

JOURNAL OF THE WESTERN SLOPE

VOLUME 5, NO. 2

SPRING 1990

 MESA STATE
COLLEGE



JOURNAL OF THE WESTERN SLOPE is published quarterly by two student organizations at Mesa State College: the Mesa State College Historical Society and the Alpha-Gamma-Epsilon Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta. Annual subscriptions are \$10. (Single copies are available by contacting the editors of the Journal.) Retailers are encouraged to write for prices. Address subscriptions and orders for back issues to:

Mesa State College
Journal of the Western Slope
P.O. Box 2647
Grand Junction, CO 81502

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Printed by KLB PRINTING

THE COVER: The drawing of Houston Hall was done by Jodi McIntosh, a
junior Fine Arts major at Mesa State College.

Contents

- A Reminiscence of Mesa College
at the End of World War II,
1944-1946** 4
by Calvin W. Gower
- The Manhattan Project on the
Colorado Plateau** 20
by Beth M. Yoder Gilleece
- The Plateau Canyon Road** 30
by Cathy Cummings



A REMINISCENCE OF MESA COLLEGE AT THE END OF WORLD WAR II, 1944-1946

by Calvin W. Gower

Calvin W. Gower grew up in Grand Junction, attended Mesa Junior College, and then earned a B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. in history. Dr. Gower taught history for 32 years at St. Cloud State University, and is now retired in St. Cloud, Minnesota.

As the fall quarter of 1944 started at Mesa College I unexpectedly found myself among the newly enrolled freshmen. About four months earlier I had decided not to accept a scholarship at the University of Colorado in Boulder awarded to me by the administration of Grand Junction High School. I had informed the principal that I did not plan to attend an institution of higher learning in the autumn of 1944, due in part to the possibility that I might be drafted into the army later that year. However, one of the most tragic events in my life, the death of my brother Jack in combat in Italy in July, 1944, changed my plans and brought me to Mesa College that September. Thus began two very pleasant and fruitful years of college education. This essay attempts to recapture some of the events and circumstances of that year at Mesa in the last year of World War II and in the first nine months of the post-war period.¹

At the beginning of June, 1944, after graduating from Grand Junction High, I secured a job at a flour milling firm in Denver. A friend of mine, Joel Blair, who formerly had lived in Grand Junction, had moved to Denver with his family in 1942. In the spring of 1944 he urged me to come to Colorado's capital city, and he helped me obtain employment at his place of work, a milling establishment. Through those fateful days of that summer as American and other Allied troops



(Photo courtesy of Calvin W. Gower)

Calvin W. Gower at age 17, ready to begin his academic career at Mesa College.

tried to recapture territory from Japan in the Pacific, invaded France, and attempted to overcome the Germans in northern Italy, my friend and I worked at the mill, attended movies in downtown Denver, rode the streetcar to City Park to while away the hours, and enjoyed life while we could. For me this agreeable existence ended in early August when I received a phone call from my mother telling me that Jack had died in that struggle with the Germans in Italy. She asked me to return home.

I left for Grand Junction on the D&RGW "Mountaineer," a night train, several hours after hearing from my mother. During the next few weeks in a mournful daze I tried to assist my sisters in efforts to console my mother. For her the death of her first-born child was devastating. For me the sad occurrence made a lasting impression which later made me abhor war and champion peace efforts throughout the years. A week or two after my return to Grand Junction my mother suggested that I enroll at nearby Mesa College for the fall quarter and remain at home with her and my two younger sisters. Therefore, in September, 1944, I became a member of the student body at Mesa.

About 150 full-time day students attended classes in that fall quarter and most of them were young women. A Lincoln Park Pharmacy ad

in *The Mesa College Criterion* in October stated: "We are glad to note the college boys (both of them) are trading with us. The girls also are welcome." Although the druggist was jesting, I doubt that there were over thirty young men in the student body and those numbers diminished as the year progressed. The Student Body Association officers were: Helen Reeves, president; Shirley Myers, vice president; Floyd (Joe) Hutton, secretary; and Polly Childress, treasurer. Gerald Scofield, the faculty member who taught social science classes and supervised men's physical education, introduced a "football team" at an October assembly which consisted of young women. They were in football garb (but obviously were not going to play the game), and the four cheerleaders were all young men. The effects of World War II were quite evident. Many male youths, including a number of my former Grand Junction High School classmates, had either joined some branch of the armed forces or had been conscripted. The resulting imbalance in the population of the college created an institution with no intercollegiate sports, limitations on social events, etc., which varied considerably from the pre-war college.²

The campus on which this small number of students congregated was vastly different from the Mesa College campus of recent times. The only building was the then four year old edifice, now known as Houston Hall. North of that up to Elm Avenue and between College Place and Twelfth Street was, as I recall, an area of desert-like soil where only sagebrush and cactus grew and horned toads attempted to survive the human encroachment which was occurring. A few houses were scattered along Twelfth from Elm to Orchard Avenue, including that of my mother. Surrounding the college building on three sides was a lush lawn and some young trees and shrubs. Presiding over the care of this structure and its grounds was Elmer "Pop" Houston. A note early in October, 1944, in the *Criterion* declared: "To 'Pop' Houston, Mr. Wood and their helpers goes the credit of having done a really first-rate job of 'polishing-up' the building."³

About September 1, 1944, I became one of "Pop" Houston's helpers. Since I had not planned to go to college at this time, I had not saved any money for the expenses of higher education. I could live at my mother's home, but I needed some part-time work to provide an income to pay for fees, books, clothing, and other costs. I secured that employment at Mesa and continued with it for the two years I was there, including the summers of 1945 and 1946. I performed all kinds of tasks inside the building from sweeping floors to cleaning the restrooms. I also was the principal lawnman during the summers, mowing and watering the lawn. The wages derived from the toil

(\$603.80 in 1945, for example) enabled me to pursue my Associate in Commerce degree at Mesa and prepare for subsequent collegiate study.⁴

At the time, I probably grumbled about having to do such labor, but looking back on the period, I realize I was very fortunate to have gained the employment. "Pop" Houston was a bit eccentric, often calling me Clyde rather than Cal (Clyde Stanbro was a grand old fellow who assisted "Pop" in the 1945-1946 year), and mixing up other workers' names. "Pop" wanted us to do a good job, but he was not a tyrant. The *Criterion* again lauded the custodial staff in September, 1945, stating: "Orchids to Pop. Pop Houston and his helpers have spent all summer waxing floors, washing windows, cleaning lockers. . . ." I believe that praise was deserved for "Pop" and his crew, and I am certain the work experience and the income which I received from these activities were invaluable for me.

Even though I worked several hours a day Monday through Saturday, I had sufficient time to study for my classes. I must state that, after so many years have passed, I cannot recall very much about particular classes or individual teachers. However, I am convinced that I secured two years of substantial collegiate work which gave me excellent preparation for my later undergraduate and graduate endeavors. Since I had not intended to attend college, my academic goals were not clear to me. For some reason, probably because I thought I should take some "practical" classes to enable me to gain some kind of employment even if I did not finish college, I enrolled in a number of business courses. I liked those classes, such as Fundamentals of Accounting, Introduction to Business Law, Business Correspondence, and Word Study and Spelling. The three business teachers whom I remember most clearly were Esther Herr, Harlan Morton, and May Belle Gordon. Mrs. Herr was an old fashioned looking, bespectacled woman with what seemed, at first glance, to be a forbidding nature. Actually she was a very nice person from whom I took various courses in the Business English field. Harlan Morton, who taught Accounting and Business Math, was an agreeable but demanding educator with a "five o'clock shadow" and a ready smile. May Belle Gordon, who came to Mesa in the fall of 1945 to head the commercial department, was 4 feet and 10 inches tall. She was a sharp dresser and a friendly type. I did rather poor work in her typing classes, but the fault was all mine.⁶

In the long run, the more important classes for me were the "liberal arts and sciences" ones such as Freshman English, Inorganic Chemistry, American Government, and Current History. I believe my Freshman English teacher for three quarters was Marie Killheffer, a person with

high standards but a very fair instructor. One of the most pleasant teachers whom I ever encountered, Lowell Heiny, taught Inorganic Chemistry. My American Government (and Principles of Economics) teacher was Gerald Scofield, who sparked my interest in political science courses. After I left Mesa I eventually earned a B.A. and M.A. and a Ph.D., with, for each degree, a minor in political science and a major in history. However, at Mesa I took only two one-credit courses in history, Current History (essentially current events), offered by Mary Rait, who was also Dean of Women and Vice President.⁷ As I remember, Miss Rait was a good instructor, but my great enthusiasm for collegiate study of history developed later when I began work in the survey of European history in the fall of 1946 at Western State College in Gunnison. Nonetheless, I am convinced that all of my work at Mesa prepared me well for subsequent collegiate studies.

Mary Rait's Current History classes and, even more so, my assiduous reading of *Time* magazine helped me considerably when I took a *Time*-sponsored current affairs test given by her in February, 1945. It was a "comprehensive, factual test covering events in the last four months of 1944." The *Criterion* reported the results: "Feel sorta' lucky about the whole thing," confessed Calvin Gower when informed of his top grade in the recent *Time*-sponsored current affairs test, given to the entire Mesa College student body on February 9." I assume I was quite pleased with this development even though my sense of accomplishment must have been tempered a bit by the knowledge that the median score on the test at Mesa was 37, compared to a national average median of 58. Also, of course, in the winter quarter, 1945 at Mesa, there were only 127 full-term students.⁸

Such a small enrollment showed the continuing impact of the war. I personally had a very pleasant year at Mesa College in 1944-1945, but there were constant reminders at the institution that the United States was still at war with the Axis Powers. In November and December, 1944, a "War Queen" contest occurred. It was "sponsored by the college Red Cross chapter to speed up the [war] stamp and bond sale..." Virginia Sitton became the War Queen, and Zeta Goss and Pat Tedrick were runners-up. The contest raised \$1,699. Another sign of the war was a *Criterion* ad of the Champion Shoe Store in Grand Junction which read: "Shoes Are Rationed. Have Them Half Soled." More sobering were periodic reports of young men leaving for service in the armed forces, such as the announcement in November, 1944, of the departures of Lester Donegan, Alfred Darley, Gene Chapel and Jack Pollock. In the spring of 1945 the *Criterion* listed the

names of a total of fourteen young men who had "departed for service" during the 1944-1945 academic year.⁹

Since I reached the age of 18 on November 14, 1944, I had fully expected to be one of those youths who left for the army in December, or shortly thereafter. As I mentioned earlier, I had turned down a University of Colorado scholarship in large part because of that expectation. I had enrolled at Mesa thinking that I would only be there for a quarter and then might have to leave. Instead, soon after I went to Denver in December with a draft group for physical examinations at Fort Logan, I received word that my classification was 4-F. I never did obtain a very clear explanation for this decision although I did have extremely poor eyesight and I was having some trouble with sciatica in the winter of 1944-1945. As I recall, I was somewhat disappointed about this development. I was not opposed to serving in the army on religious or ideological grounds. I believe I was patriotic and ready to serve my country. I had thought I would go to the army, even though I assumed I might be in "Limited Service" due to my pronounced near-sightedness. My disappointment was lessened to an extent when I sensed the relief which my mother exhibited knowing that her third and youngest son would not go into the army as the two older ones had. Her continuing grief over the loss of Jack made her more willing to hope that I would not be called. Therefore, I stayed at Mesa and graduated in June, 1946.

As the 1944-1945 academic year approached its conclusion, the *Criterion* noted the ending of the war in Europe in a story with the headline: "V-E Day Observed in Rejoice, Thanks." The article stated:

A calm celebration of V-E Day was observed by college students Tuesday, May 8, 1945. A special assembly was presented in rejoice of the cessation of hostilities in Europe and in tribute to those who had sacrificed their lives to make it a reality.

Miss Mary Rait in speaking to the student[s], said: "We rejoice that the phase of war in Europe has ended; we grieve that war is still continuing." Miss Rait also referred to the twenty-six Mesa students ... [who] helped to pay the price....

Two separate items in the same issue of the college newspaper discussed those twenty-six former Mesa students who had given their lives "on land, sea, and air for freedom, security." My brother Jack had attended Mesa, hence there was a note which read in part: "Pfc. John (Jack) Gower, brother of Calvin, was killed in action in Italy July 23, 1944."¹⁰

Also in May, 1945, the Mesa College students chose their student body association officers for the 1945-1946 year. I had not been



(Courtesy of Mesa State College Archives)

Student Body Association officers for the 1945-1946 academic year: Back row — Mr. Scofield, Baughman, Allison, DaLee, Mackley, Gower. Front row — Noble, Dolgan, Besse, LeVan, Dennis, Kilborn, Ferguson.

particularly "popular" in high school and had never been a class officer. I do not believe I had ever been active, to any degree, in student government. However, in October, 1944, a majority of the small number of Mesa men students at an Association of Men Students meeting cast their votes for me to be the secretary-treasurer of that group. I cannot remember my service in that position, but I presume I did reasonably well. At any rate in May, at the urgings of some of my fellow students, I allowed my name to be placed in nomination for the position of SBA president. Running against me was a fellow Grand Junction High School graduate of 1944, Dorothy LeVan. According to the *Criterion*: "Voting was close in the contest, in which a majority of the student[s] balloted." Dorothy LeVan was the winner.¹¹ Thus my venture into "campus politics" was unsuccessful, but it may have laid the groundwork for subsequent success.

Mesa College President Horace Wubben summed up the situation at the institution very well with this statement as the 1944-1945 year came to a close:

This has not been an easy year. The unbalance between the numbers of women and men, lack of normal social activities, curtailed program of college courses, all these have meant a readjustment of our thinking and acting which have been made in most instances by students and faculty with grace and good sense. After all, whose life is normal these years? Surely we should not complain whose brothers, fathers, and friends are serving in battle areas all over the world.¹²

The graduation ceremonies held on June 1, 1945, illustrated the effects of World War II on Mesa College in a graphic manner. The number of graduates, reportedly the smallest in history, was fifteen. All of them were women, and they came from only seven western Colorado towns. Despite the meager number of graduates, a full-fledged commencement took place with a well known educator, Charles B. Hershey, as speaker, and a musical program. Presumably the college administration carried on with anticipation that the war would soon end, and the institution would resume the pronounced growth which had characterized the late 1930s and early 1940s.¹³

I personally settled in for a summer of waxing floors, washing windows, and mowing and watering the lawn under the supervision of "Pop" Houston. When I was not working, I spent a considerable number of hours in the leisure time activities of reading and going to movies, both of which I found extremely enjoyable. I cannot remember now my reaction to the horrible news in August, 1945, that the United

States had dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan. Probably, in the patriotic fervor of the period, I believed these moves were needed and the Japanese deserved to be treated in that manner. I can recall the tremendous exhilaration I felt when the Japanese surrender occurred. I was very glad that the war was over and that my brother Wiley and various friends of mine would be coming home.

When the 1945-1946 academic year opened, Mesa College was still in the "World War II decline." The enrollment by mid-September was only 153 students, not much different from a year earlier. There were 111 new students and freshmen, but the number of sophomores was quite small. Young women still were dominant at the institution. The *Criterion* editor was June Noble, and the newspaper's business manager was Jean Barry. The SBA president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer were women, namely, Dorothy LeVan, Marolyn Ferguson, Noreen Besse, and Marie Dolgan, respectively.¹⁴ The fact that these women had been able to gain these leadership positions was a sign of the times. It was part of the overall impact of World War II upon the female population of the United States. With a huge number of men (and some women) drawn off into the armed forces, women were given many more opportunities in the work place and other arenas outside the home. They had talent and ability, and they performed well. Nevertheless, at Mesa an imbalance between men and women students continued, and, I presume, the administration hoped to alter these circumstances and add more males to the student body.

Seemingly running counter to the foregoing was the development described as follows in an October, 1945, *Criterion*:

Sophomore Class Gets In Full Swing

Calvin Gower was elected president by the approximately forty (40) sophomores at their first class meeting.

Calvin, when asked to make a statement, declared: "I am glad I was elected and will try to make this year a successful one for the sophomores. And as for the freshmen, we will try to make them feel at home."¹⁵

I thought at the time that my victory in this election came about in part because a number of the sophomores gave me support on this occasion to assuage my feeling of disappointment resulting from my defeat back in the May SBA officers' elections. Nobody ever told me that, but I believed that may have been the situation.

Regardless, as I look back on my life, I am convinced that my becoming president of even such a small class as ours, was an important development for me. As class president, I served on the student

Officers Elected For 1945-46

The Mesa College CRITERION

Vol. XII GRAND JUNCTION, COLO., THURSDAY, MAY 24, 1945

Le Van, Ferguson, Dolgan Victorious in Election Contest Staged May 14

Fifteen to Be Graduated at Morning Exercises in the College Auditorium June 1

Week of Social Functions Precedes Commencement; Graduation Exercises Open to Friends and Relatives

Charles B. Marshall, will address the 1945 graduating class and guests at the Commencement Exercises Mesa College auditorium, which will be held at 10 a. m., June 1 in the college auditorium. This year's class consisted of 15 graduates from the college, consisting of 12 women and three men, each having received a degree in arts, education, and education with teaching experience with Mesa State Normal—Grand Junction, Huerfano State Normal, New Mexico, Colorado State Normal, and Colorado State Normal.

Mr. Marshall has been visiting president of Colorado College and head of the Educational Department. He is a member of the Colorado State Board of Examiners, Grand Junction, and has been employed among students. Mr. Marshall

Fresh Entertain At Annual Picnic In Red Canyon

Freshmen played leads at the annual spring picnic held Friday afternoon, May 12. Red Canyon was the scene of the picnic, which was the first of the year. The picnic was held at the Red Canyon picnic grounds, which are the property of the Mesa College. The picnic was held at the Red Canyon picnic grounds, which are the property of the Mesa College. The picnic was held at the Red Canyon picnic grounds, which are the property of the Mesa College.



Portrait of a man, likely a student or faculty member mentioned in the text.

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TWELVE GOLD STARS ADDED TO FLAG AT COLLEGE INDICATION

Twelve more stars were added to the flag at the college on Friday, May 12. The stars were added to the flag at the college on Friday, May 12. The stars were added to the flag at the college on Friday, May 12. The stars were added to the flag at the college on Friday, May 12. The stars were added to the flag at the college on Friday, May 12.

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College R. C. Chapter Receives Charter For Year's Services

A charter signed by the National R. C. Chapter, was presented to the Mesa College R. C. Chapter by Mr. C. L. Paul on an excellent program, May 12. The charter was presented to the Mesa College R. C. Chapter by Mr. C. L. Paul on an excellent program, May 12. The charter was presented to the Mesa College R. C. Chapter by Mr. C. L. Paul on an excellent program, May 12.

Annual Dinner For Sophomores To Be May 31

The annual dinner for the Mesa College Sophomore Class will be held on Friday, May 31. The dinner will be held on Friday, May 31. The dinner will be held on Friday, May 31. The dinner will be held on Friday, May 31. The dinner will be held on Friday, May 31.

Service Takes 14 During Year

Throughout the year there have been 14 service projects. The projects have been 14 service projects. The projects have been 14 service projects. The projects have been 14 service projects. The projects have been 14 service projects.

MR. WURBER SPEAKS

Mr. Wurber spoke at the college on Friday, May 12. Mr. Wurber spoke at the college on Friday, May 12. Mr. Wurber spoke at the college on Friday, May 12. Mr. Wurber spoke at the college on Friday, May 12. Mr. Wurber spoke at the college on Friday, May 12.

S. A. Treasurer to Be Selected From Freshman Class Next Fall

Donald Le Van, Business Manager, and Marie Dolgan were the candidates for the position of Treasurer for the 1945-46 year. Donald Le Van, Business Manager, and Marie Dolgan were the candidates for the position of Treasurer for the 1945-46 year. Donald Le Van, Business Manager, and Marie Dolgan were the candidates for the position of Treasurer for the 1945-46 year.



Group photo of several people, likely students or faculty members mentioned in the text.

YANKEES Winning in the all-around contest for 1945-46 S. A. officers.

Donald Le Van, Business Manager, and Marie Dolgan were the candidates for the position of Treasurer for the 1945-46 year. Donald Le Van, Business Manager, and Marie Dolgan were the candidates for the position of Treasurer for the 1945-46 year. Donald Le Van, Business Manager, and Marie Dolgan were the candidates for the position of Treasurer for the 1945-46 year.

Conway and Schwab To Conduct Summer Business School

Conway and Schwab will conduct the summer business school. Conway and Schwab will conduct the summer business school. Conway and Schwab will conduct the summer business school. Conway and Schwab will conduct the summer business school. Conway and Schwab will conduct the summer business school.

A. W. S. Comedy Skill Amuses Students

The A. W. S. comedy skill was held on Friday, May 12. The comedy skill was held on Friday, May 12. The comedy skill was held on Friday, May 12. The comedy skill was held on Friday, May 12. The comedy skill was held on Friday, May 12.

Y-E Day Observed in Rejoice, Thanks

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(Courtesy of Mesa State College Archives)

The Mesa College Criterion, May 24, 1945. Note the fifteen-member graduating class.

council. Also, I made appointments to committees, such as those that organized the "annual sophomore sponsored picnic" in September and later ones for the "stunt night." At the first college assembly for the 1945-1946 year I stood up before the student body and faculty and invited all of them to the picnic arranged by the sophomores. Then on March 1, 1946, at the college soiree, because I was sophomore class president, I was "master of ceremonies of the program and performed the coronation."¹⁶ None of these activities was of tremendous importance or required great energy or ability. Nevertheless, I had never been in such a leadership position, and I believe I gained a lot of self-confidence and a certain amount of increased self-esteem from performing these duties. Later in my life when I was elected president of the Faculty Senate at St. Cloud State University and to other similar positions at the institution, my year of service as sophomore class president at Mesa stood me in good stead. I had secured some experience in conducting meetings, choosing committee chairpersons, and working with people in carrying out the projects of a group.

As we moved farther into the 1945-1946 academic year at Mesa and the United States wound down participation in World War II, changes occurred at Mesa College. Authorities decided to designate it as "... one of Colorado's three veteran guidance centers." Harold M. Routh became the vocational advisor for returning veterans in this center by November, 1945. Enrollment at Mesa rose to 298 in the winter quarter. Although numbers declined somewhat in the spring, the total enrollment of 255 was over 100 higher than the number of Mesa students in my first quarter in the fall of 1944.¹⁷

Accompanying the increase in students at Mesa, there was a revival of various activities at the college. The famous violinist, Mischa Elman, gave a recital on April 9, 1946, in the Mesa College auditorium.¹⁸ I was there because, as part of my duties as one of "Pop" Houston's helpers, I was in charge of opening and closing the curtain for the performance. Unfortunately I incurred Elman's wrath. When it came time to close and then quickly open the curtain again for more applause at the end of the recital, I acted too slowly, and the audience stopped clapping and began breaking up. I was chagrined about this at the time and rather unhappy with the violinist for attacking me so vigorously. In the years that have passed since then, I have become an avid admirer of fine violinists such as Yehudi Menuhin and Isaac Stern. I wish I had not been so inexperienced about recital protocol in 1946 and had done a better job for Elman.

Another event of 1946 was the Mesa College soiree, which had not been held in 1945 as I recall. LeElla Timmons, a Grand Junction

High School graduate, was the queen of the soiree, and Marolyn Ferguson and Patricia Dennis were attendants. As I mentioned before, since I was sophomore class president, I was master of ceremonies of the intermission program which included the coronation. An article in the Grand Junction *Daily Sentinel* noted:

Approximately 150 couples of Mesa College students, alumni, and escorts attended the soiree, annually the most important social event of the college year.

Among those attending were many alumni and students who returned in recent weeks and months from service in the armed forces, some of them so recently that they still wore their uniform.

The soiree was the largest social function of the college since early in the war and was one of the most successful in a number of years.¹⁹

The return of the veterans of the war clearly had an effect on this social affair, and that development aided Mesa College in its efforts to resume other pre-war activities.

I became aware of this increase in male students as the basketball season began early in the winter quarter of 1946. Despite my 4-F draft status, I had dreams of becoming a member of the Mesa basketball team. I had participated in the sport for years even though I was only 5 feet 7 inches tall and not particularly quick. I "lettered" in my senior year at Grand Junction High School, but I had not really played much in any of the varsity games. So, I placed strips of white adhesive tape on the sides of my head to try to hold on my heavy glasses and seemed to be a fairly good prospect in December, 1945. By January, 1946, with the arrival on campus of such people as Creger Westley, Al Fothergill, Dean Baldwin, Jack Braddock, and Walt Schmidt, all of whom were war veterans, I believe, I was clearly outclassed. Coach Gerald Scofield cut me from the squad with ample justification. Mesa played only eleven games that year but definitely had returned to intercollegiate competition.²⁰

When spring arrived, often the optimist, I decided to try out for the track team. Since I had had no experience of any sort in track, Coach Peter Carlston and I attempted to discover in what way I might gain some success in that sport. The sports editor for the *Criterion*, Dale (Spider) Morris, chronicled this futile search. "Calvin Gower along with Morris Woods will be effective in the quarter mile event," Spider reported in April, 1946. However, in an intersquad meet at the beginning of that month I came in third behind Morris Woods and

James Mackley. By early May, Spider declared: "Calvin Gower has switched over to the two mile run. The stalky [sic] lad is clipping off the event in impressive time." In spite of Spider's kind words, at an invitational meet at Brigham Young University I came in a distant fourth, placing that well only because just four (out of six, I believe) of the runners completed the run. I still have the medal (in a drawer in our bedroom dresser) which I received for finishing fourth, but I did not "letter" in track and I realized without Coach Carlston's telling me that I had not been a success. Nonetheless, I had been a part of the revival of intercollegiate sports at Mesa under the leadership of Scofield and of Carlston who had returned in the winter quarter to his pre-war position of athletic director.²¹ Mesa still had not recovered completely from the curtailed operations imposed by World War II circumstances, but the college was unquestionably making a strong comeback.

On June 7, 1946, thirty sophomores received either associate degrees or diplomas at the commencement exercises at Mesa "before a good sized crowd." Nineteen of the graduates were women and eleven were men. This contrasted to the 1945 class of fifteen graduates, all of them women. Scholarship winners were: D.A.R. scholarships to June Noble and Claire Van Breeman; University of Colorado awards to Margaret Allison, Dorothy Baughman, and Donald Hoaglund; a Colorado State at Greeley scholarship to Marie Dolgan; and one for Western State College in Gunnison to Calvin Gower.²² My decision in the spring of 1944 not to attend college had changed dramatically to a strong desire to continue my higher education work. Mesa had filled me with great enthusiasm for more learning.

Others left Mesa after graduation, but I remained through the summer of 1946 assisting "Pop" with the indoor and outdoor tasks. On a beautiful day near the end of August, I was mowing the lawn on the southeast side of Houston Hall, when I noticed a car pulling up to the curb on North Avenue. Two strapping young men alighted carrying duffel bags. They were my brother Wiley and my friend Joel Blair who had hitchhiked from Denver to Grand Junction. They were en route to Gunnison where they also intended to enroll for the fall quarter. We chatted and then they proceeded north on Twelfth Street going to my mother's home to visit for a short time. Their arrival made me anxious for the summer to end, although I continued working at Mesa into September and then joined Wiley and Joel at Western State.

My two years at Mesa College were two of the most important ones in my life. I stayed at home and offered some comfort and assistance to my mother, although I am not certain I helped her much.



The 1946 Mesa College track team: Back row — Mr. Carlston, Kenny, Kinkade, Leonard, Hutton, Lcsner, Erven, Osborn, Perkins, Nelms. Front row — Wubben, Carlucci, Ragan, Pollock, Gouwer, E. Mackley, J. Mackley, Stranger, Hammigan.

I secured part-time work at Mesa which enabled me to go to college without going into debt. I became acquainted with new people and became the friend of some of them, as well as continuing my friendship with other individuals. I gained some leadership skills through my student government activities. Most significant of all, I had classes which interested me very much and many of which challenged me. As I started my work at Western State College I was enthusiastic, well prepared, and confident.

During my two year period at Mesa it changed considerably, also. When I started in September, 1944, the institution was at a nadir. The small enrollment of 150 was far below the figures of the immediate pre-war period. In addition, the makeup of the student body was overwhelmingly women. Obviously the faculty was quite small, numbering about twenty. Many of the pre-war activities did not take place, to a large extent due to the low enrollment and the drastic imbalance between the sexes. By the winter and spring quarters of 1946 a revival had occurred at the college. It still had not escaped entirely from the wartime doldrums, but the institution was on the way out of them. The administration had received approval for the construction of a three story women's dormitory, enrollments were rising, more varied activities were reappearing, and the future looked bright.²³ The end of World War II raised the hopes of individuals and also of institutions.

NOTES

¹The chief sources for this work are my memory, which I admit is fallible, and *Mesa College Criterion*. In July, 1989, I perused the *Criterion* for 1939-1940 and 1944-1946. I also consulted several other sources such as the Grand Junction *Daily Sentinel* and some general works in American history. The Mesa College yearbook, *The Maverick, 1945-46*, also provided me with information and wonderful memories.

I was not the only member of my family who went to Mesa College. Five of my parents' six children attended the institution. The others were: John (Jack), 1939-1940; Wiley, 1940-1941; Dorothy, 1946-1947; and Patricia, 1951-1953 and 1964-1965.

²*The Mesa College Criterion*, October 20, 1944. The Mesa College enrollment in the fall quarter, 1939, was about 500 and in fall, 1940, was 563. In the winter quarter, 1941, enrollment was over 600. *Ibid.*, September 28, 1939; October 17, 1940; December 13, 1940.

³*Ibid.*, October 5, 1944.

⁴Form W-2, Withholding Receipt — 1945, Employee's Copy, in author's possession. I believe my two brothers worked for "Pop" Houston when they attended Mesa College.

⁵*Criterion*, September 20, 1945.

⁶There is some discussion of Esther Herr in the *Criterion*, October 20, 1944. The September 30, 1945, issue of the *Criterion* introduces Gordon and Morton as two of the new faculty members. Also, see the 1945-1946 *Maverick*.

⁷*The Maverick, 1945-1946*.

⁸*Criterion*, January 17, 1945; February 22, 1945. My prize was Van Wyck Brooks, *The World of Washington Irving*, which still reposes on a bookshelf in my study.

⁹*Criterion*, November 22, 1944; December 8, 1944; May 24, 1945.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, May 24, 1945.

¹¹*Ibid.*, October 20, 1944; May 24, 1945.

¹²*Ibid.*, May 24, 1945.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴*Ibid.*, May 24, 1945; September 20, 1945. The final enrollment figures for the fall quarter, 1945, were 169. *Ibid.*, October 5, 1945. There is an error in the caption under the picture of the candidates in the May 24, 1945, *Criterion*. See also the 1945-1946 *Maverick* for a listing of SBA officers.

¹⁵*Criterion*, October 5, 1945.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, October 5, 1945; November 30, 1945; March 8, 1946. Also, see the 1945-1946 *Maverick*.

¹⁷*Criterion*, November 8, 1945;

January 24, 1946; March 29, 1946.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, March 8, 1946; April 12, 1946.

¹⁹Grand Junction *Daily Sentinel*, March 3, 1946; *Criterion*, March 8, 1946. See also the 1945-1946 *Maverick*.

²⁰*Criterion*, April 12, 1946; May 10, 1946. See also the 1945-1946 *Maverick*.

²¹*Criterion*, April 12, 1946; May 10, 1946. See also the 1945-1946 *Maverick*.

²²Grand Junction *Daily Sentinel*, June 7, 1946. Also, thanks to fellow graduate Dorothy LeVan McKelvie, I have a copy of the program for the 1946 commencement. My name is

incorrectly listed therein (William Calvin Gower, rather than the correct: Calvin William Gower), as it was in the June 7, 1946, *Daily Sentinel*. I cannot recall now, but I probably was responsible for this, since I may have made a mistake when I put my name on a form for graduation. Incidentally, the *Daily Sentinel* also stated that Dorothy LeVan had been recommended for a scholarship at what is now Colorado State University in Fort Collins and Mary Okagawa and Elaine Semmens for ones at the University of Denver.

²³*The Maverick, 1945-1946; Criterion*, November 8, 1945; April 12, 1946.

THE MANHATTAN PROJECT ON THE COLORADO PLATEAU

by Beth M. Yoder Gilleece

Beth M. Yoder Gilleece came to Grand Junction in 1974 when her father took a job at Union Carbide Corporation. Beth graduated from Central High School in 1983 and from Mesa State College in 1989 where she earned a teaching certificate and a B.A. in Social Sciences. She plans to continue researching the history of the Manhattan Project. She invites those with information to contact her at her home in Fruita.

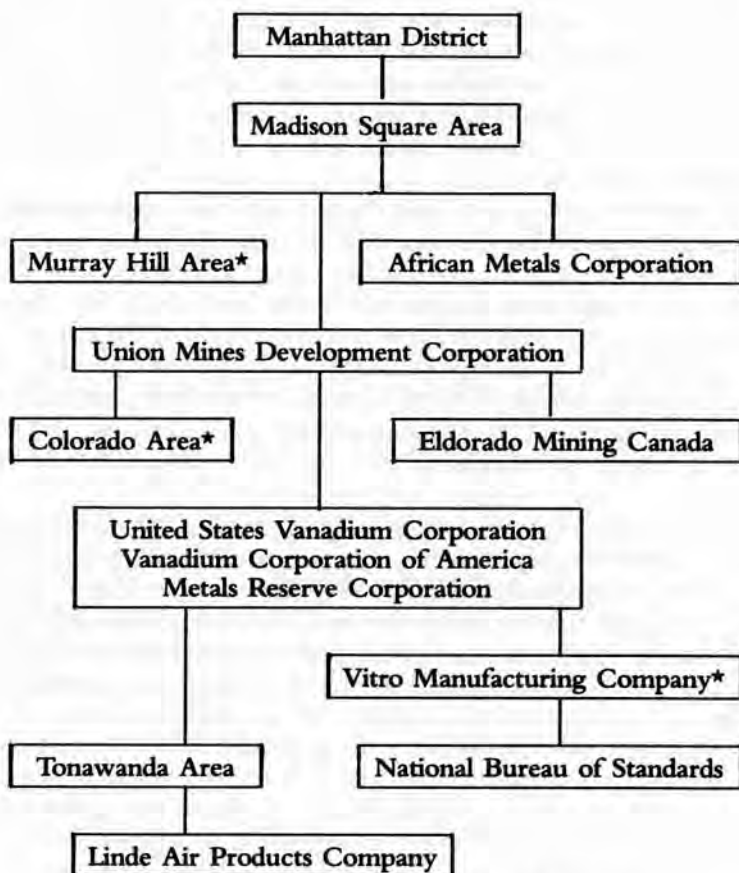
On August 6, 1945 the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan and the American public became aware of the devastating power of atomic energy. Only later did the public find out about the Manhattan Project, the code name used by the Army Corps of Engineers for the atomic bomb project.

The United States government undertook this project at great expense because they received reports, mainly from escaped Polish scientists, that Germany was working on the atomic bomb and would utilize it to conquer the world. The government, acting on these reports, asked the Army Corps of Engineers to undertake a similar project in 1941, even though the Corps was mobilizing to fight in both Europe and Japan. The Corps of Engineers formed the Manhattan Engineer District (MED) in 1942 to take over the administration of the project from the Office of Scientific Research and Development. This operation had been started earlier by American and refugee scientists, also seeking to build an atomic bomb.¹ This project was supervised by Colonel James C. Marshall in New York City.²

In 1943 the MED moved the atomic bomb project to Oak Ridge, Tennessee, and appointed Brigadier General Leslie R. Groves to coordinate activities from Washington, D.C.³ At first Groves doubted that the project was worthwhile or workable. A precise and meticulous man, Groves was a stickler for rules and regulations; he wanted to run the entire project in a military manner, although civilian personnel were dominant in the project.⁴

The MED's policy was to keep the project top secret. Accordingly, the project was divided into five working units. The code names for these units were taken directly from the area of Manhattan: New York Area was the code name for the unit charged with the production of materials; Hanford Engineer District was in charge of the plutonium production; Clinton Engineer District was responsible for the Oak Ridge, Tennessee facility; Special Products covered areas like security and special needs; and Madison Square Area was the mineral procurement division, which directly involved the operations on the Colorado Plateau.⁵

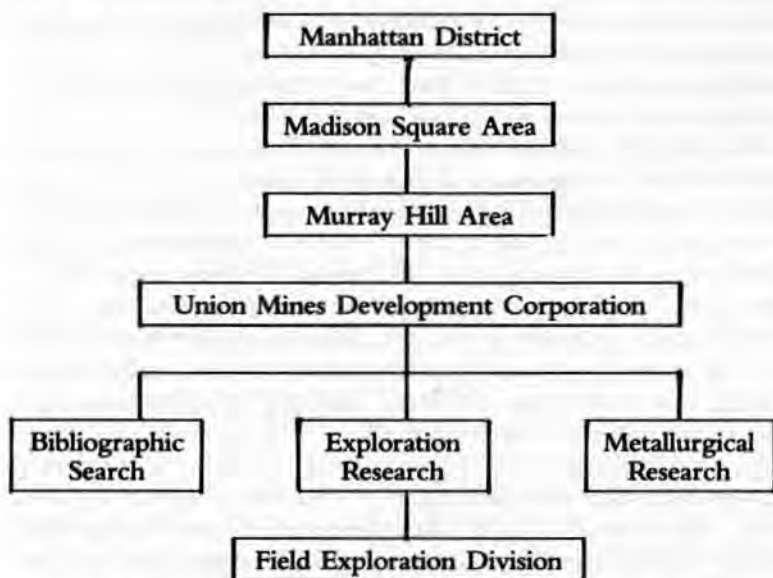
The Madison Square Area acquired minerals from all over the world, specifically from the Belgian Congo in Africa, the Northwest Territories in Canada, and the Colorado Plateau in the United States. In June of 1943 another operation was added to the Madison Square Area responsibilities. This was called the Murray Hill Area, which was in charge of the Union Mines Development Corporation part of the project.⁶ The bureaucratic organization of Madison Square Area became quite complex,⁷ as represented by the following chart:



*Directly involved on the Colorado Plateau

Many corporations and companies became involved in this project. One company was Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation and its subsidiaries, such as Linde Air, Union Mines Development Corporation, and United States Vanadium Corporation, which together provided important materials such as rubber, metal, vanadium, and uranium as well as manpower and exploration teams for the project. The latter two, Union Mines Development Corporation and United States Vanadium Corporation, played key roles on the Colorado Plateau, yet neither knew of the other's involvement in the Manhattan Project.⁸

Union Mines Development Corporation (UMDC) was created in 1943 to carry out geographical exploration, and, later, to refine the basic raw materials the Manhattan Project required. The contract between UMDC and the United States Government stated that the United States Government would cover all costs with no fixed fee or profit to the contractor.⁹ UMDC, though a subsidiary of Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation, which did top secret governmental work around the world, functioned almost like a governmental agency. The work was executed via four different divisions: Bibliographical Search, Field Exploration, Exploration Research, and Metallurgical Research. UMDC may be exhibited hierarchically as follows:



Note: The Murray Hill Area was the only division in the Madison Square Area that had knowledge of the other divisions and their roles in the Manhattan Project.

The Bibliographic Search Division provided data and information for the early appraisal and relative importance of uranium deposits from various countries and provided valuable information for the examining engineers dispatched by UMDC to make investigations. This division had about twenty-eight employees with some geological training. Those in the Bibliographic Search division could translate

any pertinent information from about fifty foreign languages. This division was based in New York City.¹⁰

The Exploration Research Division was involved with improving field exploration. By improving the Geiger-Muller Counter, a lightweight, rugged, small and extremely useful counter resulted. The Mineralogical Research Sub-division helped improve the bead-test, a chemical field procedure in which borax heats up if the ore contains uranium. In 1943 UMDC arranged for all testing to be done in the laboratories of Linde Air Products Co., a Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation subsidiary at Tonawanda, New York.¹¹

The Metallurgical Research Division was in charge of finding better ways to process the carnotite ores from the Colorado Plateau and elsewhere. By the time this division's work was finished, examinations of nearly every type of uranium-bearing ore in the world had been done. This division made a contract with Denver Equipment Co., Denver, Colorado to do laboratory research on a fee basis.¹²

The Field Exploration Division brought the Colorado Plateau into the Manhattan Project. Personnel from this division were sent to twenty different foreign countries and thirty-six states of the United States.¹³ Division personnel were dispatched by UMDC to the area to be studied without maps or any pertinent information because of the secrecy policy. Once at their destination, the men received this information from the government agency in the area.¹⁴ This division employed about sixty-seven people with approximately two-thirds of this force working on the Colorado Plateau mapping and evaluating the uranium-bearing carnotite ore areas.¹⁵

The Field-Exploration Division was based in New York City, with a single field office in Grand Junction, Colorado. Mining Engineer Frank J. Belina was Chief of the Grand Junction office.¹⁶ Having Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation as a parent company helped serve as a blind in maintaining secrecy. While the Field-Exploration Division was working on the Colorado Plateau, no other corporation in the area was advised of the nature of the division's work. Many corporations, even United States Vanadium Corporation, another Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation subsidiary, along with army personnel, thought that Union Mines Development Corporation was in this area only to create competition for the mining of vanadium. It was the policy of the MED to provide information for the completion of a particular job and nothing else, so even the army personnel under the Colorado Area of the Madison Square Area did not understand what UMDC was doing in the region. Lieutenant Philip Leahy,¹⁷ who worked closely with United States Vanadium Corporation and other

companies, supplied money from the MED to a captain and his staff for security matters, but did not know why. It was later revealed that this captain was keeping a watch out for, and preventing foreign agents from purchasing land and mills at Slickrock, Colorado.¹⁸

The secrecy of this project also was displayed in the reports that were filed by all of the divisions. Though MED classified its reports as top secret, the word uranium was never mentioned in these reports. The employees used special codes in their reports such as S-37 for uranium minerals; SOM for uranium; and SOQ for uranium oxide (U_3O_8). These codes caused the reports to be difficult to read, though easily decoded.¹⁹

The Exploration Division of UMDC also recommended that the federal government purchase land for the development of uranium resources. The lands purchased on the Colorado Plateau were: the 960-acre Navaho Indian Lease in the Carrizo Mountains of northeast Arizona; forty-two claims of Gateway Alloys Co. on Calamity Mesa, in Mesa County, Colorado; and a campsite, mill and eighty-two claims held by North Continent Mines, Inc. at Slickrock, San Miguel County, Colorado. The total cost to the United States for these properties was approximately \$276,000.²⁰

Simultaneously, UMDC moved to purchase land in the Yukon Territories, Canada with the assistance of Ventures, Ltd. The Canadian Government, on September 15, 1943, claimed for the crown all radioactive substances, and stated that it would do all of the processing of these substances itself. UMDC had Ventures, Ltd. turn over to the Canadian Government all of these properties, then the United States government purchased uranium from the Canadian government.²¹

Union Mines Development Corporation reached its peak number of 129 employees in July 1944. Of these, thirty-nine were office professionals, sixty-one field professionals with the majority stationed on the Colorado Plateau, and twenty-nine administrative and clerical workers.²² UMDC was given orders to bring the project to a close in 1946 and by 1947 UMDC no longer existed. The total cost of this project was \$2,409,000. Bibliographical Search had cost \$240,000; foreign field exploration, \$288,000; domestic field exploration \$677,000; land and property \$276,000; research, \$129,000; administration and overhead, \$799,000.²³ The reports and other material relating to the project were not declassified until late 1950s and early 1960s, too late for companies or private prospectors to benefit from the findings during the peak of the uranium boom of the 1950s. The information compiled by UMDC went into files maintained by Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation and the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) files.²⁴

Carnotite was discovered on the Colorado Plateau in 1899. From 1911 to 1929 high-grade carnotite ores were mined principally for the radium content, with two byproducts, uranium and vanadium, being produced. By 1937 carnotite was being mined primarily for its vanadium (used to harden steel) content.²⁵ World War II brought about a high demand for vanadium which stimulated production on the entire Colorado Plateau. The three most active corporations in the production of vanadium were: United States Vanadium Corporation, a Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation subsidiary; Vanadium Corporation of America; and Metals Reserve Corporation. By early 1944, while the demand for vanadium was drastically falling, the demand for uranium oxide (U_3O_8) reached its peak.²⁶

One result of mining and refining carnotite ore for radium and vanadium for more than thirty years was the large stockpiles of accumulated tailings containing low-grade, but recoverable, uranium. By 1947 a total of 1,349 tons of U_3O_8 contained in 379,671 tons of ore had been contracted for.²⁷

Before the MED Project went into full operation, reports were written concerning the availability of the materials needed. The reports filed in 1942 to 1943 emphasized mines in the Belgian Congo and downplayed possibilities in the United States. Geologists believed that resources in the United States would be more difficult to process and would not last as long as resources elsewhere. The reports estimated a production rate of about 5 pounds of U_3O_8 per ton of ore. The Uravan area alone was expected to produce 328,500 pounds of U_3O_8 per year.²⁸ These yearly reports regarding the value of the various deposits proved incorrect. Shortly after the war, the Belgian Congo resources ran out, while in 1988 the Colorado Plateau was still producing U_3O_8 at a level above the war years.

The MED contracted with the three major companies to produce and ship uranium sludge, but USVC, under the direction of Blair Burwell as superintendent, agreed to do much more. USVC owned and operated mills in Rifle and Uravan. The Rifle mill, built in 1930, produced radium, vanadium, and very little U_3O_8 . USVC opened the Uravan mill in 1937 to reduce the production costs of vanadium. Once the government started putting high demands on uranium, USVC cut its vanadium production in half and started producing more uranium. The Rifle plant produced vanadium from the carnotite ores while the Uravan mill emphasized the production of uranium.²⁹

USVC also agreed to construct and operate two vanadium-uranium sludge plants and a refinery at the government's expense. One of the plants was to be constructed on the site of the vanadium sludge plant

in Uravan. The feed for this plant was to be the stockpiled tailings already there and from various other sites. The other sludge plant was located in Durango, Colorado. The feed for this plant came from the production and tailings produced by Metals Reserve in the area.³⁰

The sludge produced by these two plants was transported by truck to the refinery in Grand Junction, where vanadium and uranium were separated from the sludge. The uranium produced at the Grand Junction refinery was then sent by rail and truck to the Linde Air plant, in Tonawanda, New York, to be refined into Black Oxide. A total of 891 tons of uranium were contracted for at a total cost of \$941,800.³¹ The sludge plant in Durango and the refinery in Grand Junction became the property of the AEC after the war, while the Uravan plant was turned over to USVC.

Vanadium Corporation of America also made contracts with the MED for the purchase and refinement of their vanadium-uranium sludge. The value for this sludge ranged from \$.25 per pound of U_3O_8 and \$.55 per pound of vanadium, to \$1.50 per pound of U_3O_8 and \$.90 per pound of vanadium. By January 1, 1947 a total of \$692,350 for 230 tons of U_3O_8 had been paid to Vanadium Corporation of America.³² Metals Reserve also made a contract with the MED for their U_3O_8 production. Their prices ranged from \$.20 per pound to \$1.10 per pound for U_3O_8 , for a total of \$216,300 by January 1, 1947.³³

Lieutenant Philip Leahy, of the Madison Square Area of the MED, supervised these three companies and helped control disputes among them. Vanadium Corporation of America and Metals Reserve felt that USVC was receiving preferential treatment from the MED, so Lieutenant Leahy and his crew helped these companies with their processing techniques. Lieutenant Leahy and the army also helped settle a machinist strike in May 1945 at Uravan.³⁴

The employees of these companies had to undergo intensive investigation by the government before they could work on the project. Anyone found not suitable by the government was released. There was also a secretary appointed to each company to file daily progress reports and send them out to nine different locations. These locations were Brigadier General Groves, in Washington, D.C.; the Department of Defense, in Washington, D.C.; Oak Ridge, Tennessee; Los Alamos, New Mexico; Hartford, Washington; Tonawanda, New York; Princeton, New Jersey; and Madison Square Area Office in New York City.³⁵

By the end of World War II the Colorado Plateau had contributed approximately fourteen percent of the U_3O_8 needed for the Manhattan Project.³⁶ The remainder came from the Belgian Congo in Africa which provided a cheaper and better material.

The Manhattan Project influenced the growth and prosperity of the Colorado Plateau. The Project employed many men and women, which helped the economy of west-central Colorado. Many of the people involved did not know what part they were playing in history until after the atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Secrecy still prevails because many of these people do not want to talk about their role in this project that changed technology and warfare for all time.³⁷

The MED was absorbed by the AEC in 1947 and all reports were transferred to the AEC or kept classified by the Department of Defense. Union Mines Development Corporation was dissolved by January 1, 1947 and USVC became Union Carbide's Metals division in the late 1950s. The Colorado Plateau has gone through a series of boom and bust cycles; the latest downturn has caused Uravan, Naturita, and quite a few other mining towns to close or be virtually evacuated.

NOTES

¹Vincent C. Jones, *Manhattan: The Army and the Atomic Bomb* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1985), p. vii.

²*Ibid.*, p. 19.

³*Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁴L.R. Groves, *Now It Can Be Told: The Story of the Manhattan Project* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 19.

⁵Jones, *Manhattan*, p. 91.

⁶Manhattan District Engineers, *Manhattan District History*, Book VII, Vol. 2, "Geographical Exploration" (Atomic Energy Commission, 1947), p. S-1.

⁷Jones, *Manhattan*, p. 90.

⁸"Summary of War Projects of Division and Units of Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation" (Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation, 1946), p. 6.

⁹Manhattan District Engineers, Book VII, Vol. 2, p. S-1.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 1.4.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 1.8.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 1.13.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. S-2.

¹⁴William L. Chenoweth, "Raw Materials Activities of the Manhattan Project of the Colorado Plateau," *Four Corners Geological Society Guidebook* (Catact Canyon, Arizona, 1987), p. 153.

¹⁵Manhattan District Engineers, Book VII, Vol. 2, p. 1.6.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. S-6.

¹⁷Philip Leahy worked for the Army Corps of Engineers, Madison Square Area. He maintained the proper process for the Government to acquire the minerals needed for the project from this area.

¹⁸Philip C. Leahy, personal correspondence with William Chenoweth, Dec. 15, 1986, p. 2.

¹⁹Chenoweth, p. 153.

²⁰Manhattan District Engineers, Book VII, Vol. 2, p. S-4.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. S-5.

²²*Ibid.*, p. S-6.

²³*Ibid.*, p. S-5.

²⁴Chenoweth, p. 154.

²⁵*The Petrified River: The Story of Uranium*, Union Carbide Corporation (New York: 1971), p. 4.

²⁶James Keener and Christine Bebee Keener, *Unawep to Uravan: Travel through 1.7 Billion Years into the Atomic Age* (Grand Junction, Colorado: 1988), p. 40.

²⁷Manhattan District Engineers, *History of the Manhattan District*, Book VII, Vol. 1, sec. 3, "Sources of Minerals: United States" (Atomic Energy Commission, 1947), p. 2.5.

The three companies contributed in this manner: 135 tons from Metals Reserve Corporation, 230 tons from Vanadium Corporation of America, and 891 tons from United States Vanadium Corporation, 93 tons from various independent sources.

²⁸L.P. Merritt, "Memorandum to Files: Present and Perspective Supplies of Uranium-Bearing Material (Dec. 21, 1942), p. 4.

²⁹Manhattan District Engineers, Book VII, Vol. 1, sec. 3, p. 4.4.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 4.5.

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 4.7.

³²*Ibid.*, p. 4.7.

³³*Ibid.*, p. 4.8.

³⁴Leahy, personal correspondence with William Chenoweth, p. 3.

³⁵Groves, *Now It Can Be Told*, p. 185.

³⁶Keener, *Unawep to Uravan*, p. 42.

³⁷The author contacted seven people who did not want to discuss their roles in this project.

THE PLATEAU CANYON ROAD

by Cathy Cummings

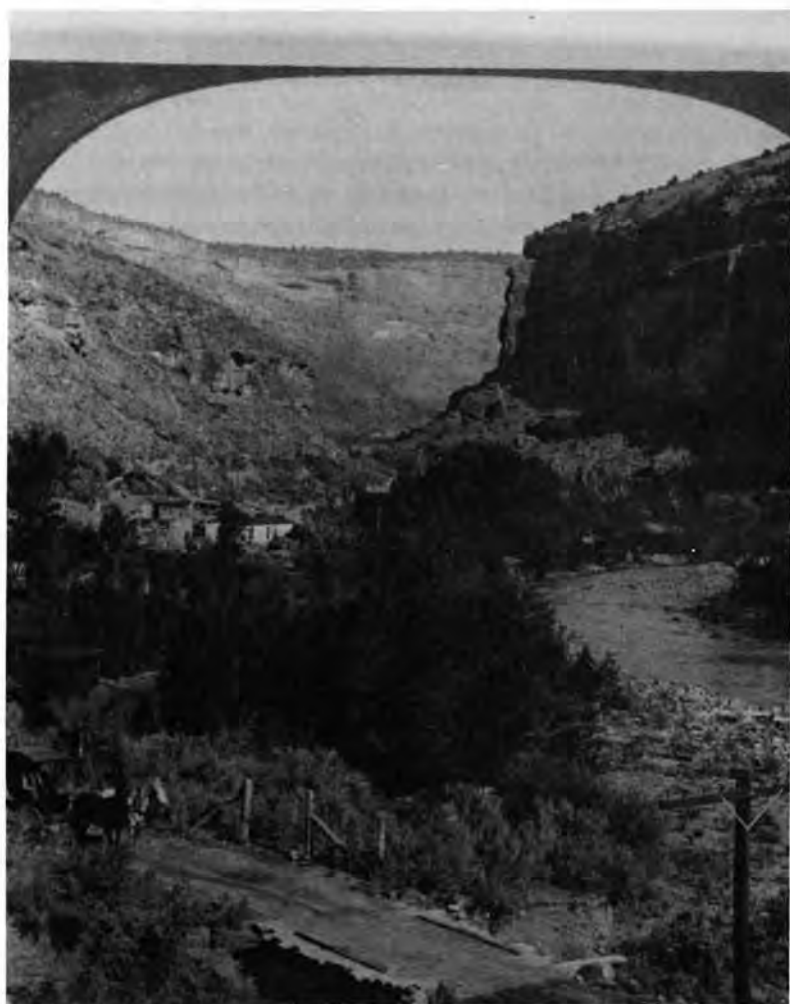
Ms. Cummings was born in Craig, Colorado. She has lived for most of her life in Grand Junction where she attended public schools. Ms. Cummings graduated from Mesa State in 1988 with a B.A. in history and a Colorado secondary teaching certificate.

In the early twentieth century, small communities located in the canyons and high valleys of western Colorado depended on roads as lifelines to outlying communities and commercial areas. Roads acted as transport routes for carrying products to market and as social connections for the isolated inhabitants.

The Plateau Valley, located thirty-five miles from the burgeoning trade center and county seat of Grand Junction, was the site of several towns, including Collbran, Mesa, Molina, and Plateau City. These isolated communities needed adequate thoroughfares to move goods to market. Prior to 1900 the only means of access to Grand Junction for these communities were two indirect routes that carried travelers as much as sixty miles out of the way.¹

By 1910 most valley residents used a primitive road located on the steep south side of the Plateau Canyon. This trail, wide enough for only one wagon, was entirely inadequate for the expanding needs of the local residents. Travel to Grand Junction was especially difficult during the winter months, when the road often became impassable to all but the stout of heart. Snow often caused wagons to slide off the road. At times, the snow was too deep for either wagons or horses. Some inadequately prepared travelers even died along the route in winter. Spring thaw produced its own kind of problems for travelers, mud so deep that wagons became stuck.²

As the communities in the Plateau Valley grew, so did the need for a better road. In 1910 area farmers, ranchers, and merchants approached the Mesa County Commissioners with their problem, since



(Photo courtesy of Glen Pryor Collection, Museum of Western Colorado, Folio 1986.93, and the efforts of Ms. Julia Harris)

Grand Canyon at the mouth of Plateau Creek, circa 1910. The horse-drawn buggy in this and subsequent pictures is that of Ray and Goldie Stites, Sheriff Dick William's grandparents.

the county received annual allotments from the state of Colorado for the construction and maintenance of public highways.³ In addition, the Commissioners could apply for prison labor to supplement the appropriated road construction fund.

It was Warden Thomas Tynen of the State Penitentiary in Canon City who was instrumental in implementing Senator Casimiro Barela's bill allowing prison labor to be utilized for highway construction. Barela's bill expanded an earlier bill, known as the Lewis Road Bill, passed in 1905, by allowing isolated areas such as the Plateau Valley to acquire appropriations for construction of branch roads utilizing convict labor. The Lewis Bill allowed use of convicts only on designated state highways.⁴

The Barela bill allowed allocations of up to \$10,000 for the procurement of prisoners and for the purchase of tools, implements, supplies, and equipment, and to provide transportation for the prisoners. Individual counties were to establish work camps and were responsible for the payment of services and expenses in excess of the state appropriations.⁵ Most counties relied on funds raised through subscriptions to a good road fund or the county's general road fund to pay for their share.

On July 11, 1910 the Mesa County Commissioners wrote to Warden Tynen asking for twenty-five convicts to work on local roads.⁶ Because a previous prison administration had denied an earlier request for convict labor, the Commissioners hoped Warden Tynen would be more amenable.

In a letter received by the Commission in April of 1911, Warden Tynen outlined the requirements for outfitting a convict road camp. The county would have to provide two overseers, whose salaries would be equivalent to about \$160 a month, finance the camp's equipment and necessities, and provide the teams and wagons for transport. The penitentiary would supply the labor, clothing for the men, and drivers for the teams. Tynen suggested that, instead of employing a night guard from the prison at the cost of \$75 per month, that a dependable prisoner be used as a trustee guard.⁷ The Mesa County Commission worked with the Delta County Commission to establish the convict camp, which was to be turned over to Delta County when Mesa County no longer needed it.⁸

The Commissioners voted to establish the road camp and began seeking a convenient location for it. They selected a site five miles from the mouth of the Plateau Canyon. The camp would be moved two times in the course of construction, with the last site near the Harris ranch.⁹

Penitentiary personnel drew up a list of supplies and necessities and sent it to merchants in Grand Junction and the Plateau Valley for bidding purposes. Most of the contracts were awarded to Grand Junction merchants: Schmidt & Sons supplied hardware and tools;

Grand Junction Canvas was awarded the tent contract; and a Grand Junction department store called The Fair provided bedding and general articles.¹⁰

Thirty prisoners arrived in April of 1911. Two of the men were overseers, one was a guard, and another was a cook.¹¹ The camp, the Commissioners boasted, would include some expert road workers, including a convict who had been a highway engineer.

The establishment of the road camp and the prospect of a good road excited the people of Mesa County. The prisoners themselves, of course, considered the camps a great reward. The chance to be outside the prison, three square meals a day, and the reduction of their sentences for good behavior made convicts eager to be part of the program.¹² The program was based on an honor system and promoted by the prisoners themselves to benefit the convicts and the state. Only trustworthy convicts who were deemed safe could join the road crews. A prisoner who became unruly or attempted to escape was sent back to Canon City.¹³ Although there was some alarm in the community about the convict laborers, according to Julia Harris, who lived in the vicinity of the last Plateau Valley road camp, most residents trusted the prisoners. Sometimes the men obtained their water from the Harris ranch, and once a convict even tutored Julia when she had difficulty with her math homework.¹⁴

In the early twentieth century it was uncommon to see a gang of unrestrained convicts off prison grounds, but that was the unique aspect of the road camp program. The prisoners were not chained together, nor were they balled and chained. The prisoners were not under armed guard either, only under the supervision of the overseers and hired supervisors. Most of the control resulted from convict trustee supervisors and pressure among the prisoners themselves. According to Ms. Harris, when a prisoner ended his sentence, he simply walked away from the job.¹⁵

Using convict labor to construct the road cost approximately \$800 per month.¹⁶ In daily estimates this would come to forty-three cents per man per day, compared with the two dollars per day that would have been spent had free labor been utilized.¹⁷ The state helped in maintaining the Plateau Canyon camp. Most of the money the county provided came from the good road fund raised by local interests, such as the Plateau Valley ranchers, who collected \$2,500 through a private subscription. Plateau Valley communities also paid for half of the expense of maintaining the camp.¹⁸ Tynen estimated that the county was receiving three dollars worth of labor for every dollar spent.¹⁹



(Photo courtesy of Glen Pryor Collection, Museum of Western Colorado, Folio 1986.93,
and the efforts of Ms. Julia Harris)

Pulpit Rock, a landmark in Plateau Canyon which was removed during construction of the new road, circa 1910.

The Plateau Canyon road promised to be an important economic asset to the area because it would facilitate travel and commerce. The new road would cut two days of travel time between Plateau Valley communities and the nearby towns of Palisade and Grand Junction. Transportation costs would decrease. The eight-horse teams required

to transport goods over the old road could be replaced by smaller teams on the graveled and well-drained road being constructed down the canyon.²⁰

On June 19, 1911 the County Commissioners were ready to establish a permanent convict road camp in Western Colorado. Many people felt the camp would be a great benefit, not only to Mesa County, but to surrounding communities such as Glenwood Springs and Delta, and even to distant towns like Gunnison, because it would provide easy access to convict labor for other projects to benefit the Western Slope.²¹

With these preliminaries out of the way, the prisoners were dispatched and the camp in Plateau Canyon was established in May, 1911. Efficient road construction was soon under way. After only five months of work, parts of the Plateau Canyon road were opened for travel. The six mile stretch of road in the canyon would be one of the most picturesque in Colorado when it was completed.²² It is extraordinary that construction of the road was accomplished utilizing only horsepower, picks, sledge hammers, wheel barrows, and blasting powder. These unshackled prisoners who handled blasting powder and other potentially dangerous weapons built the road at a rate equivalent to that of two regular crews.

In September, 1911, within a week of opening the completed portion of the road, an unexpected development changed the course of highway construction; the state road fund was shattered. House Bill 200, which appropriated money for the construction of state and county roads and bridges, was declared invalid because of a technical error in the Senate records which omitted the final resolution of the bill and the roll call. The road funds were placed in probate, closing them from any drawing.²³

As a result of litigation over the road funds, convicts around the state began to be withdrawn from their camps because county funds could not support them.²⁴ In the Plateau Canyon, however, the convicts stayed for two more months and the number of prisoners was actually increased to forty-five in an effort to complete the road before the funds were exhausted. People of the area recognized the importance of the road, and took extra measures to keep the camp and complete the project. Consequently, preparation began to provide winter quarters for the men.²⁵

The Mesa County Commissioners traveled to Denver on September 20, 1911 to encourage the legislature to save the Plateau Canyon project by transferring \$250,000 from the state internal improvement fund into the state highway fund.²⁶ Ranchers



(Photo courtesy of Glen Pryor Collection, Museum of Western Colorado, Folio 1986.93,
and the efforts of Ms. Julia Harris)

Overhanging bluffs in the Plateau Canyon, circa 1910.

of Plateau Valley also launched a new drive to raise money for the canyon project.²⁷

During the last months of 1911 the Commissioners vacillated on the project, sometimes offering motions to retain the camp and at other times introducing resolutions to dissolve it. Finally, on October 12, the Commissioners decided to stretch funds and retain the camp until the

work was completed, pending the action taken by the Colorado State Supreme Court on the validity of House Bill 200. Also, the General Assembly planned to draw on warrants from the 1911 tax levies for road fund appropriations if that became necessary to maintain construction.²⁸

In November Judge Carlton Bliss of Denver placed the \$500,000 highway fund in limbo, making it untouchable. The County Commissioners prepared to close the camp because they felt it unwise to draw on the tax warrants and, though it was a good effort, the subscriptions raised in the Plateau Valley would not be sufficient to maintain the camp.²⁹

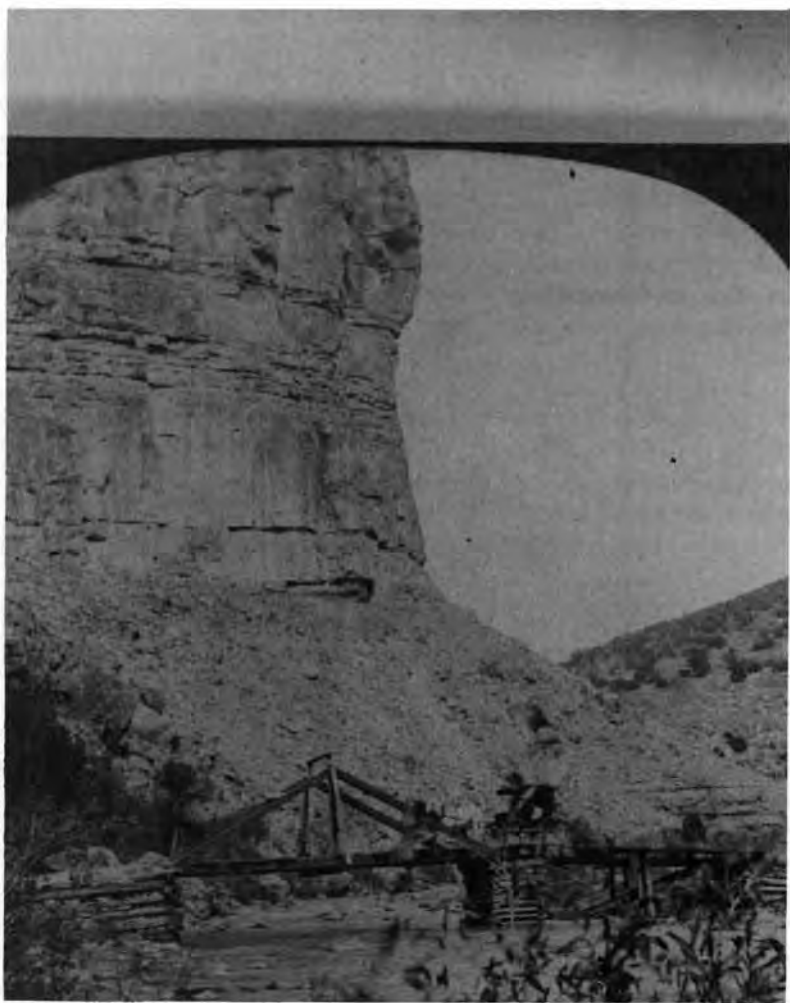
The loss of state funds would negatively impact the state. Specifically it meant the loss of 200 prison laborers in Colorado, including the forty-five stationed in the Plateau Canyon; \$500,000 in state highway funds; suspension of work by the State Highway Commission; and complete suspension of all county road work.³⁰

On November 9, 1911 the county decided that the road camp would have to be abandoned if no help from the state was forthcoming. Nevertheless the county considered financing the camp with assistance from the penitentiary and Governor John Shafroth, who would be asked to pay the supervisors and commissary while the county supplied necessary tools and blasting powder.³¹

Little information is available about the Plateau convict camp between December 1911 and May 1912 while the state waited for the outcome of the legal problems related to House Bill 200. The road camp was sustained on the meager county funds and by the private subscriptions raised in the Plateau Valley. The economic impact of the suspension of H.B. 200 began to affect local interests involved with the camp project. All the bids on new supply contracts were rejected as too costly.³²

In April, during the spring run-off, high water on the Lewis ranch damaged the road and a bridge in the canyon. Work had to be suspended because the Barela Road Bill prohibited convicts from doing skilled labor, such as bridge construction work.³³

During the first part of May, 1912, the State Supreme Court was to make a decision concerning the transfer of \$500,000 from the internal improvement fund to the state highway fund. Also H.B. 200 was declared invalid. Plans were underway to introduce a new highway appropriation bill to solve the legal problem, but such action would be too little too late for the Plateau Canyon project.³⁴ However, over half of the construction work on the road was complete and what little yet to be done could be completed by others. As for a permanent labor



(Photo courtesy of Glen Pryor Collection, Museum of Western Colorado, Folio 1986.93,
and the efforts of Ms. Julia Harris)

Great Bluffs in the lower Plateau Canyon, circa 1910.

camp in the canyon, it would not be maintained by Mesa County, which lacked the necessary funds.³⁵

On May 6, 1912 the State Supreme Court sustained the lower court decision that had ruled the highway bill invalid. The funds for highway construction would be tied up for at least a year. This news disappointed the County Commissioners. The Plateau Valley convict camp would



(Photo courtesy of Glen Pryor Collection, Museum of Western Colorado, Folio 1986.93,
and the efforts of Ms. Julia Harris)

Looking down Plateau Canyon, circa 1910. An example of the terrain and the hardships it imposed on the roadbuilders.

have to be closed, and plans were made to evacuate the camp. The road project would have to be completed by the supervisors and local ranchers who were interested in seeing the job finished.³⁶ The ranchers, realizing the benefit of a state highway, finished the last half mile of the road, and the Plateau Valley residents

residents pitched in to raise the \$1,500 to meet final construction expenses.³⁷

On July 15, 1912 the Mesa County Commissioners entered into negotiations with Delta County for the possible rental or sale of the convict camp equipment and transfer of the prisoners. It was decided that, if Delta no longer needed convict labor or could not afford the cost of maintenance, the convicts would have to be returned to the Canon City Penitentiary.³⁸

Many people were glum over the prospect of abandoning the road camp in view of the fine job the convicts had done on the Plateau Canyon road. Many people, including Warden Tynen, claimed that the road was one of the finest in Colorado. Perhaps the most disappointed were the convicts themselves. They had lost their chance not only to work time off their sentences, but also the privilege of working outside the prison.

On January 2, 1913 the Plateau Valley convict camp was sold. All the equipment and necessities were turned over to Delta County after the road was done. Many of the convicts were sent to other stations around the state and others returned to prison.³⁹ All that remained in the canyon were the camp buildings; a coke oven, which still stands today; and, of course, a fine stretch of highway.

The program of convict road labor continued through the World War I years when the state faced a labor shortage, but succumbed to pressures produced by mass unemployment during the Great Depression. Warden Tynen remained at the prison until 1927 when he resigned.⁴⁰

Eventually the Plateau Canyon road was finished. However, the little communities of the Plateau Valley did not become bustling trade centers, and people did not flood in to populate the valley. The road did bring tourists to the rustic towns and the road improved the way of life for the local inhabitants by making trade and travel easier.

NOTES

¹*Grand Junction News*, 20 September 1890.

²Helen Hawxhurst Young, *The Skin and Bones of the Plateau Valley History* (Grand Junction, Colorado: 1976).

³Records, Colorado General Assembly, *Session Laws of Colorado 1911* (Denver, Colorado: 1911), pp.79-83.

⁴Elinor M. McGinn, "Trying To Profit," *Colorado Heritage* (1987), p.20.

⁵Records, Colorado General Assembly, *Session Laws of Colorado 1911* (Denver, Colorado: 1911), pp.79-83.

⁶Records, County Commissioners, Mesa County, Colorado, vol.4, 11 July 1910.

⁷*Daily Sentinel*, 3 April 1911.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹Records, County Commissioners, Mesa County, Colorado, vol.4, 8 April 1911.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹*Daily Sentinel*, 12 April 1911.

¹²*Ibid.*, 26 April 1911.

¹³*Ibid.*, 19 June 1911.

¹⁴Interview with Julia Harris, Grand Junction, Colorado, 21 October 1986.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶*Daily Sentinel*, 22 August 1911.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 26 April 1911.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 22 May 1911.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 19 June 1911.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 22 May 1911.

²¹*Ibid.*, 19 June 1911.

²²*Ibid.*, 9 September 1911.

²³*Ibid.*, 18 September 1911.

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵Records, County Commissioners, Mesa County, Colorado, vol.5, 12 October 1911.

²⁶*Daily Sentinel*, 20 September 1911.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 27 September 1911.

²⁸Records, County Commissioners, Mesa County, Colorado, vol.5, 12 October 1911.

²⁹*Daily Sentinel*, 7 November 1911.

³⁰*Ibid.*

³¹*Ibid.*, 9 November 1911.

³²Records, County Commissioners, Mesa County, Colorado, vol.5, 4 January 1912.

³³*Ibid.*, vol.5, 16 April 1912.

³⁴*Daily Sentinel*, 3 May 1912.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 3 June 1912.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 27 May 1912.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 3 July 1912.

³⁸Records, County Commissioners, Mesa County, Colorado, vol.5, 15 July 1912.

³⁹*Daily Sentinel*, 2 January 1913.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*; Elinor M. McGinn, "Trying to Profit," p.24.

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