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And the status quo returns

Surviving The Gas Boom

By Cathy Rutledge

Over the past few years, we have seen big changes in our lives and town. We experienced something similar to the madness of the early Gold Rush days. Our town, Elk City, was fairly much like any other small town—clean and calm with everyone knowing one another. Suddenly, hoards of people moved in. The population jumped from 9,700 to 15,000 within a few months. Some of the people we had known all our lives changed and became greedy and bitter. No longer were they willing to do neighborly deeds for one another. People became distrustful and were aware that they didn't always know their neighbors. The landlord who once understood your problems suddenly didn't understand why your rent was late, and like a charging bull he came to evict you. The dollar sign had become the important factor.

What had happened to cause all this? The gas boom!

We're in the Anadarko Basin, which means we're rich in gas. In the 1970's the oilfield gradually moved in. In the late 60's, men had gone to work on seismograph crews. They worked ten to thirteen hours a day making good money at the time. In 1970, men started working on oilrigs as roughnecks. At first they drove sixty to a hundred miles to work. Gradually over the years, the rigs moved in closer. Then in 1981 and 1982, the gas boom peaked; what happened in Elk City, as in neighboring towns, was unbelievable.

The land mushroomed in every direction from Elk City with the oil rigs. There were over two hundred rigs within a fifteen-mile radius. It was a spectacular sight to drive at night along the highway and see the lights from the oilrigs.

The money earned during those days was staggering. Roughnecks, common laborers, brought home \$2000 to \$3000 a month. Drillers earned much more,

even more than professional people. People spent hundred-dollar bills as if they were ten-dollar bills. Businesses thrived; prosperity was abundant, and we began to pay the price for it in several ways.

How was a person treated upon going to a store or restaurant? Rudely! Many business people were overworked from all the business they received, and they didn't even care if customers came back.

Because there was so much money, businesses raised their prices. Motels, for instance, became extremely high. It wasn't at all unusual to pay \$65 a night for a room that was formerly \$20. Workers rented motels by the month; they were willing to pay the price because they couldn't find housing. Local people who weren't in the oilfield didn't make the high wages of the oilfield; therefore, they had it tough paying oilfield prices for everything.

Three or four families would live together in one house or apartment. Renters tore up houses, and most landlords were unwilling to make repairs. People were desperate for places to live. Unable to find houses, they lived in cars, vans, or makeshift tents by the lakes. They even lived in old abandoned railroad cars, anything to give them shelter. At one time, the city park was lined with tents.

The arrangement didn't work well. The ducks at the park were killed and eaten. People living in the tents were robbed and stabbed for their money. The police finally banned people from living there.

Repairmen's housecalls were out of the question. The best a person could do was to take an appliance into the repair shop and maybe get it back in a month or so. Getting a plumber was also totally impossible because most plumbers were working in the oilfields.

All of the pressure caused by the

boom had a detrimental effect on homes and marriages. The environment became demoralizing. Liquor, drugs, and women were easily accessible. Products were neglected, arguments, alcoholism, drug addiction, and cheating in marriages. The divorce rate was high, but many families stayed together experiencing difficult times in their marriages and lives.

In the last year of the gas boom, people moved to Elk City to start new businesses. They borrowed huge sums of money for equipment, not realizing that the gas boom would die suddenly.

They believed that prosperity was here to stay. Land was bought to build on, people thinking they would make a fortune. Motels went up; restaurants were built. Beautiful homes were constructed in every direction. People bought these \$100,000 homes, thinking the money was here forever. All they knew was that they were making big money, and they spent it quickly. They didn't realize the gas boom would die to the extent it did.

It totally died by the end of 1982, and there was mass unemployment. Men and women stood in line at the unemployment office for hours everyday. Many of them lost everything they had.

The picturesque homes sit empty now. There aren't enough people here to patronize all the new businesses that were started too late. Motels, restaurants, and stores are still closing their doors every month.

How did local people feel about all this? Angry. It wasn't uncommon to hear people say, "I'll be glad when it leaves."

Many wish it were back. Most never want it to come back on the scale it was. How do you survive a gas boom? By realizing it won't last. ❖