. One significant petition occurred in 1962, when many Gas Hills
residents were unable to leave on Easter weekend due to mud. However, once road construction
began, these petitions occurred less frequently, and did not carry the weight or urgency that previous
petitions had carried.

Completion of the fourth stage of the Gas Hills road brought the road roughly 75% of the
way from Riverton to Gas Hills. Its completion coincided with a decline in the uranium industry that
resulted from preparation for the allotment period, the time between 1963~1970 when the AEC
scaled back its purchases of refined yellowcake uranium. During this time, the AEC had sufficient
uranium stockpiles for its activities, but had not yet put in place the regulatory mechanisms for
private nuclear power. With between 10 and 12 miles remaining, no further surfacing occurred for
several years.

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Improvements to the Gas Hills road combined with a the allotment period in the uranium industry brought the towns in the Gas Hills into a state of decline. Though precise population figures are difficult to track down, enrollment in the Gas Hills school tells some of the story. After reaching a high of 193 students in the 1960-1961 school year, school enrollment began to shrink. Every stage of improvement to the road made commuting from Riverton more and more feasible. The near completion of the road in 1963 and the allotment period especially reduced the population and importance of the towns. In the Gas Hills. By the 1963-1964 school year, enrollment in the Gas Hills fallen to roughly half its previous high.

After a slow half-decade, the uranium industry once again took off in the Central Wyoming in the 1970s. With AEC approval, private utility companies began to invest heavily in nuclear power, and this private market eventually pushed the price to roughly five times the price paid by the AEC prior to the Allotment Period. “With the resurgence of uranium demands” in 1969, “the Fremont County Commissioners returned the completion of road to their priority list.” Finally, By 1970, a “black ribbon stream[ed] out across the Fremont County sagebrush from Riverton” into the heart of the Gas Hills. This boom lasted until shortly after the Three Mile Island incident in 1979. Lucky Mc, “the Grand-daddy of the Gas Hills uranium operators,” had already began setting new production records as early as 1972. Other uranium companies in the Gas Hills, as well as Western Nuclear in Crooks Gap experienced similarly robust growth. However, this growth in the Gas Hills industry was not reflected in the physical growth of the community in the Gas Hills. That same year, the elementary school in the Gas only had 50 students, just over one quarter the number enrolled at the height of the AEC-sponsored uranium boom of the 1950s-1960s.
Through at least 1960, more people lived in Gas Hills than lived in Jeffrey City. After the completion of the road, Jeffrey City became the more isolated town, and the trend reversed. At the end of the 1970s, most people in the Gas Hills lived in Federal’s small camp of trailer spaces and a few cinder-block houses, or in Lucky Mc’s camp of 40 trailer spaces; the vast majority of uranium workers in the Gas Hills lived in and commuted daily from Riverton. Even the Gas Hills School’s four teachers commuted daily from Riverton. Meanwhile, Jeffrey City reached a peak population of somewhere near 5,000 inhabitants. It had several dozen single-family site-built homes, half a dozen multi-family townhomes, and hundreds of trailer spaces. Its high school opened in 1977, and by the end of the decade, Jeffrey City’s schools had a total enrollment of around 650. Businesses would include two grocery stores, several filling stations, a bowling alley, a movie theater, a motel, a hardware store, and multiple bars and restaurants. Jeffrey City’s growth compared to the Gas Hills occurred despite the industry in the Gas Hills area employing 57% more workers than the same industry in the Jeffrey City/Crooks Gap area at their peak employment in 1980.

The Three Mile Island incident in March, 1979 spooked the nuclear power industry. The next year, utility companies delayed 16 new nuclear power plants, and canceled 69 of them. Uranium prices went into a freefall, dropping below their cost of production, and in part thanks to cheap imported uranium, stayed there. This decimated the United States domestic uranium industry. By 1983, uranium employment had fallen by 70 percent in the Gas Hills, and by 94 percent in Jeffrey City. Some limited production would continue through the 1980s as companies waited for a recovery that never occurred. Today, Jeffrey City is still home to a few dozen ranchers, recluses, and eccentrics, but all of the camps in the Gas Hills have disappeared completely. The area’s mills were decommissioned and demolished in the early 1990s, and though some mine reclamation continues today, only subtle clues still exist of the once great “Gas Hills Industrial Complex.” The primary
clue: a well maintained but rarely used two lane paved road that starts in Fremont County’s largest town and ends in the middle of a sagebrush desert. A road which once carried many hundreds of people to and from work on a daily basis, but now likely has more cattle and antelope travelers than automotive travelers. A road whose purpose is hardly known, even by local inhabitants, despite supporting the county’s largest industry for more than two decades.

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i “Uranium Changes Economy of West, AEC Man Declares,” Riverton Ranger, June 1, 1954, sec. 1.
vii “Western Nuclear Corporation Has Adventure, Daring Filled History,” Wyoming State Tribune and Eagle, July 26, 1957.
ix William Anthony Romek.
x Charles Snow, Chasing Gas Hills Yellowcake, 149.
xii “Front Stage of Act One on the Atomic Stage,” Riverton Ranger, June 29, 1954, sec. A.
xii “Western Nuclear Corporation Has Adventure, Daring Filled History,” Wyoming State Tribune and Eagle, July 26, 1957.
xv Lucky Mc Newspaper, “The Story of Lucky MC.”
xviii “Access Road to Be a 2-Lane Gravel Route to Gas Hills,” Riverton Ranger, December 7, 1955.
xxviii Milward Simpson, “Letter to A. V. Quine in Response to His Funding Proposal for the Gas Hills Road,” July 17, 1957, Milward Simpson Collection Box 189, Folder 13, American Heritage Center at University of Wyoming.
xxx “Letter from Wyoming Taxpayers Association to Governor Milward Simpson on the Gas Hills Road Proposal,” July 21, 1958, Milward Simpson Collection Box 189, Folder 13, American Heritage Center at University of Wyoming.


xxxiii “Road Hearing Tuesday at 10,” Riverton Ranger, March 26, 1959.


xxxv “Place Five Patrols on Access Road,” Riverton Ranger, April 23, 1959.

xxxvi “Present New Plan to Try To Pave the Gas Hills U-Road,” Riverton Ranger, June 2, 1959.


xl “Editorsly Speaking: Gas Hills Uranium Has Long Life Ahead, Road Needed.”


xlii “Commissioners Say No To $90,000 on Gas Hills Road,” Riverton Ranger, February 25, 1960.


xliv “New Demand, Gas Hills Road.”


xlix “Call for Bids on GH School,” Riverton Ranger, September 17, 1963.


liii “Riverton Population Hits 6,784; Gas Hills Third Largest, Has 1,129.”

lii “Gas Hills Grade School Is One Big Happy Family.”


lv “Nearly 4000 Uranium Jobs Lost over the Period of Three Years,” Riverton Ranger, June 17, 1983.

lvi “Uranium Comeback Predicted within Two to 10 Years,” Riverton Ranger, June 18, 1981.

lvii “Nearly 4000 Uranium Jobs Lost over the Period of Three Years.”