

The History of Las Colonias Park:  
Historic Crossroads Along the Riverfront  
Of Grand Junction, Colorado

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## **I. Introduction**

The history of the land surrounding the Colorado River has a rich multicultural heritage that reaches back centuries. For all desert dwellers throughout history, rivers are the source of life itself. Long before asphalt, they were the highways of the desert, carrying people and guiding travelers. They draw people and animals to their banks, offering shelter and sustenance. Riverwater is the lifeblood of Western agriculture and industry; without the power and life force of rivers, Western cities would be limited and sparse. The river draws all people to its banks, no matter their origin, and we in turn pull from rivers to sustain our societies.

The history of Grand Junction, situated at the confluence of the Gunnison and Colorado, is the history of the land around the rivers—a fact that has often been forgotten in the rush of twentieth century industrial development. Within the boundaries of the modern city, few areas are as representative of the rich, multicultural history surrounding Western rivers as the land now known as Las Colonias Park. This remarkable stretch of land carries within its earth moments that define Grand Junction, and which are emblematic of the larger course of Western history. Long before it bore the name of Grand Junction, the banks of the Colorado River were used by the Utes; it was near here that the Spanish and the Natives created a centuries-long system of cross-cultural trade along that developed into the iconic Old Spanish Trail. And it was here that the agricultural dreams of the city founders were watered through irrigation, and their industrial aspirations were built in the form of factories. Though the river was central to the city's development, the history of the riverfront in the twentieth century is also a story of neglect, and forgetting. For it was on this land that one of the West's major uranium mills was constructed, its byproducts poisoning the land and the water. Throughout it all, the area remained culturally rich:

it was here, along the river and in its surrounding neighborhoods, that Hispanic migrants lived and worked, building a community that has permanently enriched Grand Junction.

Above all, the story of Las Colonias Park is the story of different people coming together to form communities. From the Spanish and Ute traders to the Hispanic migrants who built lives and homes on its banks to the more recent community-wide efforts to restore and preserve the riverfront, this stretch of land has been a convergence point for people and culture. After nearly 30 years of work, the land is poised to enter into a new era as a developed city park, but it is important that its history not be forgotten in the transition. The history of the Old Spanish Trail, the sugar beet industry, the uranium years, and the remediation and restoration of the land are all vital to the story of Grand Junction: these themes demonstrate both the various cultures and the economic changes that have shaped the Grand Valley.

## **II. The Old Spanish Trail**

The rich colorful history of the Grand Valley stretches far back, centuries before pioneers from the East settled here. The story of this region, like many parts of the American West, involves much more than the traditional narrative of white Euro-Americans emigrating from east to west. The fascinating history of the Old Spanish Trail and its North Branch that crossed through present Las Colonias Park shows the diverse nature of subsistence, trade, conflict, and exploration throughout the region. One can best describe the region through which the trail passed as “borderlands,” as a vast zone of interactions among different cultures: the indigenous Indians whose territories fluctuated, Spaniards from the south and west, French from the northeast, and Anglo-Americans from the east. Over the years, historians and archaeologists have sought to interpret the development and significance of this historic trail network. Indeed, the story begins long before the arrival of Europeans.

The term “Old Spanish Trail” actually describes a trail system that fully developed by the 1820s yet actually consisted of much older paths. The trail system likely developed during prehistoric times, as archaeological evidence shows archaic travel along many parts of the “Old Spanish Trail,” such as artifacts of ancient bison hunters recovered in the San Luis Valley, pictographs along the San Juan Mountain Range, and petroglyphs in Rabbit Valley near the Colorado-Utah border. Indigenous peoples, even predating the more recent Ute Indians, forged the trails that would later comprise much of the Old Spanish Trail. But why it did it become known as the “Old Spanish Trail?” The name undoubtedly sprang from the fact that Spanish explorers and traders were the first Euro-Americans to traverse the entire area, a vast region spanning some of the most rugged terrain of the Southwest. Unlike the earlier indigenous path makers, the Spaniards possessed a written language to convey the geography and ethnography to

later travelers. The term, “Old Spanish Trail,” or “Great Spanish Trail,” appeared long after the area was under Spanish control, first used by the American explorer John C. Fremont during the 1840s.

The Old Spanish Trail evolved slowly through the late 1700s and early 1800s, linking the northern Spanish settlements of Santa Fé and Taos, New Mexico to those in southern California such as Los Angeles and Monterey, a route eventually stretching over 1200 miles. The trail was not acknowledged as a regular trade route until the early 1830s and consisted of several various branches extending over six (present-day) states: New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, Arizona, Nevada, and California. Researchers such as Jack Nelson, Mark Kessler, and David Sanchez have suggested that the oldest portions of the trail system lie in Colorado.

Any study of the Old Spanish Trail must first consider the Ute Indians who inhabited this region for over four centuries. First on foot, then on horses, the Utes undoubtedly established many trails which later became branches of the Old Spanish Trail through New Mexico, Colorado, and Utah. Being some of the first Native Americans to acquire horses during the late 1600s, the Utes fragmented into six tribes that occupied parts of northern New Mexico, northeastern Utah, and most of western Colorado. Some researchers place the number of groups much higher, identifying up to sixteen separate tribes.

Among these groups, the largest was the Tabeguache (Taviwatch), or Uncompahgre Utes. The Tabeguache lived a semi-nomadic life in the mountains and valleys of west central and southwestern Colorado. During the summers, these people would live in the mountains, but during winter they would inhabit lower regions like the Uncompahgre, Gunnison, and Colorado River Valleys. One such wintering spot likely existed near the present Las Colonias Park, three miles downstream near the confluence of the Gunnison and Colorado Rivers. Early interactions

between the “Yutahs” and the early Spanish explorers enormously influenced the evolution of the Old Spanish Trail.

### **The Search for Teguayo**

The earliest Spanish interest in exploration of the northern frontier emerged not only from the hopes of finding precious metals and goals of converting “heathen” Indians to Catholicism , but from a mythological curiosity, the search for the legendary land of *Teguayo*, a mysterious kingdom near a great body of water linked to the mythical origins of the Aztecs. Early Spanish writers and cartographers expressed intrigue concerning legends of the Aztec Indians originating from seven caves near a huge lake to the northwest called *Copala* and references to this kingdom show up in the late 1600s. In a 1686 report to Spanish officials, Fray Alonso de Posada, a Franciscan missionary, linked the land of Teguayo with the Yutah Indians, and wrote that on an expedition into the northern frontier – present northern New Mexico – Juan de Oñate had met with Indians “who said they were from the Kingdom of Teguayo, and seeing him eat from a silver vessel, they told him that in their land there was much of the same metal.” Posada’s journal indicates that other Spanish traders and explorers had ventured as far north as the Colorado River, but very little actual documentation exists since trade with the Utes was banned by Spanish decree.

Despite restrictions that authorities of New Spain instituted to prevent warfare, trade occurred between the Utes and the Spanish settlements of New Mexico. The Utes were some of the first Indians of the Southwest to enter into trade with the Spanish. As early as the late sixteenth century the Utes engaged in seasonal trade with Indians from the Rio Grande pueblos, and soon recognized the Spanish pueblos in New Mexico and began seeking trade with them, predominantly exchanging captured Paiute women and children as slaves for trade goods.

Serious “official” Spanish exploration into the northern frontier did not occur until 1765, when Governor Vélez Cachupín, inspired by reports of a Yutah warrior bringing a piece of silver ore to New Mexico for trade, ordered the first official exploratory expedition into Yutah country. In June of that year, Juan María Antonio Rivera set off from Abiquiu with a small party that included a Ute interpreter and several frontiersmen who possessed some knowledge of Yutah country. The composition of their party and their apparent familiarity with the region indicates that unlicensed, clandestine trade had likely been occurring for years. This expedition’s primary goal concerned locating the source of the silver ore that the Ute Indian, *Cuero de Lobo* (Wolfskin), had traded in Abiquiu.

Traveling northwest into present-day southwestern Colorado, Rivera’s party reached the Dolores River and skirted the western edge of the La Plata and San Juan Mountains. Although they finally succeeded in finding Wolfskin, their attempts to locate the source of the silver which the Indian had brought to New Mexico proved futile. Nevertheless, they had begun the process of exploring the northern Spanish frontier and naming the geographical features, some they had seen and some they had only heard of. They returned to Santa Fe with stories of ancient pueblo ruins, the existence of a large river farther north – Rio del Tizón, the present Colorado River, and strange Indian accounts of bearded, light-skinned men allegedly dressed like Spaniards inhabiting a place to the northwest. His interest piqued by such reports, Governor Cachupín ordered a second expedition into the same region in September of the same year.

The objectives of Rivera’s second expedition of 1765 involved more than the discovery of precious metals. This time the governor directed Rivera in other pursuits, geographic and ethnographic in nature, instructing him to reach the Rio del Tizón, verify its location, discern

more of the local inhabitants, and perhaps identify larger settlements and other nations such as the fabled one where bearded men “dressed in European manner” supposedly lived.

On this second journey, Rivera’s party took basically the same route as before. Travelling up the Dolores River, they headed northeast, crossed the southern part of the Uncompahgre Plateau and descended into the Uncompahgre Valley near present-day Montrose. They reached the confluence of the Uncompahgre and Gunnison Rivers near present-day Delta but discouraged by the Tabehuachi (Tabeguache Ute) Indians who cautioned them about dangers to the north and west, they decided to proceed no farther. As Rivera noted in his diary, before setting off on the return trip to Santa Fe, he carved his name and the date in a cottonwood tree near the confluence of the rivers. Rivera’s expeditions essentially marked the opening of one of the eastern sections of the “Old Spanish Trail,” a branch that later would pass through present-day Grand Junction. Rivera’s northern journeys provided information and incentive for another expedition into Yutah country eleven years later led by Francisco Atanasio Domínguez and Silvestre Velez Escalante.

### **The Dominguez-Escalante Expedition**

Aside from the goal of religious conversion of native peoples, other factors motivated authorities of New Spain to endorse Domínguez’s and Escalante’s proposal for another exploratory expedition into Yutah country. Concerned about both Russian and British threats to Spanish claims along the Pacific coast, officials began considering the possibility of establishing a westward trade trail connecting Santa Fe to Spanish settlements in California such as Los Angeles and Monterey.

In July of 1776, the same year that thirteen English colonies along the Atlantic Coast declared their independence from Britain, the two Catholic priests set out from Santa Fe with

eight others with the intent of finding a route to the Spanish settlements in California. Although Dominguez was the official leader of the expedition, Escalante held more experience and authority as an explorer, having ventured numerous times into the northern Spanish frontier. Among the party were the Muñiz brothers, Andrés and Lucrecio, who had accompanied Rivera eleven years before and who both knew the Ute language. Another notable member of the group was Bernardo de Miera y Pacheco, a cartographer and astronomer who had served in the military fighting Apaches and Comanches. The maps he created from reckonings and Indian accounts throughout the journey, along with Escalante's meticulous journal, became valuable geographical documents shedding new light on the terrain, river courses, and Indian groups of the upper Colorado River Basin. Although Anglo-Americans would later rename some geographical features, many names Spanish explorers ascribed to rivers and mountains remain to this day: Los Piños, Las Animas, San Juan, La Plata, and Dolores.

To establish a westward route to California, Dominguez and Escalante decided on a more northerly route to avoid hostile Indians and inhospitable territory. For the most part they followed Rivera's route into southwestern Colorado, travelling up the Chama River and entering present Colorado near the vicinity of Pagosa Springs. From there they headed west-northwest, past present Durango and Mancos. Skirting the western edges of the La Plata and San Juan Mountain ranges, they laboriously made their way up the rugged Dolores River valley to the area of present-day Slick Rock. Then they turned northeast and crossed the southern end of the Uncompahgre Plateau. Like Rivera, they entered the Uncompahgre Valley south of present-day Montrose.

Escalante's diary entry for August 27, 1776 reveals that many parts of the later "Spanish Trail" were already well-travelled by Indians: "We finished descending the sierra and came to

the banks and meadows of El Rio de San Francisco – among the Yutas called Anacapgari [Uncompahgre] . . . On this river meadow, which is large and very level, there is a very wide and well beaten trail.” This trail would become an important section of the North Branch of the Old Spanish Trail as well as the later Salt Lake Wagon Road.

In the same day’s diary entry, Escalante describes the trail north to confluence of the Uncompahgre and Gunnison Rivers and mentions that Don Juan Rivera had been there in 1765. Inexplicably, instead of heading west, the Dominguez-Escalante party travelled east up the Gunnison River, along its North Fork, then went up and over Grand Mesa and crossed the Colorado River in the proximity of present Debeque. This detour to the northeast may have related to the greater abundance of game and water sources in the higher country, or perhaps reports of hostile Indian tribes directly to the west influenced their decision. From the Colorado River, they took a northwestern route, a very difficult trek, through the rugged Roan-Bookcliff Range and eventually made their way into Utah to the Green River near present-day Jensen. From there, they crossed the Wasatch Mountains and entered Utah Valley near present-day Provo, Utah.

Apprehensive of the coming winter and uncertain of the actual distance to the California missions, the expedition decided to return to Santa Fe. Escalante’s account of this decision reveals the mounting discord within the party. Earlier disagreements frequently arose throughout the journey regarding which courses to take as well as how to deal with different Indian groups. At this point, Meira y Pacheco and Muñiz, wanting to press on to California, argued with the friars about their resolve to return to New Mexico. During such crises, they would pray for guidance, but if that produced nothing, they would cast lots to determine their course of action. At this turning point, they casted lots and the outcome favored the return to Santa Fe.

Instead of retracing their original route, the Dominguez-Escalante party traveled into southwestern Utah near present Cedar City and into northern Arizona. Making their way to the Grand Canyon, they meandered east, made a difficult crossing of the Colorado River in early November, then trekked southeast. Suffering from cold, hunger, and exhaustion, the expedition moved through western New Mexico and finally reached Santa Fe on January 2, 1777. Over the next several days, while recuperating from their adventure, they excitedly described to their friends what they had seen on their journey.

During their five-month journey, Dominguez and Escalante had traveled nearly 2,000 miles, traversing some of the most rugged terrain in North America. Their expedition resulted in the farthest penetration into the mysterious land of *Teguayo* by the Spanish. Although it failed to reach its California destination, their exploration provided the Spanish their first sound knowledge of the Colorado Basin country and paved the way for the development five decades later of the Old Spanish Trail. Indeed, along with countless unknown Indians who blazed the early trails, this early Spanish exploratory endeavor remains an integral part of the history of the American West.

### **Conflict, Trade, and Transition in the Borderlands**

Following the Rivera and Dominguez-Escalante expeditions, official Spanish interest in the northern frontier waned due to increasing conflict with various Indian tribes occurring in the province of New Mexico. Comanches from the North and Apaches from the West raided homesteads, farms, and rancheros, stealing livestock and killing settlers. Governor Don Juan Bautista de Anza moved to resolve the crisis in different ways. He persuaded many of the widely dispersed settlers vulnerable to raids to move into defensible towns, and he led a military force of nearly 600 men up into Colorado through the San Luis Valley to pursue the Comanche

warriors led by Cuerno Verde (Greenhorn). While his defeat of – and subsequent treaty with – the Comanches created somewhat better relations with other Indian tribes, Anza’s foray into the northern frontier resulted in greater Spanish settlement in southern Colorado which in turn affected the later development of the North Branch of the Old Spanish Trail through that area.

Intending to stabilize relations with the Utes and other Indian groups, Spanish officials continued policies of trade restriction for decades, issuing decrees, or *bandos*, banning unlicensed trade in Yutah country. Despite these restrictions, illegal trade flourished through the late 1700s and early 1800s. After the Rivera and Escalante-Dominguez expeditions, many New Mexicans grew interested not only in possibilities of trade with the Pacific coast but also in the whole Colorado Basin. This of course involved illegal trade. Records reveal numerous cases of illicit trade involving everything from exchanging Paiute or Ute slaves for horses and mules, to trading knives and pots for pelts and tanned buckskins, as well as unsanctioned quests into the borderlands to recover kidnapped relatives or stolen livestock. Records show that many illegal traders were tried for their crimes during this era, yet the penalties were usually light and often New Mexican officials themselves became involved in various schemes for profit. These borderlands witnessed a huge transition over the next few decades as great geopolitical changes occurred.

International politics during the early 1800s greatly affected the evolution of the Old Spanish Trail. In 1800, Spain ceded most of its holdings west of the Mississippi River to France, and only four years later, France sold the huge region to the United States in the Louisiana Purchase. While the Spanish still controlled much of the southwest, the land above the Arkansas River became part of the new Missouri Territory owned by the United States. As early as 1807, American traders began trapping beaver in the Green River area in Utah. After Mexico declared

independence from Spain in 1821 and lifted trade restrictions the following year, several American traders ventured into Colorado and Utah seeking fortunes in furs. These changes invigorated further trail building and influenced the development of the North Branch of the Old Spanish Trail.

One entrepreneur who contributed to what later would be known as the Northern Branch of the Old Spanish Trail was Antoine Robidoux, who established two trading posts, one near the confluence of the Uncompahgre and Gunnison Rivers near Delta, Colorado sometime during the late 1820s and another on the Uintah River in Utah a few years later. Robidoux's trading connections to Santa Fe greatly contributed to the development of the North Branch of the Spanish Trail. By early accounts, Robidoux was the first to use wagons – simple two wheeled carts – to haul trade goods south to Santa Fe. Trappers and traders travelling the North Branch trail used only a very small part of the earlier Dominguez-Escalante route. The northern end started near Green River, Utah east to the Grand (Colorado) River, through present-day Grand Junction and continued into the Uncompahgre Valley to present Montrose. From there the route went over the Gunnison Basin, crossing the Continental Divide at Cochetopa Pass and following the San Luis Valley down into New Mexico.

### **The Old Spanish Trail Complete**

What exactly was the “Old Spanish Trail?” Actually, it consisted of several interconnecting trails stretching from Santa Fe to Los Angeles that developed slowly over several decades, only clearly taking shape in the 1830s. During the same time as the Dominguez-Escalante expedition, another missionary-explorer, Fray Francisco Garcés, sought a route from the Spanish missions in California eastward to New Mexico. With the help of Indian guides, in the summer of 1776 Garcés skirted the Grand Canyon and made it all the way to the

Hopi village of Oraibe in northeastern Arizona before turning back. Five decades later, in August 1826, Jedidiah Smith set out from the Great Salt Lake with fifteen men and following the route that Dominguez and Escalante took, traveled to the Sevier River, then southwest to the Mojave Desert. His expedition essentially connected the previous paths of Dominguez-Escalante and Garcés.

The whole trade route between New Mexico and California officially began in 1829, when Antonio Armijo successfully led a trade caravan from Abiquiu, New Mexico across northern Arizona, skirting the Mojave Desert and reaching Los Angeles in eighty-six days. There his party traded woolen serapes for horses and mules and journeyed back to New Mexico the next year. Armijo very likely knew of Jedidiah Smith's route. Otherwise, it is unlikely he would have undertaken such a large and risky commercial enterprise. The Armijo route was the culmination of decades of geographical and ethnographic knowledge of the southwest accumulated over decades by missionaries, traders, slavers, explorers, and trappers.

Although many New Mexicans favored the more direct Armijo route for both trade and travel to California, two other routes were extensively used for trade from the 1830s through the 1850s. The main route basically followed the Dominguez-Escalante route up through southwestern Colorado, entering Utah near Slick Rock, but from there heading northwest to the vicinity of Green River, Utah. This route then veered southwest, past present Cedar City, Utah, connecting with the Armijo trail southwest of St. George on the Virgin River.

The North Branch, which has often been historically neglected, also heads northwest to the Green River and is actually one of the most significant and interesting branches of the historic trail system. Through this part of the Old Spanish Trail much trade occurred between the fur-rich Uintah Basin and Santa Fe, the major trading center of the Rocky Mountains. This

branch of the trail began south of Taos near San Juan Pueblo where it split into two routes on either side of the Rio Grande, later rejoining in the San Luis Valley near present-day Saguache. From there it went over Cochetopa Pass into the Gunnison Basin, headed west skirting the Black Canyon and descended into the Uncompahgre Valley near present Montrose. From there the trail went north across the confluence of the Gunnison and Uncompahgre Rivers and northwest to present Whitewater. It continued west approximately seven miles, then headed due north for about one mile down to the Colorado River. Just west of this area, the Las Colonias neighborhood of Grand Junction would spring up about a century later.

At this point on the river, roughly three miles east of the confluence of the Colorado and the Gunnison Rivers, travelers forded the Colorado River from an arroyo, near present 28 1/4 Road at the northern edge of Orchard Mesa. The route then trailed westward along the Colorado River. Closely skirting the northern edge of the river, it undoubtedly passed through the present Las Colonias Park. The route logically stayed along the north side of the river all the way into Utah. By remaining fairly close to the river, travelers had better access to wood for fuel and especially water for the pack and riding animals. After entering Utah near Rabbit Valley, people and animals found fewer water sources as the trail took a northwesterly route to Green River where it connected to the main route of the Spanish Trail.

### **The Demise of the Great Spanish Trail**

Aside from Antoine Robidoux, William Wolfskill and Ewing Young were some of the first American traders to travel the whole route of the North Branch of the Old Spanish Trail. Their success in trapping in the Uintah Basin, commonly called the “Winty,” led to more commercial travel to that region even before Armijo opened the southern route of the Spanish Trail. By the early 1840s, the fur trade was dying out and hostility between Indians and white

traders was intensifying. Upset with unscrupulous trading and more difficult bargaining, Utes burned both of Robidoux's trading posts about the same time in 1844. Indian wars as well as the decline in the fur trade diminished travel along the North Branch. As Americans opened up other more direct and traversable trails to the west, travel along most routes of the Old Spanish Trail sharply declined during the 1850s. Still the trail attracted other travelers for different reasons.

### **American Exploration on the Trail**

In 1853, Secretary of War Jefferson Davis commissioned Captain John W. Gunnison to conduct a survey of west central Colorado and eastern Utah to determine the feasibility of a Pacific-bound railroad route. From the west side of the Sangre de Cristo Range his party traveled over Cochetopa Pass and into the Gunnison Basin. With great difficulty, the expedition pulled horse-drawn wagons over steep and rugged terrain over Blue Mesa and down into the Uncompahgre Valley near Montrose. By late July, the Gunnison party reached present-day Grand Junction and made a very difficult "crossing of the Grand." Although mileage reports indicate they forded the river near present 31 Road, descriptions of the place more closely match an arroyo near present 28 1/4 Road, a crossing that Indians and traders had long used. The Gunnison expedition was the first to accurately survey and map the region and recorded valuable information regarding the native Ute Indians. The party met disaster near the Sevier River in Utah as Gunnison and seven others of his force were killed by Ute Indians who were upset by recent violence committed by white frontiersmen. Shortly after the Gunnison party traversed the North Branch of the Old Spanish Trail, Colonel John C. Fremont led an expedition across much of the same route on one of his many exploratory trips to California.

Four years later, Colonel William W. Loring led a military expedition across much of the same route as Gunnison's party had taken. The Loring Expedition intended to increase the geographical knowledge of the region, improve the route across Colorado, and firmly establish American authority over land that was acquired from Mexico only eight years before with the end of the Mexican-American War. This expedition was a large undertaking, involving about 300 men, 50 wagons, and hundreds of horses and mules. Their records show that the large group camped on Orchard Mesa just east of a bend in the Gunnison River before traveling due north to ford the river, thus firmly establishing the location of the crossing near 28 1/4 Road.

Approximately thirty years later, Henry Gannett, a surveyor in the Ferdinand Hayden expedition, would record the topography more accurately, showing in much greater detail the contours of the land and explicitly illustrating where different explorers of the past forded the Gunnison and Colorado Rivers. Gannett provided the first detailed topographical mapping of western Colorado. The Hayden expedition, traveling through the area only two decades after the Gunnison and Loring parties, supposedly saw the wagon ruts from both expeditions.

### **Remembering the Old Spanish Trail and Subsequent Trails**

In 1994, people from all over the Southwest enthusiastic about the history of this trail system established the Old Spanish Trail Association (OSTA) "to study, preserve, and protect the Old Spanish Trail." Of course, today highways and buildings cover much of the Old Spanish Trail, but one can still see remnants of the historic North Branch of this route in various places across Colorado such as in the San Luis Valley, and along U.S. Highway 50 between Delta and Grand Junction, and in more remote places such as Rabbit Valley, towards the Colorado-Utah border.

During the late 1990s, local OSTA enthusiasts such as Bill Chenoweth, a renowned geologist, and Jim Robb, a widely respected civic leader, along with others obtained grants to conduct research pertaining to the North Branch of the Old Spanish Trail. Bill Chenoweth went to the National Archives and investigated old maps and journals of the Gunnison and Hayden surveys to confirm that much of the Salt Lake Wagon Road which ran between Ouray, Colorado and Salt Lake City, Utah during the late 1800s actually comprised much of the North Branch of the Old Spanish Trail. Bill Chenoweth and James Robb, among many others, pushed hard for national historic recognition of the trail. This recognition became reality in 2002, with the passage of S 1946, Old Spanish Trail Recognition Act of 2002, which designated the trail system as a National Historic Trail.

The Old Spanish Trail represents an important multicultural aspect of our national and local history. The history of the southwestern borderlands shows the complexities of interactions involving Euro-Americans and native peoples in the “New World,” perhaps more accurately described as the “Old World.” Indeed, the trail system stretching from Santa Fe to the Pacific coast constituted more than just a trade route. It symbolized a zone of interactions between various cultures, interactions that transformed individuals and societies. Western Colorado, the Grand Valley, and the present-day Las Colonias existed and changed within that zone. Indians, traders, explorers, surveyors, and freighters stood at the forefront of the history of Las Colonias Park before Grand Junction existed. During the twentieth century, this riverfront area would witness other legacies immensely important in shaping the Grand Valley’s development.

### **III. Sugar Beet Culture in Western Colorado**

#### **Down by the River**

Like the history of the Old Spanish Trail, the story of Grand Junction's Las Colonias neighborhood encompasses global, national, and regional histories. The sugar beet culture that thrived here in the Grand Valley for nearly eight decades provides an excellent example of this weave. Starting in the 1890s and lasting into the 1970s, the sugar beet industry in west central Colorado constituted a major part of the region's economy and drew emigrants from far and wide, culturally enriching the community. Within the story of the sugar beet culture in the Grand Valley, the Las Colonias area deserves special attention since this is where Colorado's first beet sugar factory was built in 1899, and more importantly, this is where a very unique, culturally diverse community developed throughout the 20th century. One cannot neatly separate the history of the Las Colonias neighborhood from the history of sugar beet culture in Colorado and more specifically in the Grand Valley. The sugar factory down by the river played a huge role in the development of the Grand Valley, of Grand Junction, and of the Las Colonias neighborhood.

Sugar beet culture contributed to the growth and prosperity of communities throughout the Grand Valley, provided further impetus for the expansion of irrigation systems and attracted an ethnically diverse work force to the region. On the eighteenth of November in 1899, the front page of the *Grand Junction Daily News* flashed the headline announcing the start of a new experimental enterprise: “*Sugar From the Beet. The Plant of the Colorado Sugar Manufacturing Company Doing Business – A Mammoth Concern.*” Rivaling and even surpassing the enthusiasm over the fruit industry in the valley, the prospects of sugar beet culture generated excitement not only in west central Colorado but throughout the whole state.

## **Early History of Sugar Beet Industry**

International events leading up to the opening of Colorado's first sugar plant here in Grand Junction reveal a fascinating history of beet sugar cultivation. While the production of sugar from sugar cane plants dates back to the second century, the extraction of sugar from beets evolved much later, the original concept emerging during the eighteenth century in Europe. In 1747, the German chemist Andreas Marggraf proved that beets could yield sucrose. Farmers had grown beets throughout Europe for animal fodder, but through the work of Marggraf and his student, Franz Carl Achard, knowledge slowly spread concerning this new potential use of beets.

Achard, meticulously investigating beet sugar extraction, developed a new breed of sugar beet, the Silesian beet, which all subsequent varieties derived from. He steadfastly advocated the establishment of a beet sugar industry. By 1802, he convinced the King of Prussia of the sugar beet's potential and the leader funded the construction of the world's first beet sugar factory, located in present-day Poland. Soon thereafter, Russia and Austria began building factories.

Further advancement of beet sugar production occurred a decade later in France. During the Napoleonic Wars, as Britain's blockade severely restricted the importation of cane sugar from the Caribbean Islands, a chemist working for Napoleon improved the process of extracting sugar from beets and produced a greater quantity of sucrose. By 1813, over 300 sugar factories were operating throughout France.

## **Sugar Beet Interest in the United States**

By the late nineteenth century, sugar beet cultivation had spread to the United States. Numerous places in the country, from Minnesota to Texas to California, proved to be ideal locations to grow beets. Colorado was one of those places. Many beet sugar factories that were built between the 1850s and 1870s did not last long. The first commercially successful beet

sugar factory started operating in Alvarado, California in 1870 but did not become profitable until the late 1870s. Establishing factories proved difficult because wealthy individuals were weary of investing the extremely large sums of money required to construct such facilities.

### **“White Gold” in Colorado**

Promotion of sugar beet culture emerged early in Colorado, more than a decade before the territory achieved statehood. Shortly after the gold rush of 1859, farmers such as L.K. Perrin in the Clear Creek Valley and Peter Magness from the Platte Valley grew beets that, when tested, proved to be high quality and had high sugar content. Magness, a farmer of Swedish descent who moved from Illinois to Colorado in search of gold, quickly saw better opportunities in agriculture and is often credited with being the “father” of the sugar beet industry in Colorado. While growing sugar beets for the traditional use as livestock feed, he strongly advocated the building of beet sugar factories in Colorado and maintained that farmers could reap incredible profits from the “white gold.”

With the help of Professor Jacob L. Schermer, Magness and Perrin improved the breeding and productivity of their beet crops. William N. Byers, the founder and editor of the *Rocky Mountain News*, joined these three men and others in promoting investment for the construction of a beet sugar factory, urging “far-seeing and enterprising capitalist[s]” to step forward and invest in a sugar plant that they all predicted would produce high profits. Although they raised \$30,000 under the name of the Colorado Sugar Manufacturing Company, they failed to obtain the additional \$470,000 necessary to build a plant. Soon thereafter, a disappointed Magness wrote an editorial in Byers’s newspaper, writing, “If we had beet sugar factories in Colorado similar to the flour mills scattered around, farmers could produce more gold than all the mines in

the mountains.” Despite this early setback, agitation for the construction of beet sugar factories continued to mount throughout the whole state.

During the 1880s the Colorado Agricultural College, established in 1879 in Fort Collins, gradually joined the advocacy for beet sugar production. The college grew beets on the school grounds and throughout the Fort Collins area and publicized their research and findings. Additionally the college conducted extensive testing with sugar beets at various experimental stations located across the state. Their research provided an abundance of information regarding sugar beet production, including time of planting, the best soil type, depth of planting, distance between plants, cultivation, thinning, and irrigation timing. The Agricultural College’s work immensely influenced the course of events concerning sugar beet culture in the state and provided greater impetus for the construction of Colorado’s first beet sugar factory in Grand Junction.

### **Early Grand Valley Sugar Beet Dreams**

Even before the sugar plant was built in Grand Junction, Grand Valley residents grew more curious about the sugar factories located in Grand Island, Nebraska and especially the plant located just 250 miles away in Lehi, Utah. Intrigued by the success of these factories, Grand Valley residents increasingly became convinced that the same industry could succeed here. Henry R. Rhone and M.L. Allison started experimenting with raising sugar beets in the Grand Valley as early as 1890. Samples sent to the Oxnard Beet Sugar Company of Grand Island showed their beets contained high sugar content despite the inadequate attention and cultivation given them. During the next few years numerous business and civic leaders from the Western Slope pushed for the establishment of a sugar plant in Grand Junction.

Notable town founders like George Crawford, Benton Canon, and Edwin Price all enthusiastically promoted the idea of a refinery here. However, three men stood out in the mission to bring a sugar factory to the Grand Valley: Charles E. Mitchell, Henry J. Holmes, and Charles N. Cox. Without these zealous visionaries' efforts, this valley's economic and agricultural history could have moved in a much different and less fruitfull direction.

Mitchell, a pharmacist from Grand Junction, became the most forceful promoter of sugar beet cultivation in the Grand Valley during the 1890s. On a family visit to Nebraska, his wife had toured the Oxnard beet sugar plant in Grand Island and returned with fascinating accounts that inspired him. Soon thereafter Mitchell traveled to the Lehi sugar factory operated by the Utah Beet Sugar Company and convinced their officials to look into beet prospects in the Grand Valley. Early in 1893, Bishop Cutler, the president of the Lehi Factory , and two other officials visited Grand Junction and discussed the potential for beet growing in the valley. They told local farmers that if they would grow beets, the Lehi factory would process them.

During the next two years, with backing from various businessmen, the county commissioners, and the Rio Grande Railroad, a group of beet boosters delivered seven train carloads of sugar beets to the Lehi factory. The beets tested very high in sugar content and overall quality. At a sugar convention held in Denver, Cutler remarked that the Grand Valley beets were "the richest of any I have ever examined." He went on to say that conditions were ideal in the Grand Valley – good soil, climate, rail line access – to ensure the success of a beet sugar factory. Near the end of the same meeting, Charles Mitchell adamantly proposed that a sugar factory be erected in Grand Junction. Failures in gaining state subsidies for beet production and uncertainties of federal tariff policies regarding sugar imports delayed Grand Valley's sugar beet dreams. But not for long.

## **Brighter Future for Sugar Beets in Western Colorado**

Four years later, national and international events changed the outlook for the potential sugar beet industry in Colorado. In 1897, Congress passed the Dingley Tariff which placed a high tariff on cane sugar imports into the country. Soon after that, the Spanish-American War disrupted the flow of cane sugar from Cuba. With these developments, both state officials and potential investors reconsidered the scene. An encouraging visit from U.S. Secretary of Agriculture James Wilson further stoked sugar beet fever in the valley, and in 1898 Charles Mitchell, Charles Cox, along with other Western Slope businessmen established the Grand Valley Beet Sugar Company, whose main purpose was to attract wealthy investors to help make the construction of a beet sugar factory in the valley a reality. Of course, they knew those wealthy investors could not be found anywhere on the western slope. Other communities in Colorado vied to be the first to have a sugar plant. The race was on.

As an incentive for finding investors, Mesa County Commissioners offered a one percent bonus of the cost of building a factory in the county to any individual who obtained the necessary funds to build such a plant, provided that the cost would be at least \$350,000 and the individual obtaining the funds was not directly associated with the building contractor. Serving as representative and treasurer of the Grand Valley Beet Sugar Company, Henry J. Holmes, publisher of the Glenwood Springs *Avalanche* and longtime beet booster, traveled to Denver and met with John F. Campion who had made a fortune in the mining industry in Leadville, Colorado and then was president of the Denver Chamber of Commerce. Campion was already aware of the progress of the sugar beet industry and recognizing its potential in the state, contacted his business partner, Charles Boettcher. Unfortunately, Holmes died soon thereafter, but Grand Junction businessman Charles N. Cox took up the pursuit and eventually convinced Campion

and others to invest in the venture. Due to his valuable social and business connections with wealthy eastern Coloradans most whom made their fortunes in the mining industry, Cox attracted a group of six businessmen who were willing to invest in this enterprise.

With the objective in mind to build a beet sugar factory in Grand Junction, on January 3, 1899, with an initial capital stock of \$750,000, this group of investors formed the Colorado Sugar Manufacturing Company. The makeup of this incorporation shows the connection between mining and agriculture in Colorado in the state's early years. Many of the capitalists from eastern Colorado who made sugar happen on the western slope made their fortunes in the mining industry. Besides Campion, Eben Smith, James J. Brown, and James McKinnie (the sole local investor) profited greatly from extractive industries but realized those days were coming to an end. One of the most notable incorporators, Charles Boettcher, who had prospered by a variety of business endeavors, traveled to his native Germany and brought back 75,000 pounds of beet seed, known to be the finest in the world, for Grand Valley farmers to plant.

### **Sugar Beet Factory: Finally a Reality**

Excitement mounted not only in western Colorado but all across the state. The town of Grand Junction donated 1,500 acres for a factory site near the north bank of the Grand (Colorado) River between the south ends of 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Streets, in the western section of the present Las Colonias neighborhood. One of the town's founders, Benton Canon had surveyed and laid out the street plans for that area of Grand Junction during the 1890s, and the factory site was strategically located within a mile of the juncture of five rail lines that ran through the valley. Additionally the town council granted the factory perpetual water rights which would essentially amount to eight million gallons of water per day. Although some locals expressed distrust concerning the perceived intrusion by wealthy capitalists from the "Queen City,"

Denver, optimism generally ran high in the Grand Valley in 1899 as farmers pledged to grow 3,500 acres of sugar beets for at least three years and a beet growers association was formed to encourage the cultivation of the crop and to aid immigrants. The dreams of the sugar beet boosters of Grand Junction were coming true.

E.H. Dyer and Company of Cleveland, Ohio, began constructing the massive factory during the summer. They had designed the first successful beet sugar plant in Alvarado (now Union City), California as well as the factory in Lehi, Utah. Actually, the company contracted the work out to a local building contractor, John J. Lumsden. Named "House 13," the Grand Junction plant was twice as large as the Lehi factory, its foundation was larger than a football field and rose three stories high, surrounded by beet sheds and silos, and crowned with an enormous smoke stack. Containing several Corliss 150-horsepower steam engines, nearly two dozen pumps, washers and evaporators each weighing several tons, vacuum pans, and centrifugal machines, the plant towered over all previous Dyer sugar factory projects. Although it was called the "crackerjack" of all of the plants that the company had built, problems soon arose causing delays in construction and the factory did not open until the middle of November. That fall, over one hundred men were hired to work two twelve-hour shifts for the first campaign (the time period for the harvest and processing of the beets).

Guy and Hubert Dyer came from the Lehi factory, Guy working as the superintendent and his brother filling the top-salaried position of chemist, supervising stages of the sugar making process. Company president John Campion hired longtime beet promoters Charles Cox and Charles Mitchell as factory manager and field superintendent, respectively. But what started out as such a sweet year ended on a sour one for several reasons.

## The Disappointing Early Years

The valley's first official sugar beet year turned out to be quite a disappointing affair for many involved. Many farmers had to reseed their fields after heavy rains in May. A heat wave followed, hardening the soil and a caterpillar blight occurred in July. Cold weather arriving earlier than expected coupled with the late opening of the factory worsened matters. In mid-November, the growers could not get their beets out of ground during the two weeks the sugar company had given them. The *Grand Junction News* reported that the "beet fields throughout the western slope are filled with men, women and boys, busy digging, topping, and preparing the first crop for shipment to the factory." Many beets were lost, frozen in the ground. Arguments between management and farmers, general inexperience in growing methods, machinery problems, weather and pest problems, and a labor shortage all contributed to the dismal outcomes of that first year of beet culture in the valley.

The second season proved nearly as disastrous. The company's board fired Mitchell for his quarrelling with the growers and soon after also dismissed Hubert Dyer. The financiers of the business venture openly voiced their disgust with the operation. Writing to Cox, Campion said, "I have never gone into a scheme in my life that has been more disappointing and annoying." In two years the stockholders lost \$80,000 in the business. The Denver businessmen had invested \$200,000 in cash in the factory and owed \$400,000 in bonds to trust companies. Toward the end of 1901, they closed the plant and put it up for sale. They blamed the operation's failure on an insufficient work force and poor farming practices. Later Boettcher said that the farmers wanted to "raise beets on horseback."

## **Sugar Beet Industry Expansion**

James R. McKinnie, the only local investor, along with a group of businessmen from Cheyenne, Wyoming, took over operations and barely kept the sugar factory afloat during the next year and a half, and in 1903, they sold it to the Western Sugar and Land Company. Slowly but steadily, the factory grew more efficient and more profitable over the next decade as more and more farmers began raising sugar beets. Factory owners extended their profits by constructing feed lots which they leased to local ranchers who fattened their sheep and cattle with beet pulp and tops. Farmers also bought the foul-smelling beet pulp and hauled it back to their farms and ranches for livestock feed. Photographs from as early as 1907 taken from across the river on Orchard Mesa show the large feed lots situated directly to the south of the huge factory along the river. They ran parallel to the river and extended across the central portion of present Las Colonias Park.

## **Holly Sugar**

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, sugar beet production rapidly expanded all over Colorado and Grand Valley residents increasingly associated future economic stability with the success of the sugar beet industry. In 1916, Holly Sugar Company bought the factory. The Great War in Europe caused a huge rise in demand and sale of sugar as well as a labor shortage in the beet fields. As sugar beet profits soared and more land was opened up to irrigation with the completion of the Highline Canal in 1917, more and more farmers planted beets. By the end of World War I, Holly Sugar was paying farmers a peak rate of \$12.60 per ton – more than twice the 1915 price – and had begun a profit sharing program with beet farmers. During the fall of 1918, the *Grand Junction Daily Sentinel* announced that Holly Sugar would be sending out checks to farmers totaling \$550,000. In 1920, to help meet the demands of

processing booming beet harvest yields across the Western Slope, the company built another beet sugar factory in Delta, Colorado, forty miles to the southeast.

After the war, contract prices sharply declined, basically returning to the pre-war rates of \$5.00 per ton. In 1929, Holly closed the sugar factory in Grand Junction. Curly top disease caused problems for many Grand Valley beet farmers that year, and the sugar plant stood idle that fall for lack of enough beets to profitably keep both factories running. Holly conducted one more campaign at the Grand Junction factory in 1933, then permanently shut it down and consolidated their Western Slope operations at the more modern Delta facility.

Beet farming still thrived in the Grand Valley for decades as farmers delivered sugar beets by train or trucks down to the Delta plant. For several more years, many farmers still hauled their beets to the old sugar factory, weighed them on a huge scale, received a tare ticket, and dumped them in a large area near the railroad spur. These gigantic piles of sugar beets sometimes reached twenty to thirty feet high before they were conveyed into train cars headed for Delta. After the Climax Mining Company acquired the property for use as a uranium mill, farmers hauled beets to a dump near the railroad on south Seventh Street. Farmers in the Lower Valley usually delivered their beets to dumps in Fruita and Loma. For decades, hardly a year passed when one didn't see pictures and articles in the Daily Sentinel closely covering the progress, success, or setbacks of the current sugar beet harvest.

### **Sugar Beet Culture and the Ethnic Landscape**

While the sugar beet industry in the Grand Valley promoted general prosperity for many and helped in the expansion of irrigation systems, its legacy affected this region in other very important ways. By attracting migrant and immigrant workers from various places, the industry helped in creating the culturally diverse environment found here today. Even though increased

mechanization over the decades gradually minimized the amount of manual labor necessary to grow sugar beets, for many years successful beet farming required labor intensive operations. As the sugar beet investor Charles Boettcher observed, many Grand Valley farmers failed to perform the necessary work to ensure a good crop, wanting to “raise beets on horseback.” In those early years an insufficient labor supply limited the success and expansion of beet growing. The need for field workers brought diverse groups of people from around the world.

### **The Art of Stoop Labor**

Growing a good crop of sugar beets involved hours of back breaking work. Even relatively small acreages required several field hands to perform the tasks of “blocking,” “thinning,” and hoeing. Since growers usually over-seeded to ensure a good stand, as the seedlings grew, they were too close together. In late May or early June, before the plants were very tall and weeds became a problem workers had to block, or bunch, the plants.

Using a long or short handled hoe, the worker removed part of the plants every four or five inches, leaving a small bunch one to two inches wide. During the next procedure of thinning, a person crawled along straddling the row and using a thumb and forefinger, yanked all but one plant – preferably the best – from each bunch. Correctly done, blocking and thinning resulted in the plants spaced ten to twelve inches apart and assured a healthy beet crop. Much of the time women and children performed the thinning task, crawling over miles of dirt and beets. Typically blockers could clear roughly three times as much area per day as thinners could. As it was critical that the plants not get too big before thinning and the field needed watering soon thereafter, they invariably worked under great pressure.

Later in the summer, workers hoed the fields periodically for both weeding and cultivation purposes. At harvest time, the farmer would drive a horse-drawn beet puller, or lifter,

along the rows to loosen the ground near the beets. Field hands walked behind using long machete-like beet knives with curved hooks at the ends to pull the heavy beets from the ground. The workers then grabbed the beet, knocked the dirt off, and used the broad-bladed beet knife to cut the leafy top off. After topping the beets, they tossed them to the side in a windrow. Later, they would use pitch forks with knobby ends to scoop up the beets and load them into wagons. Stoop labor was indeed strenuous, dirty, and often dangerous work. During the early decades of sugar beet cultivation, field work was often a family affair, as young children commonly worked along with their parents in the fields from daybreak until dusk.

### **Immigrant Laborers**

Since many early Grand Valley beet growers either refused to perform this stoop labor or else simply could not find enough help, they looked elsewhere. They hired beet thinners from Utah at first, but their pay demands seemed excessive and cut into profits too much. They hired children 10 to 15 years old and young Indians from the Teller Institute, the Indian boarding school in Grand Junction, but growers generally viewed them as slow and unreliable. In order to make beet farming profitable, they reasoned that they had to find a pool of cheap and dependable labor. Global events and migrations of peoples would answer that need.

Colorado's sugar beet industry attracted a diverse cast of immigrant groups from across the world. Ethnic Germans from Russia were some of the first to arrive. These Germans left the Holy Roman Empire in the late eighteenth century to escape religious persecution and settled in Russia throughout the Volga River and Black Sea regions. During the 1870s, when Tsar Alexander II mandated his *Russification* program which threatened the ethnic Germans' autonomous local governments, these groups began leaving Russia.

Many of them, especially the Volga Germans, immigrated to the Great Plains region of the United States. Beet sugar companies in Colorado, hearing that these people were willing to perform stoop labor and also had experience farming sugar beets, recruited hundreds of German Russians. During the first decade of the twentieth century, these *Deutch-Russlanders* made up the bulk of stoop labor in beet fields. Many of these people came to the Grand Valley.

German Russians proved to be a hard-working and reliable work force yet they were not satisfied with stoop labor and resolved to purchase land for themselves. Many of them made the transition quite swiftly, such as the Kiefer Brothers in the Lower Grand Valley. By the turn of the century, Frank, Ben, and Joe Kiefer were raising sugar beets on hundreds of acres on Crevasse Hill between Loma and Mack. The fourteen mile extension to the Grand Valley Canal they constructed brought irrigation to 10,000 acres of land in the Lower Valley. By 1915, the German Russians had mostly disappeared from the beet field labor force as they bought land or ventured into other trades or businesses. As another labor shortage loomed, beet sugar companies like Holly Sugar began looking to the south, to Spanish-American and Mexican labor.

### **The Mexican Presence**

World War I worsened the agricultural labor shortage as many young men who worked in the fields were fighting in Europe. The increasing need for sugar beet field workers historically coincided with political turmoil and economic crises in Mexico and the Southwest. The influx of Mexican immigrants into Colorado after World War I related to both “push” and “pull” factors. Violent revolutions and widespread economic hardship in Mexico during the 1910s and early 1920s displaced thousands of people. Mexicans fled the war’s chaotic destruction and widespread poverty in droves. Many of these immigrants gradually found work in the beet fields

of the western United States. They became a critical force in the agricultural prosperity of numerous places such as western Colorado.

Although the Immigration Act of 1917 threatened to halt the immigration of poor Mexicans who knew little or no English, beet sugar companies expressed agitation, and complained to the government that huge crop losses appeared imminent. Federal officials provided exemptions, and the sugar companies welcomed this large, desperate group as cheap and abundant labor. The number of Mexican immigrants under the exemptions heading for Colorado in 1920 more than tripled. That same year the first de facto *Bracero* program began, allowing Mexicans to enter the U.S. and stay for a specified time upon signing a labor contract. Beet sugar companies sent agents to Texas to set up recruiting centers in cities such as Fort Worth, San Antonio, and El Paso. When asked how the company would fare without Mexicans, the manager of Holly Sugar said, “We would be out of luck. We’d have to close up our factory and farmers would lose their crops. You can’t get white labor to do this work.” Between 1920 and 1930, nearly 460,000 Mexican immigrants legally came to the United States.

### **La Colonia**

Many of these immigrants made it to the Grand Valley and worked as *betabeleros*, beet workers. While many moved back to Mexico after the harvest, some stayed and found other work. In the early 1920s, Holly built two “longhouses” slightly west of the factory near the Colorado River to house migrant workers with the aim to keep the workforce nearby and also to avoid extra transportation costs sending workers to and from Mexico. The two longhouses, lying east to west, were separated by a narrow alley and each consisted of twenty units. This settlement, known as *La Colonia*, became the namesake of the neighborhood that developed in

that part of Grand Junction. Las Colonias Park bears the name in honor of this rich Hispanic heritage of the area.

### **Braceros**

During the Depression years of the 1930s, federal authorities repatriated over 250,000 Mexicans as hard times fostered Americanist racialism. However, in 1942, with World War II causing another agricultural labor shortage, the United States reopened the door to Mexican workers with the creation of the bracero program. Under this program, over 200,000 Mexican farm workers entered the country to work in agriculture or on railroads. Beet growers as well as fruit growers throughout the Grand Valley immensely benefited from this program, and many expressed disappointment in 1964 when the government ended it. From then on, many farmers throughout the valley went ahead and used Mexican nationals – illegals – because they proved to be the hardest workers. Usually one person served as a lookout and warned the others if they saw an approaching bus that appeared to be the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS).

### **Mechanized Beet Farming**

During the 1950s and 60s, advanced mechanization in sugar beet farming greatly reduced the amount of hand labor necessary for beet production. Tractor-pulled equipment such as mechanical cross-blockers, electronic thinners, and automated beet topper-harvesters made the back breaking work of betabeleros, the thinning hoes and beet knives relics of the past. Improved farming equipment made beet growing more profitable and efficient for farmers, yet for many years, sugar beet successes relied on immigrant workers. Raising any significant size of crop would have been impossible without armies of field hands performing necessary manual operations. As with many difficult low-paying jobs, the most economically desperate performed

this exhausting work. The success of the sugar beet industry in western Colorado owed a great deal to the hard work of Hispanic laborers for many decades.

### **Demise of Grand Valley Sugar Beet Culture**

Sugar beet culture in western Colorado came to a screeching halt in 1977 when Holly shut down its Delta sugar refinery. Holly officials decided to close the plant for a number of reasons. Besides skyrocketing fuel costs, the corporation faced costly facility modifications required by the Environmental Protection Agency. The 1974 Congressional repeal of the Sugar Tariff made matters worse, opening up the market to cheaper foreign sugar and creating unbearable competition. Like many other sugar companies throughout Colorado that feared massive profit losses, Holly decided to close the Delta facility. Their departure stunned and upset sugar beet farmers across west central Colorado. Hundreds of families in the Grand Valley had relied on the predictable and profitable nature of beet farming. Now Holly had suddenly pulled the rug out from under their feet. Some sold off parcels of their land. Some got out of farming altogether while others tried other crops like onions with varying success.

### **Reflections on the Sugar Beet Era**

Loma farmer Jim Bernal holds fond memories of the sugar beet era, recalling that “sugar beets were more secure and they were making money. That’s what made it possible for a lot of farmers to get ahead in life.” For several decades the sugar beet industry essentially represented a stabilizing force in the local economy. While a farmer was uncertain what price he would end up receiving for crops like alfalfa, wheat, or corn at harvest time due to fluctuating prices, he could remain fairly confident how much profit he would make raising sugar beets. Before a farmer seeded his fields, he signed a contract with Holly guaranteeing a set price for the harvest. The only factor that changed that price was a slight sliding scale regarding the percentage of

sugar content. Beets containing high sugar content such as up to 17 percent brought a somewhat better profit than beets containing 12 or 13 percent. Even so, the variation in overall profits were usually minimal.

Farmers often entered friendly county- and statewide competitions during the fall to see who raised the best beets rated by sugar content as well as the greatest quantity by the acre. Bob Gobbo, whose family farmed in the Appleton area since the early 1900s, often won trophies for his beet raising skills. One large trophy that stands nearly two feet tall attests to his farming prowess, its base inscription reading: “1975 *Top Sugar Beet Grower, Mesa County – 27 Tons/Acre 17.5%.*” Gobbo, like Bernal, was able to weather the changes when Holly Sugar abandoned western Colorado by diversifying his crops.

### **Conclusion**

Since the turn of the twentieth century, the history of the Las Colonias area of Grand Junction shows a fascinating intersection of histories. The legacy of the sugar beet culture that thrived in the Grand Valley for many decades plays a key role in this intersection. Early in Grand Junction’s history, sugar beet cultivation helped tremendously in transforming the region agriculturally and economically. Had it not been for the huge sugar factory down by the river and the lush fields of sugar beets spread throughout the valley, La Colonia would never have existed. The sugar beet industry acted like a huge magnet attracting people from throughout the world, especially from Mexico and the American Southwest. In doing so, it presented perhaps the greatest contribution, the development of an ethnically diverse landscape. Sugar beet culture remains an important part of our community’s heritage.

## **IV. Las Colonias, La Gara Neighborhood**

### **“Across the Tracks”**

While attending schools in Grand Junction during the 1960s, Jose Chavez sometimes encountered racism. He recalls episodes in school when a white classmate, hearing that Jose lived on Kimball Avenue on the city’s south side, sneered “Oh, so you live on the other side of the tracks.” Jose would quickly reply with a laugh, “No, *you* live on the other side of the tracks.” Chavez, like many people who grew up in that area “across the tracks,” takes great pride in the rich Hispanic heritage of the Las Colonias neighborhood.

For decades the dominant white establishment of Grand Junction often marginalized this predominantly Hispanic and predominately poor part of the community, ignoring the fact that this area actually represents one of the most historically important regions of the Grand Valley. However, as attitudes changed towards the late twentieth century, people throughout the larger community began recognizing the historical and cultural significance of Las Colonias and initiated efforts to appreciate and rejuvenate this area. This new mindset culminated in the creation of Las Colonias Park, an expansive multiuse recreational area situated along the Colorado River east of the neighborhood for which it is named. Still, some residents of the valley ask, “What is Las Colonias?”

Situated in one of the oldest sections of the city, the Las Colonias neighborhood lies between 3rd Avenue and Riverside Parkway, and extends west to east from 5th Street to 9th Street. This has been the traditional definition. Culturally, its perimeter actually extends farther out than traditional descriptions indicate. The story of this neighborhood stretches far back to the early years of the city’s beginnings.

In 1883, just two years after the town of Grand Junction was incorporated, Benton Canon laid out a plat for a subdivision in that area. For nearly eight decades, it lied outside the city limits. For years, South Avenue marked the southern city limits of the town and everything south of there was considered the outskirts, the poor side of town. Many people living there during the first two decades came from far and wide from within the United States and often worked as farm and ranch hands or for the railroads. Economic hardship prevailed in Grand Junction throughout the 1890s. In 1899 the sugar beet factory changed everything.

The factory that the Colorado Sugar Manufacturing Company built near the Colorado River experienced early difficulties yet gradually prospered and during the first decade of the twentieth century encouraged the rapid growth of a thriving local sugar beet industry. The story of the Las Colonias neighborhood is inextricably linked to these events.

As farmers throughout the Grand Valley grew more sugar beets, the demand for field hands increased. After Holly Sugar Company took over the factory in 1916, they realized they needed to address the problem of an insufficient labor supply. American involvement in World War I worsened this problem and in 1918 Holly began recruiting Mexican immigrants from Texas. Escaping the ravages of revolutions and widespread poverty of their country during the 1910s, thousands of Mexicans were fleeing northward into the United States. Beet sugar companies saw the influx of immigrants as a great opportunity to obtain a large pool of cheap labor. Many Mexicans had heard of work in the beet fields even before they left their homeland.

The Colunga Family of Zacatecas, Mexico typified many of these desperate people. In the fall of 1918 Eleno and Antonia Colunga, along with their five children, set off on a grueling journey to the north to find means of subsistence. By the time they crossed the border at El Paso, Texas on October 29, 1918, they had traveled more than two hundred miles mostly by foot,

sometimes by rail, and had lost a three-year-old daughter along the way. They buried their baby girl by the side of the road. Eleno's oldest son, Lucio, reluctantly recounted the trek many years later to his son, Angel Colunga, who grew up in the Las Colonias neighborhood. The Colungas made their way up to Las Animas, Colorado where they worked for a farmer sharecropping for a while. Sponsored by a beet farmer in Loma, the Colungas took a train to Grand Junction in 1923. Eleno worked in the beet fields for a few of years before finding better work on the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad. Throughout the next decades, many Mexicans followed the same general route north from Texas into southern Colorado, then over to the Grand Valley.

By the mid-1920s, Mexicans and Spanish-Americans started entering the Grand Valley in search of work in the beet fields. The 1920 census report for District 0096 which included that neighborhood later known as Las Colonias shows the first signs of a noticeable Mexican presence. Until then, besides the Anglo-Americans who resided in that area, the ethnic makeup of the community included German Russian, Italians, and some Greeks. The 1920s saw a great increase in the Hispanic population. The 1930 census shows many of them living in the Holly Sugar Company houses. Throughout the American West people referred to such meager worker dwellings as *La Colonia*, a Spanish term simply meaning “neighborhood.” This is where the name of the neighborhood originated. The legacy of the sugar beet industry heavily influenced the development of both the Grand Valley and the Las Colonias neighborhood.

Recognizing the benefits of keeping an experienced, reliable work force close at hand, in the early 1920s, shortly after they built the sugar factory in Delta, Holly Sugar Company built this housing for the beet workers. This was not a new idea. Great Western Sugar had already constructed such housing for workers in Greeley and Holly had built one in Delta near the Uncompahgre River. Sugar companies provided the housing rent free as an incentive for the

workers to “winter over.” La Colonia was located near the Colorado River in present Las Colonias Park in the area between 9th and 10th Streets and south of Struthers Avenue, now Riverside Parkway. They consisted of two longhouses situated east to west separated by a narrow alley. Built from adobe brick, plastered and painted white, they each contained ten units. The units themselves were rather small, having only two rooms, and no running water. Outhouses stood behind each unit. Everyone shared a single hand pump in the common area to get water. The establishment of La Colonia heavily influenced the development of the first Latino settlement in the Grand Valley.

Lilia Rodriguez, who grew up on Noland Avenue, remembers going to La Colonia as a young girl with her parents to attend parties in the winter when work was scarce. Her paternal grandmother lived there in one of the long white adobe buildings. Lilia’s father, Simon Aguerra, worked in the beet fields for a short time but later worked for the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad. In an interview Lilia offered in the summer of 2015, she brought out a picture of her father taken in 1963 when he retired. It shows him receiving a rather humorous gift from his smiling co-workers, what looks like a satchel stuffed with dollar bills.

Regarding the early development of the Las Colonias neighborhood, she recalls, “There really wasn’t much there, between 8th and 9th Streets on Noland.” When her parents Simon and Adella first built a small two-room house on Noland Avenue, she says, “They would have to go get water in buckets from several blocks down.” Although life on the outskirts of Grand Junction was hard, Lilia remembers good times, going with her friend Pauline Bonilla (Reyes) to the movies at the Avalon Theatre or sometimes shopping downtown at places such as Kress’s Department Store. As school buses did not pick kids up in that neighborhood, Lilia and her

friends walked the long distance to school, first to the old Whitman School (now part of the Museum of the West), and then to Emerson School located near 9th Street and Ute Avenue.

Lilia also remembers the uranium era well since the Climax Mill – which had been the old sugar factory – lay just to the east of the neighborhood. She worked as a secretary for eleven years for the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) at the large compound down by the Gunnison River. She left that job in 1964 to raise her children. Speaking of the nearby piles of mill tailings that accumulated during the 1950s and 60s where La Colonia once stood, she remembers sometimes complaining about the wind blowing the gritty mill tailings into the clothes hanging on the clothesline. Her friend Pauline Bonilla Reyes recalls the same problem.

Pauline Reyes, who started Los Reyes Restaurant with her husband Augie in 1968, remembers the neighborhood as a culturally diverse and close-knit community. An Italian family ran a grocery store there on south Seventh Street before Pauline and Augie bought the place. She remembers the community being predominantly Hispanic yet also recalls others living there: Anglo-Americans, Italians, and some Greeks.

For years two canning factories operated in that part of town, Kuner-Empson, on 7th Street near South Avenue, and the S.J. Miller Cannery, which stood where the Daily Sentinel now is at 734 South 7th. Reyes and many of her friends and relatives worked at one or both of the canneries for extra money during the fall canning season. She recalls, “You could smell tomatoes all around the neighborhood.” Like most former residents of that neighborhood, she remembers the sugar beet spur of the railroad and the area near the old sugar factory where beets were piled long after the plant was closed.

Reyes recalls when she was young watching the long line of train cars loaded with sugar beets rolling down the tracks headed for Delta. She often picked up sugar beets that fell from the

train cars and brought them home. Her mother would roast them in the oven. Reyes not only remembers the sugar beet dump to the east and the old Colonia buildings down near the river, but also the uranium mill tailings that came afterward, lamenting, “There were a lot of people down here who died of cancer.” Members of this neighborhood recall both the good and the bad, yet most have generally interpreted their experiences in a positive light.

Josephine Elizabeth Taylor Dickey is one such person. As an African American, she experienced racial discrimination even before she was old enough to be aware of it. Being black and trying to live in Grand Junction during the 1920s presented a great challenge. Shortly after her birth, Josephine’s family moved from their home near 9th and Rood after a rock crashed through a front window. The message was clear: “Get out of our white neighborhood.” The Taylors moved to Kimball Avenue in the Las Colonias neighborhood. Of course, it was not called that at that time.

The Taylor kids enjoyed playing different games out on the street and usually did not have any trouble with most folks in the neighborhood, but sometimes if they walked very far from their home, they ran into trouble. Sometimes white people would sick their dogs on the kids. They seldom ventured downtown, except to attend Sunday services at Handy Chapel, the small African American Episcopal Church on White Avenue. She recalls, “None of the drugstores or restaurants would serve you, or if they did you’d have to eat in the back or the kitchen.”

Although Josephine remembers horrible episodes of racial antagonism and harassment when she and her siblings ventured into the “other side” of town, she favors to recall the goodness of people of all races she has encountered during her life. Speaking of how close-knit the neighborhood was, good memories come back: “We were all real, real poor, and no one

knew it. We shared everything. Of course, we [all in the neighborhood] were still the minorities . . . If you killed a pig or a cow, there was no refrigerator or nothing like that, and so they shared all of it with their neighbors, they gave it to each other." She talks of how crude the residents' small houses were. They had iceboxes and old coal stoves, and would often pick up coal along the train tracks and bring it home in small pails.

Even eighty years later, Josephine remembers well the goodness of that south side neighborhood, such as a Mrs. Stevens, who had a milk cow and gave milk to everyone; Mr. [James] Arcieri, who would sometimes take the kids to watch a movie at the Avalon or the Mission Theatre: "That was such a treat!" She also remembers the old Colonia buildings which she called the "dobies," but she did not know anyone who lived there. Other former residents of the neighborhood remember La Colonia.

Born in 1935 on Kimball Avenue, Angel Colunga remembers visiting relatives at La Colonia such as his Uncle Antonio (Tony) Garcia and Uncle Lorenzo (Laurence) Garcia. Colunga remembers a lot about the colonia. He says, "The units in those colonia buildings weren't very big, and whole families sometimes lived in one apartment." Indeed, census records from both 1930 and 1940 indicate over a hundred people living in those buildings that each consisted of ten units. The latter report shows that even after Holly Sugar shut down the sugar factory in 1932, people continued living in the white adobe longhouses until they were eventually torn down in the late 1940s. A few years later, mill tailings from the Climax Mill covered the area.

For decades, the Las Colonias neighborhood south of the railroad tracks in many aspects existed as a community apart from the larger city of Grand Junction. People there seldom went to the larger supermarkets in the city to shop as they had three different local corner stores to buy

their groceries from. Besides the store where Los Reyes Restaurant now stands, across the street, the Southside Market ran business into the 1980s. Residents also shopped at a small corner market called Fleming's, located on South 5th Street near the old 5th Street Bridge. Angel Colunga remembers going to Western Meat Packers on South Avenue to buy meat at bulk rate.

Residents did venture into the city to enjoy movies. For a 15 cent admission they could watch a movie at the Avalon, the Mission, the Mesa, or the Joy Theatres. The Joy Theatre, located between 2nd and 3rd Streets on Main Street, showed Spanish movies on Sunday nights. Sports events also drew residents of the south side neighborhood into the city.

Angel Colunga remembers his father Lucio helping his Uncle Rudy and Uncle John construct the walls of many adobe houses. His father and Rudy owned a special machine to make the adobe bricks. Many houses such as some beautiful homes on Mantey Heights still are standing as testaments to their craftsmanship. Colunga was very young when many people from the neighborhood pooled their labor to build the Zion Spanish Pentecostal Church in the late 1930s. He recalls how they used adobe bricks to make the walls and that it took several years to complete. Across the street, on the east side of South 9th Street and Noland Avenue, his uncle, Tony Garcia, built a small house for him and his wife using the same adobe bricks. That house still is standing, boarded up and surrounded by commercial buildings.

Colunga smiles, reminiscing about his father, Lucio, who was fourteen years old when he crossed the border at El Paso with parents. Louie, as everyone called him, became quite a local celebrity as he was awarded the title of #1 JUCO Fan in the 1980s. Between the first JUCO baseball tournament in 1959 and the last one before his passing in 1989, Louie never missed one game. He was given his own parking space as well as a special lifetime pass and special seat for the games. When Louie died in 1989, the Daily Sentinel honored him with in a big editorial

article. Recalling how they were one of the first families in the neighborhood who acquired a television in 1950, Angel remembers his dad invited all the neighbors over to watch the first local broadcast. He said, “The house and the yard was full of people!”

Angel remembers some ugly episodes also, like when his Uncle Tony Garcia came home from serving in the army during World War II and he walked into Santy’s Cafe downtown where his mother worked as a cook. He wanted to surprise her on his homecoming. The management had him pushed out the front door, yelling at him to “get out, can’t you see the sign!” The sign in the front window read: NO MEXICANS NO INDIANS WHITES ONLY. Later that day, according to Colunga, his father went down there in the alley behind the restaurant and called Mr. Santy out and yelled at him about the incident. Angel recalls discrimination against Hispanics was quite common, but he mostly tried to ignore it. Most often, people from the neighborhood “across the tracks” endured challenges of economic hardship and racial discrimination with grace and eventually moved out into other parts of the Grand Valley, improving their lives and enriching the larger community.

The old neighborhood faced discrimination on another level. Jose Chavez recalls that even after the city annexed that area, the streets remained unpaved and without lights until the late 1960s. The city would not even run the sewer line all the way to South 9th Street where the Chavez Family lived. Jose remembers helping his father dig a huge trench for a very long distance to put the sewer line in during the late sixties.

Back in those times, people in Grand Junction did not call the neighborhood Las Colonias. Rather, they called it *La Gara*, which in Spanish means “the Rag.” Chavez explains that the term relates to the handkerchiefs that Mexican field workers would sometimes wear on their heads or around their necks to help protect them from the blistering heat and sun.

Like most people who grew up in Las Colonias, Chavez recalls with pride the Hispanic identity and friendliness between neighbors there. Everybody knew each other. He remembers that often on weekends, “there would be a band off 9th Street on Kimball about three houses down, the people who lived there on Friday or Saturday nights would have bands playing Mexican music.” The nature of that area changed throughout the 1970s as the city changed the zoning from residential to industrial, a move that Chavez and many others resented. The old neighborhood lives on only in memories. New hopes and plans for the reinvigoration of the Las Colonias neighborhood hint at a promising future.

## **V. The Uranium Years: Climax Uranium Mill**

### **Introduction**

Despite the continuing vitality of the Hispanic community in the neighborhoods north of the former sugar beet factory, the riverfront itself gradually became uninhabited throughout the 1930s and 1940s, culminating in the destruction of *la colonia* by 1950. The land surrounding the riverfront became increasingly inaccessible to the public due to private land ownership and industrial development. In 1950, the Climax Uranium Company acquired 114 acres alongside the riverfront, transforming the old sugar beet factory into a refinery and constructing eleven other buildings. Though the Climax Mill quickly attained the economic success that had eluded the Grand Valley Beet Sugar Company, it also brought unforeseen dangers to Grand Junction's environment and communities.

### **The Origins of the Uranium Industry on the Colorado Plateau**

When most people consider the nineteenth-century mineral booms that fueled Colorado's development, they think of silver and gold. However, since 1881, the presence of uranium minerals has shaped the economy of Western Colorado: in the 1910s, Colorado profited from a radium boom, and between the 1930s and 1940s the area benefited from a vanadium boom. Though these earlier periods of mining for uranium and minerals did not take place directly along the riverfront in Grand Junction, they laid the groundwork for the events of the 1940s and 1950s by establishing the Colorado Plateau as the major source of uranium minerals in the United States. In 1950, when the Climax Company construction on the Grand Junction mill, uranium was already a booming industry. Atomic weapons had ended America's conflict with Japan, but the acceleration of the Cold War with the Soviet Union made the obtainment of uranium and vanadium a national priority. However, this was not new: carnotite, a uranium

mineral, had been in high demand for decades. Though the Climax Mill Company drastically changed the economy of Grand Junction when it came to town, it was a relative latecomer to the area, lagging behind a series of early vanadium mills.

Uranium was first identified in 1789 by a Bohemian chemist named Martin Klaproth, who refined the element from pitchblende taken from a silver mine in Joachimsthal, Bohemia, in the modern-day Czech Republic. Today, the mineral that Klaproth identified and named in honor of his friend William Herschel, discoverer of the planet Uranus, is thought to have been an oxide of uranium. The first sample of uranium metal was isolated in 1841 by French chemist Eugène-Melchior Péligot. Radiation was discovered by accident in 1896 when Henri Bequerel left a piece of uranium in a drawer with an undeveloped photographic plate; when he opened the drawer a few days later, he found that the plate had been exposed. This surprising result inspired a surge of scientific study on the mineral, and in 1898 Marie and Pierre Curie discovered radium, an element found in many of the same ores which contain uranium. Radium was immediately adopted by the medical profession as treatment for a variety of disease including tuberculosis and cancer.

Uranium has a long history of use on the Colorado Plateau: many speculate that the Utes and other native tribes used the distinctly-colored mineral for decorative painting. In 1881, a prospector named Tom Talbert began shipping samples of the carnotite to chemists in the hopes that it might be valuable; it is likely that samples from Colorado were among those studied by Bequerel and the Curies. The Curies popularized multiple uses of radium: in addition to the medical applications, radioactive paint was used to enhance numerous consumer products; among the most popular uses was radioluminescent paint on watch faces to create glow-in-the-dark timepieces. Additionally, ground uranium powder was used to enhance the color of glass

and ceramics from the nineteenth-century onwards: as late as 1943, the popular ceramic line Fiestaware was created using a glaze made with active uranium.

### **Weaponized Minerals: Vanadium, Uranium, and the Manhattan Project**

In the early twentieth century the craze for radioactive items created a small boom; though it took 200 to 300 *tons* of carnotite to create one gram of radium, radium was selling for nearly \$100,000 per gram in 1910. Radium extraction was extremely profitable for those who could afford the costs of extraction on such a large scale. World War One brought about a boom in vanadium, an element that was used to harden steel and which is found in the same deposits that carry uranium and radium. The demand for carnotite grew enormously during the wartime period, and plants for the production of vanadium were established, leading to the growth of company town Uravan. Though demand for radium fell in 1921, industrial and military applications of vanadium remained high, especially with the introduction of a government buying program for the ore as research on nuclear fission accelerated.

In the 1930s, uranium was weaponized with the discovery of fission, which led to the 1942 creation of the atomic bomb. Technically, the term “uranium” refers to the periodic element  $_{92}\text{U}$ , though it is often used broadly to refer to the group of ores that contain large elements of the element uranium. These ores include uraninite, or pitchblende; coffinite; carnotite; autunite; and tyuyamunite. All uranium isotopes are unstable, which makes the element slightly radioactive in its unprocessed state. The most common forms of uranium found in nature are uranium-238 and uranium-235. When bombarded with neutrons, uranium transforms into new elements: the rarer uranium-235 and plutonium. Because of uranium’s instability, scientists can force it to create chain reactions of fission—breaking apart—or fusion—coming together—within the nucleus of

an atom. When large amounts of uranium are destabilized into chain reaction, the result is a massive release of energy which creates a devastating weapon.

Uranium is often found in the same minerals that contain radium and vanadium. Because of the preexisting radium and vanadium markets, the United States government knew that uranium-containing ores were plentiful on the Colorado Plateau, which consists of Utah, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, and Arizona. Due to its central location in this broad area, the government saw Grand Junction as an ideal base from which to procure stores of uranium to aid in the nation's defense. On March 23, 1943, Second Lieutenant Phillip Leahy was assigned by the government to establish an unobtrusive office on the outskirts of the Grand Junction to acquire and process material for use in atomic weaponry. Though historians of the era are unsure whether the uranium contained in the bombs dropped on Japan originated from the Colorado Plateau or from mines in Belgium, Canada, or the Congo, at least some of the material was very likely passed through the log-cabin office of Leahy and his small staff.

### **The Atomic Energy Commission**

In 1946, President Harry Truman passed the Atomic Energy Act, establishing a civilian governmental agency to monitor and encourage development of an American uranium industry. Because of its location and the part it had played in the Manhattan Project, Grand Junction was chosen to house one of the major offices of the newly-created Atomic Energy Commission (AEC). Though other offices were created across the Colorado Plateau, the Grand Junction Office coordinated exploration and acquisition of raw materials throughout the AEC branches as well as working in development of new mining techniques. In April of 1948, the AEC initiated a series of programs to give financial incentive to both companies and individuals: the government offered a \$10,000 bonus for discovery of new ore sites, promised a three-year

minimum price of \$1.50 per pound of undeveloped ore, and guaranteed for ten years a minimum \$3.50 per pound of refined uranium.

These financial incentives created an immediate boom: in the next couple of years twenty-two different mill sites were opened in nine different states, and many existing vanadium mills were expanded to include uranium processing. In the increasingly tense climate of the Cold War, the uranium industry seemed like a guaranteed ticket to success: the threat of Russia seemed to guarantee that the government would need limitless amounts of uranium for years to come. Companies were encouraged by the wartime success of the handful of vanadium mills which had opened during World War II: the Loma Vanadium Mill had milled as much as 15 tons of vanadium a day during the war. In 1951, the year that the Climax Mill opened, the nationwide uranium industry was grossing 30 million dollars a year. Grand Junction, with its central location, excellent road and railway connections, and proximity to one of the earliest AEC offices, was a prime spot for an enterprising company to take advantage of Colorado's resurgent uranium and vanadium boom.

### **Climax Uranium Mill**

Though it was a comparative latecomer to the business of uranium and vanadium milling, the Climax Company did its best to gain market advantage. Uranium was sold in the form of "yellowcake," a brightly-colored concentrate that is the basis for nuclear reactions. Refining uranium into yellowcake was a lengthy and arduous process that created enormous waste material. In order to create yellowcake, Climax crushed high-grade ore into a fine powder. This powder was then run through a series of chemical solutions for purification, and then extracted from the resulting mix using organic solutions. Next, the purified material was washed and filtered before being dried and formed into yellowcake. This process used enormous amounts of

water, which Climax drew from the nearby Colorado River, and created a great deal of waste.

One of the major forms of waste are tailings, a fine, white powder made from the remaining ground ore after uranium extraction.

The proximity of the AEC was both an advantage and a disadvantage for Climax. The Grand Junction AEC had its own processing facilities dating from its involvement in the Manhattan Project, but its local capacities were much smaller than the production capabilities of Climax's huge campus. The need to acquire enough unprocessed minerals to sustain production was always a concern in the competitive atmosphere. Hoping to corner the market for the quickly growing Grand Valley, Climax offered to circumvent the AEC and purchase uranium and vanadium directly from individuals; it also examined, developed, and purchased promising claims. This attempt to dominate all stages of uranium development brought great initial success, and the Climax Uranium Mill soon became a celebrated bedrock of Grand Junction's economy and community.

### **Atomic Culture**

The 1950s are often remembered as a time of atomic anxiety, marked by signs pointing the way to fallout shelters and remembered for its attempts to educate every American schoolchild on what to do in case of the outbreak of nuclear war with Russia. This fear was real, and pervaded every aspect of American life during this decade, but it was balanced by corresponding excitement and hope. On December 8, 1953, President Eisenhower gave a speech titled "Atoms for Peace," an attempt to educate the American public both about nuclear warfare and atomic energy. Though Eisenhower discussed the catastrophic implications of the atomic bomb, he also emphasized the potential of atomic energy to unlock a pathway to a shining new

future. Following the speech, the government initiated an education campaign also titled Atoms for Peace, which sent equipment and educators across the country to teach people

Eisenhower's emphasis on peaceful applications of uranium sharpened the hope of companies like Climax, who looked forward to the days when restrictions on uranium sales would be lifted and the private sector would enter the customer base. Climax and other large corporations were not the only institutions hoping to capitalize off of uranium in the 1950s. The fortune-making bonanzas of ordinary men like Charles Steen and Vernon Pick in 1951 enflamed public imagination, and self-made prospectors—armed with Geiger counters and guidebooks on recognizing and extracting atomic minerals—flooded throughout the Colorado Plateau. How-to guidebooks for would-be prospectors were published by the dozens, and Mesa College even joined in on the craze, offering an evening vocational course on the process of uranium prospecting. Narratives depicting the romance and excitement of the uranium industry proliferated in popular culture: Hollywood depicted the rush of prospectors in the 1956 film *Uranium Boom* and in 1957 the music industry joined in, releasing the Commodores song “Uranium” and Warren Smith’s “Uranium Rock.” Even the toy industry capitalized on the excitement, producing toy uranium hauler trucks and board games like “Uranium Rush,” which featured a light-up toy Geiger counter.

The western communities like Grand Junction that were the locus of domestic uranium production embraced the industry, incorporating it into business promotions and local celebrations. Some Grand Junction Police cars proudly sported atomic symbols on their doors, and the Miss Atomic Energy beauty contest, co-sponsored by the Grand Junction Chamber of Commerce and the Uranium Ore Producers Association, was a popular event, in part because the winner received a truckload of uranium ore in addition to her crown. The 1957 celebration of

Grand Junction's 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary featured as its centerpiece a dramatic production entitled "From Utes to Uranium," featuring Girl and Boy Scout troops in the roles of prospectors saluting the age of progress brought by the uranium industry.

The uranium boom sparked a surge of growth and new construction in Grand Junction; in 1954, the city issued 3 million dollars in new building permits. The Climax Company soon lit upon a way to capitalize on this expansion while simultaneously disposing of the massive amounts of tailings: they began selling the byproduct to individuals and construction companies. Tailings, which resembled the fine white sand of tropic beaches, were in high demand: construction companies purchased them in great quantities to use for house foundations and making concrete; individuals carried away small amounts to fill sandboxes and gardens; the city infused tailings into the concrete of Main Street's sidewalks; and the Bookcliff Country Club golf course used tailings to fill their sand traps. Though some residents claimed that the tailings produced unusually large vegetables, and others joked that the town glowed in the dark, few were aware of potential danger from the byproduct. Early estimates thought that over 300,000 tons of tailings were sold for use in landscaping and construction projects in over 4,000 properties around the county between 1950 and 1966, but these numbers have since been adjusted upwards.

### **The Boom Goes Bust: The Decline of the Domestic Uranium Industry**

Between 1948 and 1976, over 15 million pounds of ore containing uranium were extracted from the Colorado Plateau, amounting to over 12% of the total United States uranium ore production. However, after the first decade of excitement, the industry shifted to favor large conglomerate companies, many of them based in the East. In 1958, the AEC's ten-year buying initiatives expired, putting an end to the independent prospector's participation in the uranium

boom. Though the AEC implemented new policies, they were aimed at existing big businesses rather than at the individual prospector. Also in 1958, the AEC allowed uranium companies to begin selling yellowcake to approved private corporations for peaceful application. However, the early hopes that the private uranium sector would reach dizzying heights were disappointed, and throughout the 1960s the government was forced to extend purchasing contracts with uranium companies in the hopes that demand would increase in the private sector and relieve the AEC of the burden of sustaining the flagging industry. In the mid-1960s, following President Kennedy's 1963 Nuclear Test Ban Treaty with Russia, the government's insatiable demand for uranium slackened somewhat. Though the 1970s saw another rise in demand for uranium, the decade of bust cycle in the 1960s took its toll on many of the western mills that had opened in the booming 1950s.

In addition to the decreased economic demand for uranium, growing awareness of the potential health impact of uranium byproduct as well as highly-publicized cases concerning the impact of radioactive fallout damaged the reputation of the Climax Uranium Mill. In the 1950s, the health ramifications of uranium processing were not well understood. The risks of radiation had long been known to medicine, and the dire impacts of radioactive fallout on health were well-publicized following events like the U.S.'s 1954 test explosion in the Marshall Islands, which inadvertently rained radioactive ash on a group of Japanese fishermen eighty to ninety miles away from the explosion. Despite the growing knowledge and fear about the effects of radiation on health, uranium tailings, the byproduct of yellowcake production, were considered harmless.

In 1966, amidst growing public concern, the Colorado Department of Health sampled Climax's tailings for radon-222. Unlike the intense radioactivity produced by nuclear detonation,

radon is a gas naturally released as uranium decays; though it does not have the immediate and drastic impact on health that a nuclear blast does, in the 1960s scientists gradually realized that radon, too, might harm health over periods of prolonged exposure. The Climax samples tested positive for elevated levels, and the mill ceased selling its tailings. The backlash from the growing public health concerns, combined with the bust cycle of the uranium industry, impacted the profitability of the Climax Uranium Mill, and in 1970 the mill was decommissioned and eight of its twelve buildings were demolished.

## **VI. Remediation and Revitalization: From Grand Junkyard to Las Colonias Park**

### **Introduction**

Though the Climax Uranium Mill had been largely destroyed, the site, which had produced massive amounts of uranium during its 19 years of operation, remained a source of concern for both the Grand Junction community and the government. Awareness and scientific knowledge about the dangers of long-term exposure to radon gas were steadily increasing, and it was clear to everyone that actions had to be taken to undo the unwitting damage caused by the town's embrace of uranium culture and tailings. However, implementing a lasting cleanup program was a long and complicated process. During the lengthy process of remediation, the former mill site was used only as a dumping ground, accumulating junk and radioactive material for nearly twenty years until a bold new vision changed its fate yet again.

### **Remediation**

In 1972, a short paper published by Dr. Geno Saccomanno, a researcher at St. Mary's Hospital, recorded elevated lung cancer rates among former uranium miners. Though Saccomanno was reluctant to draw direct links between exposure to uranium ore and cancer, local and state newspapers that reported on his findings drew the connection nonetheless. The public demanded government response, and in the early 1970s, the State of Colorado initiated a limited cleanup program intended to focus on the most severely contaminated properties. The Grand Junction Remedial Action Project, created in 1972, focused on protecting the health of Grand Junction residents by removing tailings from indoor properties. Around six hundred properties were cleaned during this initial phase, but no plan had been made for what to do with the removed tailings. Lacking a better option, the tailings were returned to the riverfront and left in an open pile on the former mill site, which was unused and already contaminated. The use of

tailings throughout the county was so extensive that by 1990 the volume of waste dumped along the riverside totaled more than 2.2 million cubic yards and reached as high as 30 feet.

In the late 1970s, the national government joined the state in remediation efforts. The increased public concern about health had changed the nature of the Atomic Energy Commission, and in 1977 President Jimmy Carter signed into law the Department of Energy Organization act, creating the Department of Energy (DOE) as a replacement bureau for the AEC. Unlike the AEC, which had focused on identification and acquisition of energy material, the DOE was specifically mandated to oversee cleanup and management of areas by the uranium industry. The next year, Congress passed the Uranium Mill Tailings Radiation Control Act (UMTRCA/UMTRA), which allocated federal funding through the DOE to remove mill tailings from sites that had been privately owned or commercially operated. Among the first 22 sites identified by UMTRA in 1978, the Grand Junction mill site was the largest.

Cleaning up such a large and deeply contaminated site posed many complications: extensive environmental assessments had to be completed, a safe and protected dumping site had to be located, an appropriate method of transportation had to be determined, and conflicts between local regulations and federal mandates had to be resolved. The method of removal was particularly controversial: the DOE favored transporting the tailings solely by truck, the cheapest option; the county strongly preferred a combined rail and truck method of removal, a more expensive process, but with less safety hazards. In 1989, after more than a decade of battle that required state intervention to resolve, Mesa County won its preferred method of transport, though the disposal site outside of Whitewater, Colorado, was not its first choice. For three years, trucks and trains hauled mounds of contaminated material from the Climax Mill site, and

by 1993 more than 90% of the massive pile had been safely removed from the riverfront to the 94-acre cell.

The remediation of uranium tailings in Grand Junction spanned decades, but remains incomplete to this day. Only one portion of the storage facility has been sealed off; large sections remain open to accept waste from the ongoing process of remediating Grand Junction's buildings. Because the use of tailings was so widespread, many properties may still be contaminated, a fact that both the DOE and the citizens of Grand Junction are continually attempting to resolve. Every new construction or renovation provides an opportunity to extract tailings from the city's structures; the DOE maintains two local calibration facilities for radiation testing equipment; and the Cancer Coalition of Colorado offers free radon test kits to residents through St. Mary's Hospital. The DOE continually works to develop new technology for testing and decontamination of legacy sites. Additionally, the local DOE office closely monitors sites in and around Grand Junction, performing regular tests on the soil and groundwater of the former Climax Mill site. Grand Junction residents will have to live with the legacy of the cultural ignorance towards the dangers of the uranium industry towards human and environmental health for years to come.

### **The Impact of the Uranium on the *La Gara***

Remediation was not only a complex problem for the state and local government. It also posed difficulties to the city's residents. Due to the rampant usage of tailings in construction, over 8,000 properties were assessed at elevated radiation levels; of these, about 5,000 have been cleaned since remediation began. The remediation process often required yards and pavement to be torn out and buildings to be lifted and moved in order to excavate tailings from their foundations. Though this process was unsettling to all Grand Junction residents who experienced

it, it had an especially profound impact on the families who lived nearest to the Climax Mill. For the Hispanic families who lived in the neighborhood north of the riverfront—many of them former residents of *la colonia* and their children—homeownership was deeply meaningful, representing both individual success and the strength of the community.

In addition to physically moving the houses, many residents were relocated, moves that disrupted the close-knit ties between family, friends, and neighbors. Remembering the period in the early 1980s when his parents lived in temporary housing during the remediation process, Jose Chavez said, “Everything was just torn. [The house] was just an empty shell. And I think if you went down to that neighborhood it was all that way in every home. There was a sense of loss. The dirt—the *terra*—culturally means a lot to us. Especially if you’re a farm worker. … The Latino/Indian cultures, you feel Mother Earth, you feel it breath, and to tear it apart and lose your home it’s a sadness that I don’t know how quite to explain, but I know it makes you cry when it’s gone. And I think that’s what happened.”

The trauma of remediation is still sharply recalled by many in the Hispanic community. However, the process was undertaken to protect the health of residents. The question of how extensively mill tailings might impact health remains controversial. The Grand Junction area at large has a higher than national average occurrence of lung cancer and other negative health effects, statistics which may result from the city’s embrace of uranium and its byproducts—or might simply be the result of Colorado’s higher altitude or unrelated local background radiation. The broad cultural acceptance of the health risks posed by uranium industries was suspected early on by the individuals who lived in the shadow of the Climax Mill: while other Grand Junction residents were filling their sandboxes with tailings, many Hispanic families were forbidding their children from playing on the piles; however, they could do nothing about the

tailings that blew down their streets and coated their houses with every breeze. Though it is difficult to prove, some individuals who lived in the neighborhood remember family members who suffered cancer and wonder if the proximity of the Climax Uranium Mill to their homes may have contributed to these losses.

### **A New Vision Emerges: Reclaiming the Riverfront**

In 1973, amidst the trauma of the initial cleanup, a coalition of individuals and organizations created a proposal for a state-managed Colorado River Park. The City Council of Grand Junction approved the plan and passed it on to State Senator Chet Enstrom to propose to the government of Colorado. The plan focused on Grand Junction's growing status as a tourist destination and the expectation of increased tourist traffic promised by the pending completion of Interstate 70; furthermore, it expressed hope that the project could be tied to the upcoming Bicentennial. Despite support from the city government, Greenbelt, Inc., the Audubon Society of Western Colorado, and numerous cultural and educational institutions, the State Parks Board rejected the idea, declaring that "The stretch of the Colorado and Gunnison rivers through the Grand Junction area is not an outstanding river environment and is of more local than state significance." Though most Grand Junction residents who encountered the idea of a river park praised the concept, the timing was not right. The ongoing remediation process seemed like an insurmountable obstacle, and private landowners halted the 1976 possibility of a matching grant from the U.S. Bureau of Outdoor Recreation. Though the dream of a river park faltered in the difficult economic years of the late 1970s and early 1980s, in 1985 the idea was revived by a varied group of visionaries who, through persistence and cooperation, created a wave of momentum for revitalization and restoration that carries through to this day.

## **Grand Junkyard**

In the late 1980s, in the midst of the ongoing remediation negotiations, the mill site and the nearby riverfront was a graveyard of scrap metal, cars, and uranium waste. “Grand Junkyard,” the nickname bestowed to Grand Junction in the 1950s by John Madden as he travelled through the city, was a sadly appropriate moniker for the riverfront area. After decades of industrial use, few people envisioned the site as anything other than a junkyard. The Hispanic families who moved from *la colonia* into the surrounding neighborhoods had honored the river, using it daily, and children who attended the nearby Emerson School grew up swimming in and skating on the river. However, by the 1980s, pollution had made these distant memories seem like fantasies. There were no public parks alongside any stretch of the river; in fact, most of the river was totally inaccessible to residents of the Grand Valley. The industrial zoning of the area made the river literally inaccessible to residents, and this practical difficulty was compounded by the area’s association with toxic waste.

Despite the neglect of the land, increasing numbers of citizens looked upon the vista of rusted metal and industrial waste and saw potential. The resistance that had halted the 1973 river park proposal was breaking down: on the state level, the Colorado State Parks Board had become interested in backing a Western Slope project, possibly fueled with money from the newly-created state lottery; locally, the depressed economy made many private landowners open to the idea of selling their land. Most importantly, individuals were coming together, forming new communities around their shared love of nature. All that the dream lacked was official organization and money to catch fire. In response to the grassroots support, these key missing factors were attained in the last years of 1985.

In 1985, Lion's Club member Mahoney was searching for a project similar to the successful Two Rivers Plaza for the organization to sponsor. That year, the recently-formed Western Colorado Botanical Society and other individuals began volunteering their Saturdays to clean up both Watson Island and the surrounding area. Mahoney, who harbored a dream of a river park where he might take his children, joined these volunteers. That year, Mahoney wrote a letter to the Community Betterment Committee suggesting that cleaning up the riverfront would help the city improve its reputation as a radioactive junkyard. Supporters hoped that a river park project might replicate Operation Foresight, the 1962 downtown revitalization scheme that had successfully boosted the local economy. Intrigued, the Committee put Mahoney in touch with the like-minded Larry Jones. The pair formed a committee of two to research the property titles of the land.

After determining that landowner Tom Lewis was open to selling Watson Island, Mahoney proposed a financing plan to the Community Betterment Committee which offered matching funds from the Lion's Club if the city would put forward \$100,000. However, he inserted a clause to ensure that the park project would not languish: the Lion's Club money would come in three equal chunks of payment at landmark stages of the park's development. In order to garner the support of city officials for his financing plan, in the late spring of 1987 Mahoney organized a raft trip for a group of city officials in, including city manager Mark Aiken and Mayor R. T. Matlow. Drifting down the Colorado River was a rare experience at that time, for there was no public access point to the water in the larger Grand Junction area. The outing convinced the city officials that the Grand Junction public required better access to the overlooked natural resource of the river, and the city accepted Mahoney's proposal.

## **The Colorado Riverfront Commission**

With an additional \$250,000 from the Energy Assistance Board, Mahoney and Jones had acquired \$500,000 for the purchase of Watson Island. For the first time, the dream of a riverfront park was on the verge of becoming a reality. In June of 1987, Mahoney, Robb, and a group of city and county officials, held a “secret meeting” in the basement of the Daily Sentinel building to discuss the possibility of forming a nonprofit to shepherd their goals into reality. On July 2, 1987, a group of nature-lovers and community leaders met to discuss the best way to proceed with the funds they had raised. The success of the Watson Island project was inspiring, and the group realized that the momentum they had achieved might be pushed on to grander dreams: a trail system along the entire Grand Valley riverfront, complemented by parks. As Brian Mahoney recalls, Lion’s Club member Jim Robb compared the trail system which would extend across the Valley like a snake with jewel-like parks attached. Today, Robb’s metaphor is still used and the parks and trail systems are referred to as a “string of pearls:” the trail representing the binding cord, with each park serving as a unique pearl.

Though all recognized that the task of creating a fully connected and developed trail system was enormous, the Grand Junction and Mesa County Riverfront Commission—today called the Colorado Riverfront Commission—was formed with the goal of making this string of pearls a reality. In addition to Robb and Mahoney, founding members were Maxine Albers, Ward Scott, Jane Quimby, Rebecca Frank, Pat Gormley, Helen Traylor, Bill Graham, Chris Jouflas, and Harold Elam. In November of 1988, with the help of the Lion’s Club, the city, and the Colorado Energy Impact Assistance Fund, the Commission achieved its first goal: the purchase of Watson Island for \$302,000.

## **The Jarvis Property**

The next goal for the Riverfront Commission was the acquisition of the 11-acre Jarvis Property, which had been used for decades as an automobile salvage yard. Initially, the Jarvis family demanded 3.5 million for the property, a valuation that placed it well beyond the Commission's limited resources. However, the DOE's concurrent remediation project provided a lucky intervention: because of its proximity to the Climax Mill site, the Jarvis Property was extensively contaminated, and required federal intervention under UMTRA. Through a series of tense negotiations spearheaded by Ward Scott, in 1990 the Riverfront Commission convinced the DOE to remove the irradiated automobiles that crowded the Jarvis Property and donate \$900,000 towards the Commission's city park project. After the Jarvis family agreed to discount the property, the Riverfront Commission was able to purchase the land for \$2.15 million in 1991. In addition to the DOE's contribution, this landmark purchase was made possible by the Goodwin Foundation's grant of \$250,000, a federal Community Development Block Grant of \$340,000, and a contribution of \$635,000 from the city.

These successes, which occurred during a time in which Grand Junction's economy was in shambles, helped transform the hesitation of the public, who had grown accustomed to thinking of the riverfront as a chemically contaminated junkyard, into civic support. The riverfront project united the citizens of Mesa County behind a shared dream of creating a space for people to be in nature without damaging it. The support of the public harmonized with inter-institutional cooperation to create lasting change. In addition to the assistance from the DOE, the county, and the cities governments of the Grand Valley, the Commission worked with the Bureau of Land Management, the Bureau of Reclamation, and both the federal and Colorado

Divisions of Wildlife to provide public access to the river while simultaneously preserving and revitalizing natural habitats.

### **Encountering Nature: Education and Preservation**

The momentum generated by the successful purchases of Watson Island and the Jarvis Property was sustained by a cascade of other projects. In 1990, Elizabeth Harris, one of the early members of the Western Colorado Botanical Society, noticed a number of purple and yellow flowers growing along the riverbank by the 5<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge, their faces pointing towards Frank Dunn's salvage yard. After the city purchased the property, Harris approached Mahoney and Joanie and Bob Young with an expanded version of her vision: a community garden. The group met in Harris' kitchen, hand-drawing plans for a botanical garden. In 1994, the city leased 15 acres of land to the Botanical Society for the price of only \$1 a year. With a \$100,000 donation from the Lion's Club and money raised from community fundraising, a greenhouse was constructed, and the Western Colorado Botanical Society Greenhouse and Butterfly House was opened in 1997.

Members of the Botanical Society had been among the dedicated volunteers who helped to clear away the tons of junk that littered the riverfront, and they imbued the Botanical Gardens with the same aspirations that had inspired cleanup: a desire to educate community members about the beauty of nature and the importance of preserving it. Since opening, the Botanical Gardens have grown to include a number of outdoor gardens in addition to their indoor exhibits, including the Native Garden, designed to replicate the natural species and the varied agricultures of the Grand Valley. The construction of the Old Mill Bridge, a pedestrian bridge linking Orchard Mesa Middle School with the former mill site on the opposite bank, was another important step in realizing the goal of providing community access to nature.

The riverfront project began on Watson Island and the surrounding area, but it quickly fanned out across the Grand Valley. In 1994, the 20-year-old efforts of the Greenbelt Incorporation were realized when the riverfront project was granted state park status. Now called the James M. Robb Colorado River State Park in honor of one of the men who guided and encouraged the groundswell of community enthusiasm, this park is one of the Grand Valley's crowning achievements. The 890-acre park is home to numerous native species of Colorado, and provides the community with the opportunity to encounter them through its extensive trail system. From its humble beginnings, the trail system has nearly achieved Robb's vision of a string of interconnected pearls: the trail is largely complete from Watson Island to Fruita, and nearly complete between Grand Junction and Corn Lake.

## **VII. Conclusion**

### **Las Colonias Park: Honoring the Past, Inspiring the Future**

One the many visionary metaphors that Brian Mahoney recalls from the first meeting of the Riverfront Commission is a comment, attributed to Bill Graham, about the size of the project: “I compare this job to a mouse eating an elephant. It’s only going to take it one bite at a time, and that’s what we’ve got to do.” Bite by bite, the gargantuan project of restoring the damaged environment and creating a space for people to interact with nature has been diminished in size. Perhaps fittingly, the land where the dream was born will be one of the last areas to be developed into a park along the trail system. Though its development has slowed since the opening of the Botanical Gardens, plans to develop the old mill site have never faded. Now, thirty years after volunteers first began nibbling at the elephantine piles of waste on Watson Island, Las Colonias Park is undergoing exciting development, and soon will become a community center to complement the Colorado River State Park.

After the completion of the DOE remediation, the old mill site was deeded to the State of Colorado, which in turn transferred the site to the City of Grand Junction in 1997. In 1998, community leader Jose Chavez won a naming contest for the planned park. Chavez’s suggestion, Las Colonias, honored the community who lived in the area throughout the duration of the twentieth century, raising children—like Chavez himself—who would become inspiring political and community leaders in Mesa County. Though the project experienced a lull due to lack of funding, in November of 2006 the development plan was revisited, and after the 2008 completion of Riverside Parkway, a new master plan for Las Colonias was completed, retaileored to account for the new road. The economic downturn of the 2000s slowed development plans, but in 2013 new funding prospects and the continuing dedication of community members to the

project enabled its revival, and a new Master Plan was created. Remarkably, throughout all of these phases, the original goal of the park has remained the same: providing a space for the passive experience of nature through the creation of amenities that enhance the community without endangering the environment that so many have worked to restore.

In order to prepare for the park's development, the area first had to be reclaimed from tamarisk. This improvement, like the initial cleanup of the area, was accomplished through intergovernmental cooperation and the dedication of volunteers. In July, 2010, the Tamarisk Coalition, the National Guard, the city, and a team of volunteers worked together to remove tamarisk, save existing cottonwoods, and reseed the area with native plants. Local volunteers began building a disc golf course on Watson Island in 2011, which they completed in 2013. In 2012, the Tamarisk Coalition formed the Grand Valley Riparian Restoration Collaboration [link: <http://www.tamariskcoalition.org/>], a partnership that united Mesa County and the cities of Grand Junction, Fruita, Clifton, and Palisade with numerous government agencies and private institutions behind the shared goal of rebuilding ecological function for the damaged waterfront. Initially, the Tamarisk Coalition focused on removing the invasive species of tamarisk and reseeding native plants; however, as it has grown, it has broadened its focus to include riparian restoration as a whole. In keeping with this ethos, the city is committed to creating and maintaining a natural space in which the river ecosystem—so vital for the sustainment of human settlement in the West—can flourish.

The name “Las Colonias” was chosen to honor the site’s rich history. Though this area of land has experienced trauma, it has also brought diverse cultures together along the banks of the river. In addition to honoring Grand Junction’s past, the name encapsulates the spirit of the area’s new usage: with the Botanical Gardens, the recreational amenities, and the planned

outdoor amphitheater, the area is poised to become one of the city's most vibrant cultural centers. Above all, Las Colonias will be a space for new generations to experience the closeness of diverse human communities in balance with Colorado's wealth of natural beauty.

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pxqaeBmeuTI> Atomic Stampede – documentary, includes interviews with Bill Chenoweth

## Appendix A: Timeline for Las Colonias Area

### 1600 - 1650

- Ute Indians trading with Pueblo become aware of Spanish presence in Rio Grande Valley (in present-day northern New Mexico). Utes acquire horses from Spaniards.

### 1686

- Fray Alonso de Posada writes report for Spanish officials linking mythical land of *Teguayo* with northern Spanish frontier in present-day Utah.

### 1765

- Juan Maria Antonio Rivera led the first recorded expeditions into Ute territory, reaching the confluence of the Uncompahgre and Gunnison Rivers.

### 1776

- Francisco Atanasio Dominguez and Francisco Silvestre Vélez de Escalante led an expedition in an attempt to establish a route between Santa Fe, New Mexico and Monterey, California, exploring parts of western Colorado and Utah.

### 1824

- William Wolfskill and Ewing Young traveled along early North Branch of Old Spanish Trail to trap in Uintah-Green River country.

### 1827-1829

- Antoine Robidoux established Fort Uncompahgre near present-day Delta, Colorado.

### 1829-1830

- Antonio Armijo led first round trip trade caravan from Abiquiu, New Mexico to Los Angeles, California using southern route of Old Spanish Trail.

### 1853

- Captain J. W. Gunnison, commissioned by Secretary of War Jefferson Davis to determine a feasible route for a railroad, travels over North Branch of Old Spanish Trail.

### 1858

- Colonel William W. Loring led military wagon train across much of the North Branch of Old Spanish Trail.

### 1874-1876

- Ferdinand Hayden, with help of topographer Henry Gannett, conducted survey of western Colorado. They take note of Old Salt Lake Wagon Road.

## **1882**

- The City of Grand Junction incorporated.

## **1887**

- Newspaper articles and test growth of sugar beets excite public interest.

## **1891**

- Sugar beet factory constructed in Lehi, Utah.

## **1898**

- Grand Valley Beet Sugar Company formed.

## **1899**

- Group of six investors form the Colorado Sugar Manufacturing Company and make plans to establish beet sugar factory in Grand Junction.
- E.H. Dyer of Ohio oversees construction of the Grand Junction sugar beet factory, the first in Colorado.

## **1902**

- Colorado Sugar Manufacturing Company went into receivership.

## **1903**

- Sugar beet factory purchased by Western Sugar and Land Company.

## **1916**

- Factory sold to Holly Sugar Company.

## **1920-1921**

- Holly Sugar Company builds factory in Delta, Colorado.
- Holly builds Colonias housing for migrant farm laborers near Colorado River.

## **1929**

- Grand Junction factory closed.

## **1933**

- Holly runs one last sugar beet campaign at Grand Junction factory before final shut-down and consolidates all Western Slope operations at Delta facility.

## **1936**

- Revival of vanadium mining in Western Colorado.

## **1941**

- Loma Vanadium Mill opened, milling as much as 15 tons a day to support war effort.

## **1942**

- Bracero program begins, bringing hundreds of Mexican farm laborers to the Grand Valley.

## **1943**

- Philip Leahy established Manhattan Project office on the outskirts of Grand Junction.

## **1944**

- German prisoners of war and Mexican *braceros* assisted in harvesting of agricultural crops, including sugar beets.

## **1945**

- Atomic bombs dropped on Japanese cities of Hirshomina and Nagasaki, helping to end World War II.

## **1946**

- President Harry Truman passed the Atomic Energy Act, creating the Atomic Energy Commission.
- Leahy's Manhattan Project office was transformed into a central AEC outpost.

## **1948**

- AEC began offering financial incentives to encourage domestic mining of uranium.

## **c. 1948-1950**

- Colonia buildings near Colorado River were torn down.

## **1950**

- Climax Uranium Company acquired 114-acre site and begins expansion of sugar beet building into a uranium processing mill.

## **1951**

- Climax Uranium Mill opened and began processing uranium and vanadium.

## **1952**

- Las Colonias neighborhood annexed by City of Grand Junction.

## **1964**

- Congress terminates the Bracero program.

## **1966**

- Colorado Department of Health began sampling tailing piles for radon gas.

## **1970**

- Climax destroyed eight of its twelve main buildings and began selling decontaminated equipment. Later in the year, the mill was decommissioned.
- In December, President Nixon formed the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), a governmental agency devoted to the protection of the environment and human health.

## **1972**

- Dr. Geno Saccamanno's controversial paper on lung cancer in uranium miners published.
- U.S. Surgeon General mandated that all Grand Junction properties built with tailings had to be decontaminated.
- Congress began funding the process of remediation for tailings used in domestic construction.

## **1977**

- President Jimmy Carter signed the Department of Energy Organization Act, transforming the AEC into the DOE, an organization mandated to manage legacy uranium site.
- Holly Sugar Corporation shuts down factory in Delta, Colorado, ending the sugar beet industry in western Colorado.

## **1978**

- In April, Colorado issued regulations dealing with the stabilization of mill tailings.
- In November, Congress passed the Uranium Mill Tailing Radiation Control Act (UMTRCA).

## **1984**

- First meeting of the Western Colorado Botanical Society.

## **1985**

- Restoration efforts begun to clean-up Watson Island and surrounding area.

## **1987**

- Mahoney took a group of city officials on a raft trip through the Grand Valley to gain support for a city park along the riverfront.
- On July 2, 1987, the Colorado Riverfront Commission was formed.

## **1988**

- In November, Tom Lewis sold Watson Island to the city for \$350,000.

## **1989**

- Two of the four remaining buildings of the Climax Uranium complex were demolished, leaving only a portion of the sugar beet factory and a Quonset hut.

## **1990**

- Construction began for the radioactive disposal site located outside of Whitewater, Colorado.

## **1991**

- Jarvis Property purchased for \$2.25 million dollars.
- Clean-up of Watson Island and surrounding area completed.

## **1993**

- Colorado's Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell and Representative Scott McInnis introduce a bill to authorize the National Park Service for a feasibility study on including the Old Spanish Trail in the National Trails System as a National Historic Trail.
- Watson Island and surrounding area flooded, wiping out the trails in that area.

## **1994**

- Old Spanish Trail Association (OSTA) founded.
- 4.4 million cubic yards of radioactive and contaminated material removed from Grand Junction to the Whitewater Disposal Site; mill site declared contaminated in August.
- Western Colorado Botanical Society signed a lease with the city to establish a botanical garden.

## **1997**

- Botanical Gardens opened.
- The State of Colorado transferred the former mill site to the City of Grand Junction.

## **1998**

- DOE completed the cleanup process for the remaining mill sites initially identified by UMTRCA.
- The City of Grand Junction completed its first Master Plan for a park on the Las Colonias site.
- Jose Chavez won a contest to name the proposed new park, christening it Las Colonias.

## **2002**

- Senator Campbell introduced S 1946, the Old Spanish Trail Recognition Act, which was passed unanimously by Congress.

## **2006**

- Local business owners, stakeholders, and city staff met to discuss the plans for Las Colonias.

## **2008**

- Riverside Parkway completed.
- A new Las Colonias Master Plan completed to account for the loss of space from the road.

## **2010**

- The National Guard and the city teamed up to remove tamarisk from the Las Colonias area.
- In October, volunteers worked together to seed native grass and save cottonwoods from beaver.

## **2012**

- Tamarisk Coalition formed the Grand Valley Riparian Restoration Collaboration to rebuild ecological function for the waterfront.

## **2013**

- Volunteers completed construction of a disc golf course on Watson Island.
- On July 3, 2013, the City Council approved continued development of the park.

## **2014**

- Great Outdoors Colorado Grant was awarded to the City of Grand Junction for development of Las Colonias Park.
- Design and planning of the park accelerated for the addition of an amphitheater and amenities to Las Colonias Park.

## Appendix B: Image Identification and Sources

Format: [filename] [Image identification] [image source] [suggested use for text accompaniment]

*Note: Unless otherwise noted, most images are either fair use or public domain, or held at local archives. Verbal permission has been received for use from CMU Special Collections, but city should contact each institution for paperwork.*

### Old Spanish Trail

1. 1-Old Spanish Trail map\_2009. Courtesy of Old Spanish Trail Association. [Suggested for “Introduction.”]
2. 2-Ute petroglyphs in Arches National Park.  
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/32760/Arches-National-Park>. [Suggested for “Early Travelers on the Trail.”]
3. 3-Ute hide art.  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ute\\_people#/media/File:UteHideArt3.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ute_people#/media/File:UteHideArt3.jpg). [Suggested for “Early Travelers on the Trail.”]
4. 4-Ute warrior and bride. [http://ilovehistory.utah.gov/people/first\\_peoples/tribes/ute.html](http://ilovehistory.utah.gov/people/first_peoples/tribes/ute.html) [Suggested for “Early Travelers on the Trail.”]
5. 5-Juan Maria Antonio Rivera. [Suggested for “Rivera’s Journeys into Ute Country.”]
6. 6-Dominguez and Escalante Entering the Utah Valley. Painting by Paul Salisbury.  
<http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2013/07/29/native-history-spanish-priests-begin-catholic-conversion-natives-150636> (Uncertain of copyright.) [Suggested for “The Dominguez-Escalante Expedition.”]
7. 7-Bernardo y Pachecho’s map from Dominguez-Escalante Expedition. Utah Historical Society. [Suggested for “The Dominguez-Escalante Expedition.”]
8. 8-Map of Dominguez and Escalante’s route from Santa Fe to Utah Valley.  
<http://www.uintahbasintah.org/sftjune11> [Suggested for “The Dominguez-Escalante Expedition.”]

9. 9-Juan Bautista de Anza. <http://www.anzahistorictrail.org/juniorrangers/aboutanza> [Suggested for “Conflict, Trade, and Transition in the Borderlands.”]
10. 10-Antoine Robidoux. Courtesy of the Museum of Western Colorado. [Suggested for “Conflict, Trade, and Transition in the Borderlands.”]
11. 11-Mexican arrieros depicted in 1836 lithograph by Frédéric Lehert and Carl Nebel. Courtesy of Old Spanish Trail Association. <http://www.oldspanishtrail.org/> [Suggested for “The Old Spanish Trail Complete.”]
12. 12-Map of the North Branch of the Old Spanish Trail. Kessler, Ron. *Tracing the Old Spanish Trail North Branch: Today’s OST Travel Guide*. Adobe Village Press, 1995. [Suggested for “The Old Spanish Trail Complete.”]
13. 13-William Wolfskill. <http://mojavedesert.net/people/william-wolfskill.html> [Suggested for “The Demise of the Great Spanish Trail.”]
14. 14-Captain John W. Gunnison. Photo from National Archives. [Suggested for American Exploration on the Trail.”]
15. 15-Henry Gannett. U.S. Geological Survey Photographic Library, Portraits Collection 62 [Suggested for American Exploration on the Trail.”]
16. 16-Salt Lake Wagon Road traces between Delta and Grand Junction, Colorado. [Suggested for “Remembering the Old Spanish Trail and Subsequent Trails.”]
17. 17-Old Spanish Trail marker on Orchard Mesa. [Suggested for “Remembering the Old Spanish Trail.”]
18. 18-Crossing of the Grand marker in Eagle Rim Park. [Suggested for “Remembering the Old Spanish Trail.”]

### Sugar Beets

1. 1-Picture of sugar beet. [Suggested for “Down by the River-Intro.”]
2. 2-“Sugar from the Beet” headline from Grand Junction Daily News, Nov., 1899. [Suggested for “Down by the River.”]
3. 3-Franz Carl Achard. [Suggested for “Early History of Sugar Beet Industry”]
4. 4-Peter Magnes. [Suggested for “‘White Gold’ in Colorado.”]

5. 5-Charles Boettcher. [Suggested for “Brighter Future for Sugar Beets in Western Colorado.”]
6. 6-John F. Campion. [Suggested for “Brighter Future for Sugar Beets in Western Colorado.”]
7. 7-Picture of Sugar Beet Factory in 1899. Courtesy of the Museum of the West. [Suggested for “Sugar Beet Factory Finally Reality.”]
8. 8-Picture of inside Grand Junction Sugar Plant. Courtesy of the Museum of the West. [Suggested for “Sugar Beet Factory Finally Reality.”]
9. 9-Western Sugar and Land Company, early 1900s. Courtesy of the Museum of the West. [Suggested for “Sugar Beet Industry Expansion.”]
10. 10-View of sugar plant from across the Grand (Colorado) River on Orchard Mesa c.1907. Courtesy of the Museum of the West. [Suggested for “Sugar Beet Industry Expansion.”]
11. 11-Front page of Daily Sentinel, Nov., 1918.[Suggested for “Holly Sugar.”]
12. 12-“Sugar Beet Culture” advertisement. [Suggested for “Holly Sugar.”]
13. 13-Sugar beet side dump at Holly Sugar factory. Courtesy of Museum of the West. [Suggested for “Holly Sugar.”]
14. 14-Sugar beet knife. Courtesy of Angel Colunga. [Suggested for “The Art of Stoop Labor.”]
15. 15-German-Russians in beet field. Courtesy of Denver Public Library. [Suggested for “Immigrant Laborers.”]
16. 16-Mexican sugar beet workers in 1920s. Courtesy of Colorado Historical Society. [Suggested for “The Mexican Presence.”]
17. 17-Recommendation for artist’s charcoal sketch of white longhouses of La Colonia (as no pictures of the buildings could be located). [Suggested for “La Colonia.”]
18. 18-Picture of beet harvester being pulled by tractor 1960s. [Suggested for “Mechanized Beet Farming.”]
19. 19-Sugar beet dump in Fruita, Colorado. Courtesy of Museum of the West. [Suggested for “Holly Sugar.”]

20. 20- Train cars of sugar beets headed for the Delta plant. Courtesy of the Museum of the West. [Suggested for either “Holly Sugar” or “Demise of Grand Valley Sugar Beet Culture.”]
21. 21-Picture of sugar beet in soil. [Suggested for “Conclusion.”]

### Las Colonias

(Images can be arranged according to individual stories.)

### Uranium

1-aerial view of climax uranium mill.jpg Aerial image of Climax Uranium Mill, c. 1950s. Courtesy of Museum of the West. [Suggested accompaniment for “Introduction.”]

1. 2-wikicommons-Carnotite Carnotite. Wikicommons [Suggested for “Origins”]
2. 2-wikicommonsUranium\_conversion\_2.jpg Uranium conversion process. Wikicommons. [Suggested for “Origins.”]
3. 2-U\_S\_VANADIUM\_1940\_L.JPG U.S. Vanadium and Company in Uravan, CO, c. 1940. <http://www.uravan.com/index.htm> [Suggested for “Origins”]
4. 3-AEC cabin.jpg Philip Leahy’s log cabin at the Manhattan Project/future AEC and DOE Complex, c. 1943 [suggested for “Manhattan Project”]
5. 3-AEC cabin at the DOE.JPG D.O.E. Uranium Refinery Office, 2014. Courtesy Jonathan Carr and the Grand Junction DOE Office. [Suggested for “Manhattan Project.”]
6. 3-Atomic\_cloud\_over\_Hiroshima-wikicommons.jpg Atomic cloud over Hiroshima, August 6, 1945. Wikicommons. [Suggested for “Manhattan Project”]
7. 4-climax construction.jpg Climax Uranium Mill construction, c. 1950. Courtesy of Museum of the West. [Suggested for “AEC”]
8. 4-prospectors guide-lode location notice.jpg  
5 - Prospector’s Guide .- staking location.jpg  
Peter, P.W. A Prospector’s Guide for Uranium. Grand Junction, CO: Dunkin Blue Print & Supply Co., 1953, Courtesy Tomlinson Library Special Collections and Archives. [Suggested for “AEC”]

9. 4-climax uranium company ad-1957.jpg Advertisement for the Climax Company published in *Grand Junction 75<sup>th</sup> Diamond Jubilee 1882-1957*. Grand Junction, CO: 1957. Courtesy Tomlinson Library Special Collections and Archives. [Suggested for “AEC”]
10. 6-prospectors guide to uranium.jpg “A Prospector’s Guide to Uranium.” Courtesy Tomlinson Library Special Collections and Archives. [Suggested for “Atomic Culture.”]
11. 6-GJ police with atomic symbol.jpg GJ police car emblazoned with atomic symbol, c. 1955. Courtesy of the Museum of the West.
12. 6-miss atomic energy.jpg Miss Atomic Energy, c. 1955. Courtesy Tomlinson Library Special Collections and Archives. [Suggested for “Atomic Culture”]
13. 6-from utes to uranium-diamond jubilee 1957.jpg “From Utes to Uranium” pageant presented at the Diamond Jubilee, 1957. *Grand Junction 75<sup>th</sup> Diamond Jubilee 1882-1957*. Grand Junction, CO: 1957. Courtesy Tomlinson Library Special Collections and Archives.
14. 7-nuclear regulatory commission-yellowcake.jpg Yellowcake. WikiCommons. Yellowcake. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (public domain): <https://www.flickr.com/people/nrcgov/> [Suggested for “Bust”].
15. 7-nuclear-regulatory-commission-atoms for peace.jpg Atoms for Peace educational campaign, c. 1954, Nuclear Regulatory Commission (public domain): <https://www.flickr.com/people/nrcgov/> [Suggested for “Bust”]
16. Ballard, Thomas and Quentin E. Conklin. The Uranium Prospector’s Guide-1.jpg Ballard, Thomas and Quentin E. Conklin. The Uranium Prospector’s Guide-2.jpg Chapter heading cartoon from *The Uranium Prospector’s Guide*, 1955. Courtesy Tomlinson Library Special Collections and Archives.
17. geigercounter\_wikicommons.png Cartoon of a prospector, c. 1950s. Wikicommons.

*Note: the following images are from the internet but may be fair use for educational purposes:*

18. charlie-pose-mine.jpg Charlie Steen, 1954

<http://www.canyoncountryzephyr.com/oldzephyr/feb-march2002/nutshell-photo-evidence.htm>

19. uranium frontier-flickr user gair dunlop.jpg *How to Prospect for Uranium*, 1955.

[https://www.flickr.com/photos/gair\\_dunlop/sets/72157601813598178/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/gair_dunlop/sets/72157601813598178/)

*Note: Contact Oak Ridge Archive*

*(https://www.orau.org/ptp/collection/Atomicposters/dighthaturanium.htm) for use permission, or just hyperlink to images:*

20. orau\_uraniumboom.jpg      *Uranium Boom*, 1956.

orau\_dig that uranium poster.jpg      *Dig That Uranium*, 1956

Oak Ridge Archives,

<https://www.orau.org/ptp/collection/Atomicposters/atomicmovieposters.htm>

21. orau\_uraniumrushbox.jpg      Uranium Rush game, c. 1955 Oak Ridge Archives,

<https://www.orau.org/ptp/collection/atomictoys/uraniumrush.htm>

### Riverfront & Remediation

1. 1-Climax Mill Demo.jpg - 1-Climax Mill Demo-5.jpg      Demolition of the Climax Uranium Mill, 1970. Courtesy the Museum of the West. [Suggested for “Decline” and/or “Introduction to Remediation and Revitalization”]

2. 2-mahoney140-aerial-tailings.jpg

2-mahoney-tailings and jarvis-aerial.jpg

Aerial views of the mill tailings site and Jarvis Property, c. 1987. Courtesy of Brian Mahoney. [Suggested for “Remediation”]

3. 3-Harry Sutherland uranium bust comic.JPG

3-sutherland AEC remediation comic.JPG

3-sutherland-AEC removal cartoon.JPG

Harry Sutherland cartoons on the uranium bust, c. 1970. Published in the Grand Junction Daily Sentinel. Courtesy of the Museum of the West. [Suggested for “Remediation.”]

4. 3-whitewater disposal site.jpg Aerial view of the Whitewater Disposal site. Center for Land Use Interpretation <http://clui.org/ludb/site/grand-junction-disposal-cell>. [Suggested for “Remediation.”]
5. 2-grand junction-radiation sensor calibration site-DOE.jpg Calibration facility for radiation testing equipment in Grand Junction. Courtesy the DOE. [Suggested for “Remediation”]
6. 2-gjmilltailingsexcavation1990s.jpg An image of a house undergoing tailings remediation, c. 1990s [Suggested for “Impact”]
7. 4-mahoney-tires.jpg  
4-mahoney-grand junkyard.jpg  
Images of the junkyard on the riverfront, c. 1987. Courtesy of Brian Mahoney.  
[Suggested for “Reclaiming the Riverfront/Grand Junkyard”]
8. 4-mahoney\_watson cleanup.jpg Volunteers cleaning on Watson Island, c. 1987.  
Courtesy of Brian Mahoney. [Suggesting for “Grand Junkyard”]
9. 4-mahoney\_raft trip.jpg  
4-mahoney\_raft2.jpg  
City council rafting the River, Spring of 1987. Courtesy of Brian Mahoney. [Suggested for “Grand Junkyard”]
10. 5-botanic gardens\_junkyard.jpg Jarvis Property. Courtesy the Western Colorado Botanical Gardens. [Suggested for “Riverfront Commission”]
11. 5-mahoney-jarvis cars.jpg Jarvis Property. Courtesy of Brian Mahoney. [Suggested for “Riverfront Commission.”]

12. 6-conceptual master plan.jpg Conceptual master plan produced for Riverfront Commission. Courtesy Brian Mahoney. [Suggested for “Riverfront Commission”]

13. 6-mahoney127.jpg Plan for land around river.

14. 6-public land ownership.jpg Public land ownership in the Grand Valley—large map that hung on the wall of the Riverfront Commission in the early years. Courtesy Brian Mahoney. [Suggested for “Riverfront Commission.”]

15. 7-botanical garden opening brochure 1.jpg  
7-botanical garden opening brochure.jpg Images from the Botanical Garden Groundbreaking Ceremony, November 1996. [Suggested for “Nature”]

16. Master plans [Suggested for “Las Colonias Park”]

## **Appendix C: Sign Drafts**

[Note: sections could be paragraphs on a large sign, or perhaps broken into smaller signs.]

### **I. Climax Mill**

- a. The Climax Uranium Company opened in 1951 and closed in 1970. At first, Climax was celebrated locally for the economic development that it encouraged. However, in the mid-1960s the public became increasingly worried about the health impacts of the mill. The mill closed in 1970 in response to a tide of negative publicity combined with a decreased demand for uranium.
- b. Explanation of uranium: Technically, “uranium” refers to the periodic element  $_{92}\text{U}$ . All uranium isotopes are unstable, which makes the element slightly radioactive in its unprocessed state. The most common forms of uranium found in nature are uranium-238 and uranium-235. Because of uranium’s instability, scientists can force it to create chain reactions of fission—breaking apart—or fusion—coming together—within the nucleus of an atom. When large amounts of uranium are destabilized into fusion or fission, the result is a massive release of energy which creates a devastating weapon known as the atomic bomb. Nuclear reaction can also be used to create energy for peaceful uses, but even in nuclear power plants it can still be dangerous.
- c. Uranium is often found in the same geologic deposits that contain radium and vanadium. These ores include uraninite, or pitchblende; coffinite; carnotite;

autunite; and tyuyamunite. Carnotite, which is a distinct bright yellow, is one of the most common sources of the element uranium.

- d. Uranium was sold in the form of “yellowcake,” a brightly-colored concentrate that is the basis for nuclear reactions. Refining uranium into yellowcake was a lengthy and arduous process that created enormous waste material. In order to create yellowcake, Climax crushed high-grade ore into a fine powder. This powder was then run through a series of chemical solutions for purification, and then extracted from the resulting mix using organic solutions. Next, the purified material was washed and filtered before being dried and formed into yellowcake. This process used enormous amounts of water, which Climax drew from the nearby Colorado River, and created a great deal of waste. One of the major forms of waste are tailings, a fine, white powder made from the remaining ground ore after uranium extraction.
- e. In 1958, the government’s purchasing contracts for uranium expired. Though the government continued to buy uranium, the demand from the private sector never reached the heights of the boom’s early years, and throughout the 1960s the uranium industry steadily declined. Climax was affected by this economic change, but was also impacted by the change in public opinion. In 1966, amidst new awareness of the impact of uranium on health, the Colorado Department of Health sampled Climax’s tailings for radon-222 and found elevated levels.
- f. The backlash from the growing public health concerns, combined with the bust cycle of the uranium industry, impacted the profitability of the Climax Uranium Mill, and in 1970 the mill was decommissioned and eight of its twelve buildings were demolished. In 1989, two of the four remaining buildings were removed, leaving only the Quonset Hut and the warehouse of the original sugar beet factory.

## II. Impact of Uranium on the Community

- a. Climax brought a boom of prosperity to Grand Junction: in addition to providing jobs, the mill attracted a population of uranium prospectors as well as numerous other industries. In 1954 alone, the city issued 3 million dollars in new building permits. Climax helped to change the character of the city, transforming it from a largely agricultural Western town into a modern metropolis on the Western Slope. Many of the aspects of Grand Junction that we enjoy today, like the downtown area, were created during the boom years of the uranium industry.
- b. For the people who lived in the surrounding neighborhoods—many of them former residents of *la colonia* who had built their own families and houses—the Climax Mill was a disruptive force. The presence of Climax led to an industrialization of the surrounding city blocks. Climax Mill blocked access to the riverfront, preventing residents from using the river for food, recreation, and community gathering. The sense of community remained strong in the 1950s and 1960s, but residents lived under the shadow of the mill, and their daily lives were disrupted by its noise and pollution.

## III. Riverfront Commission

- a. By the 1980s, there were no parks and no public access points to the Colorado River. The waterfront was blocked off by piles of uranium tailings and mountains of cars, tires, and industrial waste: the legacy of the 1950s and 1960s. In 1985, a group of individuals of all ages and backgrounds began volunteering their weekends to clean up junk from Watson Island. Without the dedication and vision of these volunteers, we might not be able to enjoy
- b. In 1987, the Lion's Club worked with the city and the Energy Assistance Board to put together \$500,000 to buy Watson Island from landowner Tom Lewis for the creation of a city park on the river. In the summer of 1987, a group of nature lovers and city and county officials gathered to discuss their plans. At this meeting, they had the inspiration to continue their project beyond Watson Island to encompass the entire Grand Valley riverfront. Jim Robb proposed the creation of a trail system. He compared the river itself to a snake, winding through the valley alongside a continuous trail system and decorated by a series of jewels in the form of city parks. Today, Robb's metaphor is still used and the parks and trail systems are referred to as a "string of pearls:" the trail representing the binding cord, with each park serving as a unique pearl. In order to make this idea a reality, the group formed a nonprofit organization that they initially called the Grand Junction and Mesa County Riverfront Commission. Founding members were Jim Robb, Brian Mahoney, Maxine Albers, Ward Scott, Jane Quimby, Rebecca Frank, Pat Gormley, Helen Traylor, Bill Graham, Crhis Jouflas, and Harold Elam. With the help of generous financial contributions, the Riverfront Commission—as it is known now—was responsible for organizing and leading the groundswell of community support that made the trail system possible.

#### IV. Suggestions for further signs

- a. Sugar Beet Factory
- b. La Colonia
- c. Tamarisk removal and riparian restoration