

Coal at Sunset: A Colorado Town in Transition
Episode 4: “The Other Craigs”
Presented by the Institute for Science & Policy at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science along with House of Pod

KRISTAN UHLENBROCK (narration): Transitions are nothing new, and North American history is full of cautionary tales. When big industries fail or move away, bad things can happen to the small towns that rely on them. Think about timber mills closing in rural areas of the Pacific Northwest. Or fisheries collapsing in New England. Or Midwestern automotive factories moving offshore. There are stories like these in nearly every state. Some of those communities managed to survive. Some didn't. Chris Markuson doesn't need to speculate about what comes next. He already knows. He runs his hands through his beard, then slowly leans forward as he remembers his own childhood.

CHRIS MARKUSON: As a kid, my family and I lived in Kremmling, Colorado, in the north central part of the state. At the time, the Climax molybdenum mine was going strong and supplying molybdenum to the steel industry. The steel industry prices changed, the market changed, prices bottomed out, steel collapsed. And we didn't have a choice as a family but to move. We had to leave Kremmling because there was no more primary money coming into town. My dad worked at the local hospital. He had no involvement in the molybdenum industry. But because that was the only primary revenue stream coming into Kremmling, when it went away, Kremmling was in a really terrible spot.

KRISTAN (narration): So Chris and his family moved away. He began working in policy. Eventually, he landed in Pueblo, another former boomtown gone bust.

CHRIS: Pueblo is another example, again, another steel community. Before the price of steel collapsed in the 1980s, Pueblo was really doing very well. Then all of a sudden, it collapsed and Pueblo was not doing well. It had upwards of 20% unemployment rate, very dire circumstances. Pueblo actually marketed itself to workers around the country by having maps and photographs and images, hand drawn images of the community, with smokestacks just billowing black smoke everywhere. And that evoked prosperity. That meant that you could get a job. That's no longer the case.

KRISTAN (narration): Now, Chris is the Director of Colorado and State Economic Transition Policy at the BlueGreen Alliance. The group advocates for well-paying jobs in the clean energy space to replace disappearing coal jobs.

CHRIS: We're a national organization. We bring together the nation's largest labor unions and environmental organizations to think about policies and practices that both create family-sustaining jobs and address the climate crisis. The United Steelworkers and the Sierra Club got together, and I imagine -- I don't know for sure -- how the conversation ensued, but it was probably something to the effect of: why are we always fighting? We want the same things. How do we figure that out?

KRISTAN (narration): Chris' memories of Pueblo illustrate a different chapter in Colorado's history. It's strange to think about a time when towns here advertised themselves with billowing, black smoke. But it's true. Kremmling, Pueblo, Craig, and hundreds of other small towns.

Working in a lucrative resource extraction industry used to be seen as a path to the American dream. But not anymore.

Today, many people move here for the sunshine, the outdoor lifestyle, and the state's natural beauty. The industries that once attracted residents have either been shrinking, been replaced, or the towns that relied on them have gone away entirely.

CHRIS: I can tell you that if your community only has one primary industry, you are at risk, and your community is very much subject to the market whims that influence that industry. Unfortunately across the country, there are way too many communities that still only have one industry, and a lot of times, it's an extractive industry. And policy, economics, and our climate needs are changing things.

KRISTAN (narration): He's right. There are hundreds of "other Craigs" around the country. And their experiences serve as a warning. Craig is just the latest town to reach this turning point. And it won't be the last.

(transition)

KRISTAN (narration): This is *Coal at Sunset: A Colorado Town in Transition*, presented by the Institute for Science & Policy and the Denver Museum of Nature & Science. I'm Kristan Uhlenbrock.

Coal was popular for centuries because it was dependable energy. We can store it. We can burn it. We can use it to create electricity 24/7. But around the mid-2000s, that started to change. The U.S. began to wean itself off of coal. Cleaner, greener energy sources like wind and solar gained momentum. So did natural gas. Coal production started to decline nationwide. It's still dropping today in 2021. In 2016, Donald Trump pledged that he would revive coal. During his presidential campaign, he talked about restoring livelihoods.

DONALD TRUMP ON FOX BUSINESS CLIP: *We are putting our great coal miners back to work.*

KRISTAN (narration): As President, he tried to help coal rebound by weakening environmental regulations. It didn't work. By the time he left office, coal jobs were as endangered as ever. More coal plants closed during the Trump administration than during President Barack Obama's second term.

The transition hit hard across Appalachia and the Midwest. In Manchester, Ohio, two coal plants closed in 2018. That left the state's poorest county with hundreds of thousands of dollars in property tax revenue shortfall. Workers considered whether or not to move to other states to take lower-paying jobs as linemen or welders.

Muhlenberg County, Kentucky, a last-ditch organizing effort in 2019 failed. The iconic Paradise #3 coal unit, popularized in song by the late John Prine, closed down. As of 2020, Kentucky had lost 67% of its remaining coal jobs in just six years. McDowell County, West Virginia was once a thriving mountaintop coal mining region. Now, it's lost half of its private sector jobs since 2010. The few remaining schools face consolidation and perpetual staffing shortages.

These kinds of stories go on and on. In each case, coal's changing fortunes lead to the same grim outcome. Resources from the government either weren't available, or weren't enough. Schools, fire districts, and hospitals withered. People moved away. We wanted to get some national perspective and understand more about why so many of these transitions have gone so poorly. So we reached out to Heidi Binko, one of the country's leading experts on coal communities. She spoke with us from her home in Virginia.

HEIDI BINKO: I am Executive Director and Co-Founder of the Just Transition Fund. We created the fund in 2015, actually to get to try to get out ahead of the economic distress that was happening in coal communities all across the country.

KRISTAN (narration): The Just Transition Fund is primarily a philanthropic effort. It's a national organization that provides direct grants to struggling coal towns. But it's also a Swiss Army knife with numerous tools and resources to help communities plan for what's next.

HEIDI: I've been in philanthropy for about 20 years now and I have been working with coal communities not only around our country but also around the world for probably about 17 or 18 years of those. And it was interesting wherever I went, whether it was you know Powder River Basin or Appalachia or with communities in Australia where I did a bunch of work, that people were always saying you know, "our community is dependent on coal, what are we going to do, when it goes away?" So if not coal then what so that question just always, always intrigued me.

KRISTAN (narration): Like Chris, this issue has personal resonance for Heidi.

HEIDI: I'm actually, I'm from a small town in western New York where there is a coal fired power plant. My aunt worked at the coal plant for forty years. My mom worked in the school district and so, when a big national group comes to your town and says, "Hey, we want you to shut that thing down," and you just you see the people that work there you grew up with those people right like you know the importance of jobs in those communities. And also I have a whole part of my family that were coal miners in West Virginia. So it's very personal to me.

KRISTAN (narration): The end of coal has been like a wave washing over the U.S. It started in Appalachia and kept surging, eventually impacting more of the country's largest coal-producing regions.

HEIDI: Folks in Appalachia have been dealing with the downturn of the coal economy for over a decade so they're really farthest ahead and then you can sort of see the way the coal industry has affected other regions, you know, it hit the West in the Powder River Basin next and you know it's just really starting to have its impact in the Illinois Basin in the Midwest.

KRISTAN (narration): Inevitably, these closures hit small town America the hardest.

HEIDI: If you look at the problem of transitioning coal communities across the United States, it's primarily a rural problem. Coal plants in particular, are often the largest property taxpayers and a community so when they shut down, we see -- and we work with communities all around the country that have lost upwards of 70, 80% of their of the local government budgets, so that just means that that you're not just seeing the direct power plant workers losing their jobs. For every, power plant worker that loses their job, there's four more indirect jobs that are lost in the community. So it's really devastating to these local communities and you see of course, the, you

know when the local government budgets go down you see health services, public schools, you see all of that just get cut.

KRISTAN (narration): Communities that fall on hard times are vulnerable to increased drug use and mental health issues. Rural areas already have a 45 percent higher rate of opioid overdoses than metro counties. In the past, resources like counseling and addiction treatment services just haven't been there.

HEIDI: It's so easy to lose hope. It's so easy to be frustrated and you know, if you take Appalachia for example, these are communities that have a lot of skepticism over what the federal government can do because they've been dealing with persistent poverty for decades and they've been, like so many rural areas in America really, they've seen declining levels of investment from the federal government for a long time.

KRISTAN (narration): Research, public polling, and election results indicate that those attitudes are only adding to the polarization in our country right now.

HEIDI: When we don't invest in rural America, we see these two Americas. We see the splits getting worse and worse and worse, there's going to be an ever increasing divide between rural and urban America.

(transition)

KRISTAN (narration): Transitions face another big hurdle: inertia. The feeling of just being stuck in the mud. Change is a slow process. Government and policy measures are often deliberate and incremental. And it's tough to get everyone rowing in the same direction.

In our first episode, we met Kirstie McPherson, a local business owner who was born in Craig. She has emerged as one of the town's leading reformer voices. But not everybody agrees with her ideas about the town's post-coal future.

KIRSTIE MCPHERSON: There's a very large group who is preparing for that transition and then there's a very large group who doesn't want to do that yet. We also have what I refer to in every community as the "Loud Five." It could be 20 people, 30 people, whatever. But the ones that are adamantly against any type of change, any type of anything and anybody who is in this community listening to this is probably naming off who those people are in their head right now.

KRISTAN (narration): Chris Markuson loves that term, "Loud Five." And he completely agrees.

CHRIS: I'm grinning because yes, that happens in every single community. I like to call them the pontificators. It seems as though all the air in the room is used up by, yes, five people. And it's usually angry and very volatile.

KIRSTIE: The Loud Five are the best ones at speaking up to leadership. And then so therefore other people will want to kind of sit on the sidelines because there's a fear that I think that we have, like if I were to speak up on something that I am for, that somebody else was against, what if they boycott my business? Or what if - that's a real fear that a lot of people have. And so I think that the Loud Five are so used to being the Loud Five that leadership is like okay, well

this must be the overall opinion of the community when that's not the case and we even have data to show that's not the case.

CHRIS: That's not community engagement, that's not leadership. That's not a model that makes sense. We fundamentally believe that in order for a community to define its own future, the community needs to be leading the way, not five angry folks, but everyone, especially if our focus is on equity and improving the condition in which we currently live.

KRISTAN (narration): In the months following Tri-State's decision to close the plant and the mines, some in Craig were angry. At public forums, they vowed to fight on. Many didn't want to see coal go away. They didn't want outsiders coming in and telling them they needed to change their way of life. People are entitled to their feelings, Kirstie says. But time is precious. And ceding the mic to the Loud Five risks delaying decisive action when it's needed the most.

KIRSTIE: Being in a conservative community, which I would also like to preface that I am a conservative business owner, fiscally responsible, all those pieces. But not being able to invest in your own community is the number one thing that I am finding the most troublesome. We have a lot of very large ballot initiatives that are coming up. We are at the risk of losing some of our schools, our EMT service, our Emergency Medical Services is a huge one. If we aren't willing to invest in some of these programs, then we don't have a community that people are going to want to come to. If we don't have a community that people want to come to, then all of the work that we're doing is really for naught. And so that's the number one thing that keeps me up at night.

KRISTAN (narration): To overcome inertia, you need to take some risks.

KIRSTIE: Nobody wants to be the first right? Like nobody wants to be like, oh I want to take this bold move on this on this town or this downtown. When you start actively seeing people wanting to do things in an area, others typically kind of follow, but nobody really ever wants to be the first because it's scary. It's terrifying. Especially when you don't know the outcome of a community within the next decade, because we're not making any investments that are any less than 20 years. Could end very good, could end very bad. There are a lot of very hard Craig days, which, if I lived in anywhere else there would be a lot of very hard insert X town name days. But when we're actively doing the things that we're doing because we are outwardly believing in the community that we're going to be, and that we are, I don't have an option of not being optimistic. Otherwise, what's the point of everything that we're doing?

(transition)

KRISTAN (narration): Kirstie's comment about the need for hope stuck with me. As I researched other coal towns, and read so many stories of those affected by closures, it would have been easy to become pessimistic. After all, we've heard a lot in this series about how complicated the energy transition is. And there will be many difficult decisions ahead for Craig.

But a coal plant -- or any industry, really -- isn't what makes a community a community. And I found a dose of optimism from a local philanthropist who also knows this region well.

TIM WOHLGENANT: Philanthropy comes from the Greek word which means literally love of humanity.

KRISTAN (narration): Tim Wohlgenant is the Executive Director of the Yampa Valley Community Foundation. When I asked him about the ingredients for a successful transition, I expected him to focus on dollars and cents. Instead, he took a more philosophical approach.

TIM: When I first began up there a couple years ago, year and a half ago, we did as a staff team was hold listening sessions throughout the Yampa Valley. And what we heard was really interesting because we heard very similar things in each community we visited with, and the word love came up a lot. People said they love the river that ties us all together in that region, they love seeing kids walking to school with a parent. They love that it's a beautiful landscape that's inspirational for artists. So they love all those things together and what, so what I took from that is that there are these basic kind of core values that are the reason why people choose to live there or choose to come back.

KRISTAN (narration): Tim was born in Denver and has spent his career exploring people's deep connections with the places where they live.

TIM: I was a biologist by training, did my graduate work studying bats, actually, in Central America. But I decided I was very interested in conflict and environmental conflict in particular but mainly about how to bring different people together, people from different perspectives together to resolve or address environmental challenges. My career has been mostly in these public processes around protecting land and working in communities both urban and rural around the importance of parks, open space, and trails to people's lives.

KRISTAN UHLENBROCK: Now, when he's not out hiking or biking near his home in Steamboat Springs, Tim helps steer funding to Craig and other towns in the Yampa Valley region.

TIM: The foundation does grant making in health and human services, education, recreation, arts and culture and environment, so we kind of run the gamut of issues that are important in rural communities.

KRISTAN (narration): There's no doubt that Craig will need lots of investment, both public and private, in order to survive. Towns that lose big industries suffer because they lose a significant percentage of their property tax revenue. But dollars aren't the only solution.

TIM: Money is only one part of what's important, or what we can do as a foundation. The other significant thing we can do is convene. As a trusted partner to the nonprofit community as well as to the donor and the business community and the political community, we have the ability to bring people together around issues. And that can sometimes be far more valuable than a small grant to support the operations of an organization, just the ability to help create connections and relationships and to kind of catalyze activity.

KRISTAN (narration): Craig has one potential advantage over other coal communities: the presence of nearby Steamboat Springs. Steamboat is a wealthy ski town with an affluent population and robust tourism. What some may not realize is that it relies heavily on workers commuting from Craig, where housing is much more affordable. The two towns along the Yampa river are already economically joined at the hip. And Tim knows that many donors in Steamboat are actively looking for ways to invest locally.

TIM: There are a lot of people in the Yampa Valley area who have significant means and want to make a difference, but they just don't know where they can do that. They're just not familiar enough with what's happening, especially outside of the wealth center that Steamboat is. So a big job for us is educating those folks about the great leadership that exists outside of Steamboat proper, and inside Steamboat proper, but throughout the Yampa Valley. And the neat ideas that people are working on to improve their own communities.

KRISTAN (narration): It's a double-edged sword, though. We heard from some in Craig who'd prefer to have nothing to do with Steamboat in this transition. They view the two communities as oil and water, culturally speaking. Some, like Kirstie, are wary of becoming too dependent.

KIRSTIE: One of the things that I think we can all agree on as a community is we don't want to be a bedroom community. I specifically don't want to be a bedroom community to Steamboat. I would think that we can both support ourselves equally in that right, and I think probably a large majority would agree with that as well. But we know that we're going to have to grow and we're going to have to attract some outside voices if we want to change

KRISTAN (narration): Tim sees the Steamboat connection as part of a more holistic solution.

TIM: There's been a lot of kind of prejudices that have developed about the people there. And those kinds of mistaken understandings create these barriers that that can prevent collaboration. A lot of Colorado communities identify with the county that they're in, some arbitrary political boundary, but we have an opportunity here to think of ourselves as a Yampa Valley ecosystem, a natural ecosystem, but it's also an economic ecosystem. They run in parallel. We are intimately connected economically just as we are intimately connected by the Yampa River. And I think it's by building off of those connections and constantly going back to these shared values that we're going to find solutions.

KRISTAN (narration): A spirit of connectedness is hard to quantify, and maybe not the scientific, data-driven solution that some of us might crave. But earlier in this series, we talked about the role of values in our decision-making. Tim leans in to the idea that belief in oneself and in one's community is powerful. His vision is ultimately a hopeful one.

TIM: I think that philosophy of resilience is an empowering one. So rather than throw up your hands and kind of say, "well, everything's shutting down we're going to have to move," instead, recognizing that Craig has a long and important history in the state, that it's surrounded by an incredible landscape that, that they are proud of, and people would enjoy seeing. And that, you know Craig's survived a lot of other kinds of challenges in the past. So, the mindset of resilience, I think is a really positive one, it's much more of an optimistic outlook than what could otherwise be the outlook there.

(transition)

KRISTAN (narration): In the classic holiday film "It's a Wonderful Life," George Bailey, a banker and family man, becomes despondent when he thinks he's lost all of his savings. Wandering alone on Christmas Eve, he sees a dark glimpse of an alternate world without him in it.

IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE CLIP: *Strange, isn't it? Each man's life touches so many other lives. When he isn't around he leaves an awful hole, doesn't he?*

KRISTAN (narration): Likewise, Craig can look around the country and see haunting previews of other coal towns that died out when the jobs dried up. But there's still an opportunity for it to choose a different path.

HEIDI: We always talk about like the stages of transition right and the first stage is denial, right, it's, "This is not happening to us, we're going to be just fine. "

KRISTAN (narration): Heidi Binko, Director of the Just Transition Fund.

HEIDI: The, the industry is not going away, there's no changes and you know I think that's true of a lot of different transitions that we go through in life. It's when people move out of that that the real work starts and I think things start to get exciting when you realize that like you know what the industry is going away the jobs that we had and that our kids could depend on walking into are not going to be coming back, my kids are not going to have the same opportunities that I did and it's time for a change. Once people start realizing that, it opens up a whole world of possibilities.

KRISTAN (narration): We said earlier that there are hundreds of rural towns like Craig facing these exact same challenges all across the country. Organizations like Chris' and Heidi's have opened new doors. Each community though, must decide for itself if it wants to step through. Here's Chris again:

CHRIS: What we fundamentally believe and what data suggests is that in order for communities to be successful in, successfully transitioning, or doing economic diversification, they need to be the drivers of that change, they need to basically decide what do we want to become? And what are we good at? And how do we maximize our community's potential around our own market independence or our own assets. And so, if communities can articulate that, and they can realize that there is some possibilities, we can have a market presence. We can be good at something as a community other than one industry, other than resource extraction or power generation, for example -- that's the first step in recognizing what comes next.

HEIDI: We've seen the Biden administration respond to a number of recommendations that we made, including the creation of a task force. There's more examples like that from West Virginia to the Navajo Nation of communities, with the support of philanthropy, with the support of us being able to take, like in the case of coal field development, take a pretty successful, or a pretty good two year training program to take coal miners and train them for new jobs in different sectors and truncate that so you can - this is what our funding did, it helped create a six month program right so it helped get people trained and able to respond faster. Ideas are spreading like wildfire right so that's the stuff that I see. I see how fast people are sharing ideas of what works and how all over the country you know like some of the great models that we know work, we're now helping communities replicate those in different places. So that's happening on a faster timeline than I ever thought right now, you know you could ask me. Do we need to do more? Absolutely. And do we all need more resources to do more? Absolutely. But I think for the amount of time and the amount of resources that we've had, I think, you know, I am, I am optimistic. I am.

KRISTAN (narration): We talk about different policies, and we talk about economic development. But maybe it's simpler than that. Maybe transitions fail when nobody cares. When nobody listens. Maybe that's about to change.

CHRIS: We as a country don't have a great track record of supporting workers, families, communities through those transitions. So we think that we need to do better and we can try different approaches, and that by bringing workers together with environmental folks and really thinking about how we get from point A to point B and define a clean energy future for workers, that's a conversation worth having. We have a choice to ignore it, and just let the inevitable happen, and communities may just become ghost towns. Or we can do better. And we can put deliberate intent on fixing and figuring something out: economic diversification, supporting workers, supporting families and carving out a new path. And that's what transition is about.

(transition)

KRISTAN (narration): In our next episode of *Coal at Sunset*, we'll meet the man in charge of Colorado's newly-created government office designed specifically to support coal communities. Help is on the way for Craig. Will it be enough? Be sure to subscribe to this series wherever you get your podcasts.

Coal at Sunset was created by the Institute for Science & Policy, a project of the Denver Museum of Nature & Science, produced in partnership with House of Pod. I'm your host, Kristan Uhlenbrock. This show was written by Trent Knoss. Our producer is Juliette Luini. Our executive producers are Trent Knoss and me, Kristan Uhlenbrock. Our field recorders are Nicole Delaney and Juliette Luini. Our story editor Catherine Jaffee. Sound Design and mastering by Jason Paton. Graphic Design by Nicole Dondelinger. Web Design by Carlos Mosqueda. Special Thanks to George Sparks and the town of Craig, Colorado.

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