

A-Ore Hunt Termed Biggest Mining Boom of Century

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(Editor's Note: The biggest mining boom of the 20th century is a uranium hunt involving cowboys and housewives as well as corporations. Here's the story of a search on which many go broke, a few strike it rich, and the nation's welfare and even survival may depend.)

By GORDON G. GAUSS
GRAND JUNCTION, Colo. (P)—At the airport of this city of 30,000 there is a lineup of private planes which has come to be known as Uranium Row.

The glistering craft are the mark of success in a search for radioactive ore which has grown into the biggest mining boom of the 20th century.

A year or so ago you could pick out the boys who'd made their stake by their high powered automobiles. Today it's the private plane. Tomorrow the sky itself may be the limit. For the government guarantees the price of uranium, and production is spiraling steadily upward.

A three-story building here has been taken over by the Uranium Ore Producers Assn., an organization of independents, and been remodeled into a "uranium center." Men who used to sweat out burning days on the desert now complain because the air conditioning wasn't completed on schedule.

Uranium Club
At the Uranium Club Restaurant, miners dine on platter sized steaks and laugh about the days they had to exist on "buckskin"—another word for deer shot out of season.

There are enough such fortunates to make a big splash in this unofficial capital of uraniumland, but there number is small indeed in comparison to the number of Americans who have been touched by uranium fever. This is one of the most contagious afflictions in the nation today.

Thousands of persons, ranging from tenderfoot city explorers to grizzled, veteran prospectors, are searching for uranium in the mountains and deserts from South Dakota to California.

Numbers Jump
The number appears to be increasing, despite some indications that the lone operator may have about had his day in the uranium business. Many observers feel that the big corporations are starting to take over the industry.

For example, Lew Williams, who has made his first million and now heads a mining company, opines that "the big fish are cornering the little ones."

Kim Theobald, secretary of the Uranium Ore Producers Assn., agrees that things are getting tougher all the time for the fellow who heads into the desert with his geiger counter and dreams of a lucky strike.

Period of Mergers
Sheldon Wimpfen, the Atomic Energy Commission's top man on the Colorado Plateau—now the nation's busiest uranium hunting ground—concedes that this is a period of mergers, even though he feels there's still room for the small operator. Wimpfen's encourage-

ment of small timers is tempered with words of caution. Living conditions are harsh on the plateau—a forbidding 120,000 square mile area radiating out of the four corners area where Colorado, Utah, New Mexico and Arizona meet.

The mountains and deserts can be graveyards, winter or summer. Water is often scarce. And even a small time uranium search is bound to run into money. Some of the most promising areas are impossible of exploration except through the use of such expensive equipment as the helicopter.

Pay Low
Prospectors who run out of money can't expect to get rich working for the big mining firms. A miner gets about \$2 an hour or a little more. A mucker's pay is from \$1.75 up.

Despite all these drawbacks, however, and in the face of countless misfortunes, the number of amateurs engaged in the hunt continues to rise. And some of them are still making strikes.

There is the case of Mrs. Muriel Gould, a young housewife with two children, who spent long days prospecting while her husband worked the family ranch and sawmill. All last summer and fall, she searched the vicinity of their home, near the continental divide in Colorado.

Finally, Mrs. Gould staked eight claims, each the regulation 600 by 1,500 feet. Now, although litigation still surrounds the property, she's getting a four figure check every month from a conditional sale. This amount may look small if the title is cleared.

Dream of Fortune
The dream of such a fortune affects not only the prospector who takes to the hills, but countless other persons who are confined to the farm or office. This fact is attested to by the number of people who have invested in uranium stocks, often at the poor man's price of a penny or a dime per share. Some of these stock ventures are perfectly legitimate. Too often, however, they have been the work of sharp operators who take advantage of uranium mania by selling "shares" in non-existent or purely speculative mines.

New Rules
To protect the public against such operators, the Securities and Exchange Commission has set up a new series of rules dealing with small stock issues.

Industry spokesmen have been particularly concerned over the so-called penny stocks because the fear the public reaction might hamstring the industry when there is a legitimate need for new capital.

The continued expansion of the industry is a matter of importance not only to the individuals involved; it could mean progress and perhaps even survival for the nation in the atomic age. That is why the government has guaranteed prices ranging upward from \$1.50 a pound and pledged to purchase all ore containing as much as two pounds or uranium oxide per ton.

How much uranium is the nation now producing?
Figures Secret
Total figures are a defense secret, but Colorado's commissioner of

mines announced a year ago that the annual value of uranium to the state exceeded all the gold, silver, lead, zinc and copper ever produced in a single year. Back in 1900 the output of these metals topped 50 million dollars.

Could the present output sustain a major war effort if outside supplies were cut off?
"I simply don't know," said Wimpfen, manager of the AEC's Grand Junction raw materials office. "I doubt if anybody outside the armed forces could answer that if he would."

The refining process has hampered the industry in the past, but the AEC hopes that new milling facilities will ease the bottleneck. Nine mills, all expanded from their original size, now are in operation. Three are under construction. Seven more are being negotiated with

private industry, which runs all except some pilot plants.

Rate Increases
The milling rate now is three times that of three years ago, and Wimpfen predicts it will be five times the 1952 rate by the end of this year.

Ore was dug in 1,054 mines last year, AEC figures show, and bonuses paid for production from new properties developed during the boom approximate 5 1/2 million dollars. The bonuses are mounting weekly.

New finds are reported from Washington State to Texas and from California to South Dakota, although many are yet to be proven commercially profitable. By far the heaviest production still comes from the four corners area.

AEC figures show that 24 companies, some of them operating

several mines, turned out 77 percent of the nation's ore during fiscal 1954. A growing number of the nation's biggest and best known industrial enterprises moved into the field as big operators.

Some observers consider the influx of such name companies to be a sign that the uranium industry is growing up and becoming more stable.

Rush Continues
Despite this apparent trend, however, countless small timers continue to rush in, occasionally striking it rich but much more often winding up broke or in tragic, even comic, circumstances.

For example, one tenderfoot raced into the local AEC office sure that he had uncovered a bonanza. The area didn't look right, but experts checked. They found their geiger counters clicked wildly, all right—but the reaction came

from dust blown off passing ore trucks.

Well remembered, too, is the couple who pulled up before the Uranium Ore Producer's Assn., in a shiny new car and demanded: "tell us where to locate our claims. We've got two days."

The touring prospector who wants to trade his spare tire for gasoline to get home is an old story to filling station operators in this area. Many county officials are concerned over the prospect of broke prospectors swelling relief and welfare rolls.

Ranchers have watched the invasion of stock territory with mounting irritation. Colorado once required 10-foot discovery cuts for the staking of claims on public land. The cuts aren't required any more, but they're still dug occasionally. Often they have formed graves for cattle or sheep.

Weeks Defends Ike Administration

WASHINGTON (P)—Secretary of Commerce Weeks said Thursday that "people who don't believe in what this administration believes in" have launched a massive attack on the free enterprise system.

He wouldn't say who these people are, but he specifically defended his Business Advisory Council which has come under attack from Rep. Celler (D-N.Y.), chairman of the House antimonopoly subcommittee.

Weeks said he didn't want to indulge in personalities or politics, when asked to clarify his charge. "If the shoe fits anyone, let him put it on," the secretary suggested at a news conference.

Celler said earlier Thursday he will subpoena "everybody in sight," if necessary, to penetrate what he called the "aura of secrecy" around the Business Advisory Council. On being told of Weeks' news conference remarks,

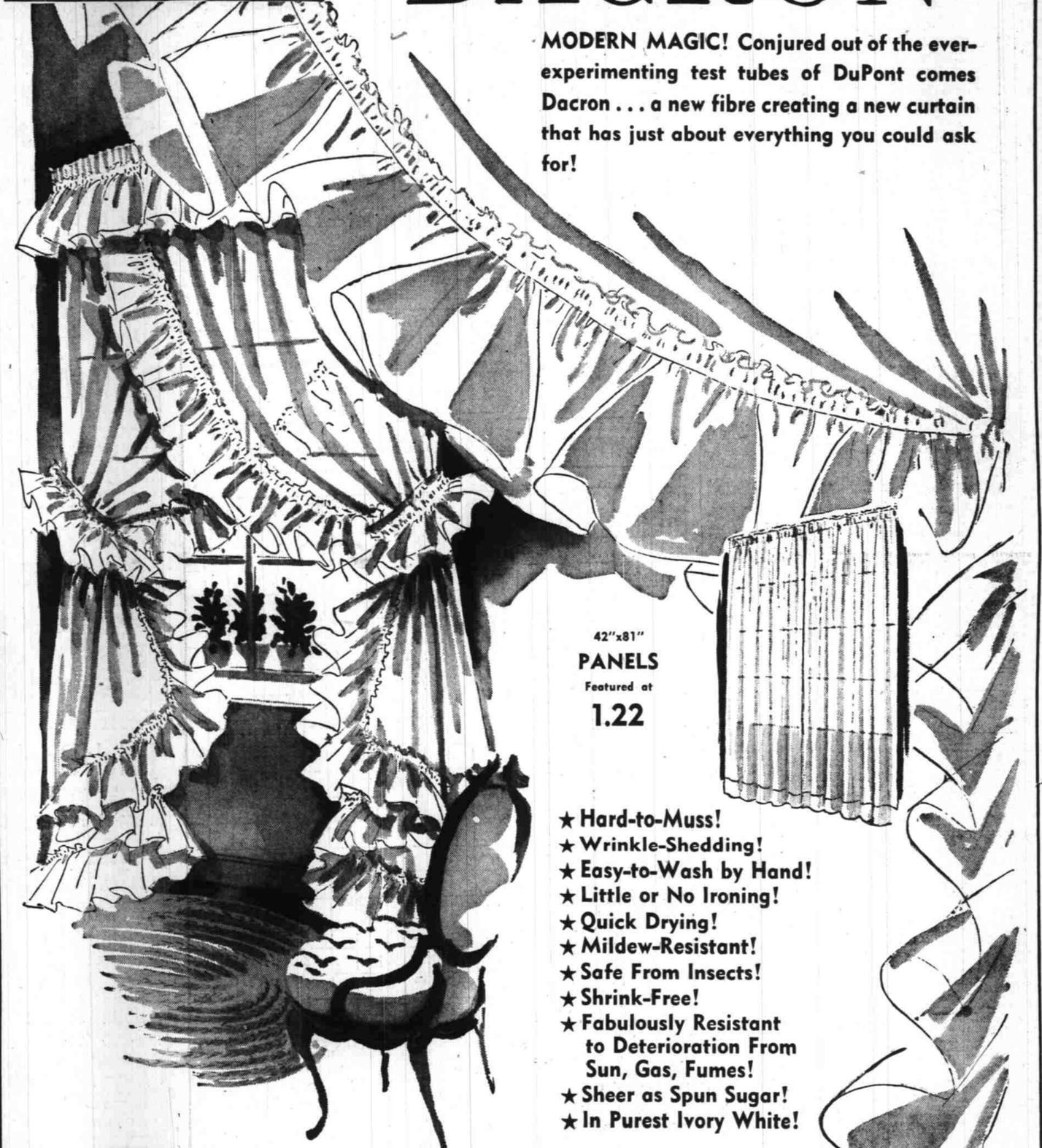
Celler said the secretary was talking "palpable nonsense." The antimonopoly committee has just recessed until October, its investigation of the government role of WOC's, or businessmen who serve as advisers without compensation, while drawing salaries from private firms.

Leader's Name Difficult to Say

MONTEVIDEO, Uruguay (P)—The head of the only Swiss-style government in the Western Hemisphere, President Luis Batlle Berres, is expected to encounter some name pronunciation trouble on his visit to Washington Dec. 3-7. His name sounds loo-ees bah-ya bah-r-has. He is head of the 9-man National Council that serves as the executive power in Uruguay.

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