

# Having Everything Before Us: Boomers and Nesters in the American West

By Pete Gomben

At the beginning of *Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens contrasts England and France in 1775 using words that ring as true for the contemporary American West as they did for 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe. Like the characters in the novel, we in the modern West live in the best of times and we live in the worst of times; we exist simultaneously in the springtime of hope and the winter of despair. The boomer lifestyle that with its callused fingers and hobnailed boots dug minerals from the earth and felled Douglas-firs brought fat times to the West. Although boomers have lost much of their transience, their restlessness remains. Over time, however, even these settled boomers yield territory to the soft hands and quiet footfalls of homebody nesters. Visit any town west of the hundredth meridian and you'll find yourself suspended somewhere between the old-fashioned ruggedness of the pioneers and a domestic white picket fence ideal.

Lured by what I rightly imagined would be an expansive landscape, a decade ago I shambled out West, first to work for the U.S. Forest Service and then to attend graduate school. Far from the myths about the western lifestyle I saw in movies and studied in my grandfather's dusty collection of shoot-'em-up dime novels, I found that the West is not a monolith, not an unchanging region stalled at a given point in history. The West and its people are dynamic, eluding blanket descriptions. The two places I've lived most recently—Lincoln County, Montana, and Cache County, Utah—lie at opposite ends of the boomer/nester spectrum and highlight the different pathways the West has taken over the years.

The basics of each county are worth noting. Lincoln County is isolated in the northwestern corner of Montana, flush against Idaho and British Columbia. Cache County is in Utah's panhandle, just an hour and a half north of the largest metropolis between Denver and Sacramento. Three-quarters of Lincoln County's current population of approximately 19,000 are rural, at least as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau. Cache County's population, conversely, stopped being rural sometime around World War II, when more than half of its residents fit the bureau's definition of urban dwellers. As of the year 2000, over eighty percent of Cache County's 92,000 residents live in urban areas.

Cache County, like the rest of Utah, was settled by Mormons, who still form a

majority of its population. Getting a beer on a Sunday morning in Logan is harder than finding a parking spot outside an LDS ward church. On the other hand, someone who doesn't partake of cheap gin and filterless Marlboros at the Pastime or the V.F.W. a few blocks from the county courthouse in Libby may be regarded with distrust. Such is the variation in how we westerners choose to spend our spare time.

Likely due to the religious differences between the two counties, the average family size in Cache County is significantly larger than that found in Lincoln County. Ages also vary greatly—nearly a generation separates the median Lincoln County resident at 42 years of age and the median resident of Cache County at 24. In 1950, the median age in Lincoln was 29; the median age in Cache was the same as it is now. Fewer than one out of ten adults in Cache County did not finish high school. In Lincoln County, that figure is one out of five. Residents of Lincoln County are twice as likely to be divorced and three times as likely to have served in the military.

If the cultural differences between the two counties are stark, then disparities in the economies of each further illuminate the schism between boomers and nesters. In 1950, fifty-six percent of the jobs in Lincoln County were in traditional boomer industries—agriculture, forestry, fisheries, mining and lumber manufacturing, the often-hardscrabble occupations that rely directly on the land and on resource extraction. That year thirty-four percent of jobs in Cache County were in the same industries. By 1990, roughly a third of jobs in Lincoln County were still tied to boomer industries, compared to only seven percent of jobs in Cache County. Median income is considerably higher in Cache County, as is the rate of employment.

\* \* \*

Statistics are soulless things, numbers on a page that are best used to sketch rough outlines. Truth is best fleshed out with stories. Here is one: In January 2003, the Stimson lumber mill in Libby turned off its head rig and shut down its green chain for the last time. Hundreds of blue-collar boomer jobs were lost, hundreds of families had to live off life savings or swallow their pride and step up to the government dole. By the time I arrived in Libby to work for the summer, the mill had been disassembled. Machinery that could be salvaged was sold. Lincoln County has undergone a brain drain that is common across the rural West as young adults go off to college. After graduating, either they cannot find white-collar or professional jobs back in Libby or Troy, or they choose not to look. Instead they move to Missoula, or Spokane, or Seattle, or somewhere else with a diverse, promising economy. They may return for high school reunions or to visit family on holidays, but in general they abandon their hometowns to the past.

Here is another story: For decades, vermiculite was removed from a mountain a few miles up the Kootenai River from Libby, at the headwaters of Rainy Creek. Mining the vermiculite also released asbestos, some of it into the air, some of it onto the clothes of employees who unknowingly took the fibers home with them. Family, friends, neighborhood kids who came over to throw around a baseball after dinner were exposed. So far, two hundred people have died from lung diseases related to asbestos. Because decades can pass before the symptoms of asbestos exposure manifest themselves, hundreds more people wait, wondering if things will get worse.

In contrast to the saga of Lincoln County, the story of Cache County can be summarized in one word: Growth. Big-box national retail stores selling designer clothes or ten-penny nails have sprung up during the past few years. Even allowing for the recent economic downturn, during the holiday season the Cache Valley Mall is a swirl of shoppers, arms stuffed with items soon to be wrapped and ribboned and stashed beneath Christmas trees. Sixty-seven percent of adults have at least some college under their belts; many of them have attended Utah State University, which sits on a hill overlooking Logan. The university employs thousands of people, and thousands more work in manufacturing of processed cheese, for example, or exercise equipment. Once-productive farmland is being subdivided for housing developments. In many ways, it is the best of times for county residents.

\* \* \*

Many boomer economies are by nature relatively short lived, existing only long enough for a resource to be mined or harvested. If left to the whims of the national economy, boomer economies either evolve into nester economies, which has happened to Cache County, or they fade away, which is happening to Lincoln County. How can we strike a balance between the boomer and the nester?

We can start by understanding that both boomers and nesters form important parts of the patchwork that is the West, and by extension, our common heritage. And we must recognize that whereas nesters form what ecologists might call climax communities and can perpetuate themselves indefinitely, boomer communities need a little help, a little boost every now and then, if they are to survive. This survival carries with it a challenge for boomers who, as Stegner notes in *Conversations on History and Literature*, are prone to be uncomfortable with, if not outright fearful of, change.

But to survive, economic change *is* necessary. This change can take a number of forms. Between the time I left Lincoln County in the late 1990s and when I returned last summer, fly fishing guide services had become popular. So much so, in fact, that I don't

think I ever drove along the Kootenai River to or from work without seeing at least a couple dories on the water with a few fishermen working the pools. Do these guide services, and other forms of tourism, compensate for the closure of the Stimson mill? Not by a long shot. But they offer a good start, an economic finger hold that can provide stimulus to the county and help maintain the rural lifestyle that residents have chosen to live.

Most towns can attract new manufacturers and businesses under the right circumstances, but often these newcomers detract from the sense of place that boomers value. Cache County sprawling, but in doing so it has lost the uniqueness that once differentiated it from other counties across the West. It has traded one aggregation of lifestyles for another. That is not intended as a value judgment, only as a statement of fact.

There are new technologies, however, that can help support old industries that are more in line with traditional lifestyles like those found in Lincoln County, lengthening the life span of boomer economies if not prolonging them indefinitely. For example, due to a declining resource base, some lumber mills in the West are retooling so they can accept smaller diameter sawtimber. Just because available old growth is dwindling does not mean that timber cannot, nor should not, be harvested. Stud mills using smaller logs can take the place of mills that turned out longer dimension lumber. Chances of a new mill being built from the ground up in Libby are slim, but there are sawyers and log truck drivers who live in town who wouldn't mind cutting timber and hauling it up to Eureka, or over to north Idaho. In addition, wood waste from timber harvesting and lumber mills can be used as biomass for energy production, therefore adding value to what was once an unwanted byproduct of the manufacturing process. This carries with it a double bonus. Not only can resource-dependent communities such as those in Lincoln County and elsewhere reap economic benefits, society itself gets a new, sustainable supply of energy.

\* \* \*

To paraphrase Dickens once more, we in the West have everything before us. Though most of us now live as nesters, we all have daydreamed a time or two about what it must have been like to be a boomer, to have felt the peculiar restlessness that kept people close to nature and on the move. Indeed, as Stegner wrote in "The Sense of Place," an essay in *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs*, "Adventurous, restless, seeking, asocial or antisocial, the displaced American persists by the million long after the frontier has vanished. He exists to some extent in all of us, the inevitable by-product of our history: the New World transient." We should not let this part of ourselves fade from our cultural history. Just as we preserve wilderness areas so that we may experience untrammelled nature, we also should preserve the boomer communities in the West, with all their hope and despair, so that we

may both celebrate and safeguard our common past.

**Author's note:** All socio-demographic data for Lincoln and Cache counties were obtained from U.S. Census Bureau reports archived at the Utah State University library.