

Coal at Sunset: A Colorado Town in Transition
Episode 1: “The Decision”
Presented by the Institute for Science & Policy at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science along with House of Pod

KRISTAN UHLENBROCK (narration): In the town of Craig, Colorado, coal is a lot of things. A job. A duty. An identity. A way of life.

For decades, the nearby mines and coal-fired power plant have been a bedrock in this tight-knit community. They’ve provided well-paying jobs. They’ve supplied dependable energy for homes and businesses. And there’s a popular saying in Craig: Coal keeps the lights on. But something is about to change. At the Trapper coal mine seven miles south of town, Graham Roberts expertly guides his pickup down a rocky track.

(trucks rumbling)

GRAHAM ROBERTS (driving): The road’s just rough enough...[chuckle]

KRISTAN (narration): He’s been the environmental supervisor here for 16 years.

Walkie talkie: Hey Graham, we have a coal haul out of N pit right now, but we will probably be switching over to L pit.

GRAHAM (into the walkie talkie): Oh that will work, I think we will just go up on the high wall and look at that.

KRISTAN (narration): Tall and slim, with round glasses that make him look more like a scholar than a coal miner. He points to a pit that drops 150 feet into the earth.

GRAHAM: Trapper Mine is a surface mine, which means we go to retrieve the coal from the top down. So we do open a large hole, a pit, to access that coal. We call that material that we move overburden. Coal lays in seams and there can be multiple seams of coal as you go down.

KRISTAN (narration): He stops the truck on a high overlook and put on a hard hat.

GRAHAM: Yeah, we’ll get out here. We should have an active coal haul here to see. I think they’re hauling overburden down the pit, so please watch your step. Don’t get too far over this berm, it’s a long ways off.

(getting out of truck)

KRISTAN (narration): We’re looking down at massive yellow Tonka Trucks. They’ve got 11-foot-high tires. Eventually, they return with their flatbeds filled to the brim with coal. That coal is destined for the Craig power station, where it will be burned to create electricity.

GRAHAM: Trapper, again, is a bit of a unique site throughout the world really because our operation is on the side of a small mountain range so you have a pretty good slope to the topography we're working on. Trapper being on a slope, averaging about 14 percent, which is pretty steep in spots, that's far steeper than even your average mountain pass in the mountains of Colorado when you're going up the highway.

KRISTAN (narration): Soft-spoken with a wry sense of humor, it's clear Graham takes pride in his work. He comes alive when he talks about coal's legacy in Craig. Because he's not just describing his job. He's also talking about his family.

GRAHAM: I'm actually a third generation employee here at Trapper. My grandfather worked here about six months before he retired. Cecil Roberts was his name. He was actually a crane operator, and was here building the shop and putting the drag lines together. My dad started here in February of 1977, he was a serviceman and equipment operator and eventually a drag line operator here at Trapper for 30-some years and he retired in 2011. So, I've been around Trapper my entire life.

KRISTAN (narration): But now, the future as he once imagined it is uncertain. In January 2020, Graham learned from his employer that the plant and mines would officially "sunset" by the end of the decade. That's a fancy way of saying they'll be closed down for good. The same goes for most of the other coal resources around the state. Coal's time in Colorado is coming to an end.

GRAHAM: We'll stop here at Trapper in 2028. There's probably about two, maybe three years at the most we'll have a small workforce still working on the reclamation and cleanup of the site to make it basically permanently go away.

KRISTAN (narration): Knowing the end was in sight was hard for Graham, as it was for many in Craig. It felt like they were being set adrift. Graham struggled to explain the news to his family.

GRAHAM: I have two children, a boy and a girl. They are 11 and 13 right now. And they often ask, "oh, geez, Dad, you're not going to have a job in a few years?" Very much possible, kids. And that can be scary for children. As a child you don't think about where mom and dad are getting the money or how long their job is gonna last. They just know they're in their home and they have the things they have and so that can be scary for children to come to that realization that, geez, Dad's job could be finite, you know. What we have could be finite. What're we gonna do?

KRISTAN (narration): Graham didn't agree with the decision to close the mine. Mostly because, there's still lots more coal in the ground.

GRAHAM: It seems a bit forced. I think we could, we could do more here, and we're doing it. We do it in such a way that our impacts are minimal and we do a good job here. It'd be nice to see this operation continue on.

KRISTAN (narration): How would you feel if part of your identity was taken away?

GRAHAM: Yeah, to see this all go away, and the circumstances of it, it does sadden me a little bit because it's been a great operation. This is one of the best examples of a coal mine in the state and the country, both from a production standpoint, safety standpoint, our reclamation, and our community involvement. We've just been a really great employer here in the valley, good operation, and, yeah, to see it go away, it's going to be a real hole in this community and with these guys that have worked out here. I think you'd be hard pressed to find a lot of employers who can show you how many guys spent 25, 30 years at a place and retired continuously. Because it was a good place to work. It really was.

(transition)

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

This is a story about energy. You know, the energy that we use every day. The electricity that powers our refrigerators, our air conditioners, our smartphones. We use a lot of it. And it all has to come from somewhere. For a long time, that somewhere was likely a coal plant fed by coal mines.

Today, it's more complicated. I'm an scientist by training. I've worked in policy for over a decade, first in Washington D.C. and now here in Colorado. I like tackling big challenges and wicked problems, with costs and tradeoffs. And I can say without hesitation: Energy is one of the most complex issues facing our society today. That's because coal is very reliable. Historically, it was cheap, but it's also very dirty. Burning coal emits huge amounts of carbon dioxide, methane, and other greenhouse gases into the air. These emissions are driving global warming at rates unseen in human history.

The best available science indicates that we have to reduce greenhouse gases drastically to avoid the worst consequences of climate change. And we have to do it fast. We also have more choices about where we get our energy from. Wind. Solar. Natural gas. Hydropower. Nuclear. They're all cleaner than coal. And most of those are getting more affordable. Nationwide, the energy transition is already underway. Coal production is currently at its lowest level since the 1960s. But what will the end of coal mean for people like Graham Roberts? Thousands of livelihoods around Colorado are dependent on coal. Towns like Craig rely on those jobs, too. They don't want coal to go away. It's part of their cultural identity. And we still need that reliable energy from somewhere. When a mine or a plant shuts down, the consequences are very real.

The Institute for Science & Policy was created to have these kinds of conversations. We want science to have a respected place at the policy table. But science is only part of the equation. Human nature plays a role, too. We're emotional, irrational beings. And sometimes we see the world in fundamentally different ways. But progress comes when we bring people together to build both trust and empathy.

There's one more thing you should know about me: I grew up in rural Indiana. I know what it's like to live in a small community. Which is why I needed to find out what this transition would mean for a town of 9,000 people. I wanted to understand more about coal and its important legacy in this region. And I wanted to listen to people from Craig and beyond to hear their stories.

I said earlier that this is a story about energy. But, it's also a story about change. Change is hard. It's uncomfortable. Our energy transition won't have easy solutions. We need a way forward that protects people as well as the planet. Maybe Craig will have some answers, so let's start there.

(transition)

KRISTAN (narration): In Colorado's Wild West days, coal was king. Coal equated to prosperity. The state's vast reserves fueled rapid industrialization from the late 1800s through the 1920s. It powered the great railroad expansion, including a planned Denver to Salt Lake City line. The project was never completed and the tracks stopped in the town of Craig.

Fast forward a century and things have changed dramatically. Colorado has moved toward cleaner forms of energy. That's partly because we have copious amounts of wind and sun. But also because in 2004, Colorado became the first state in the nation to pass a renewable energy standard. That meant that utilities had to generate at least some of their electricity from non-fossil fuel sources. In the ensuing years, renewable development increased and coal fell out of favor.

In November 2018, Colorado voters elected Governor Jared Polis. He had campaigned on strong climate change mitigation. That following spring, lawmakers took up multiple bills designed to rein in fossil fuels and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

COLORADO PUBLIC RADIO NEWS CLIP: *Colorado has a new plan to limit its contributions to climate change. Lawmakers drafted ambitious rules to cut back on pollutants that cause warming. They also passed new regulations for oil and gas drilling in the state. The first big bill makes health and safety a priority for oil and gas regulation. The second big bill writes, in law, greenhouse gas reduction goals. The ultimate goal is to reduce greenhouse gas emissions 90% by 2050.*

KRISTAN (narration): That second bill, known as House Bill 1261 or the Colorado Climate Action Plan, was ultimately signed into law. And those new emission targets meant big changes. Electrical utilities needed to take a hard look at where they could cut the most carbon dioxide the fastest. There was one obvious answer. Coal, which emits twice as much CO₂ as natural gas. Suddenly, a coal hub like Craig had very real reasons to worry.

(driving)

Four hours northwest of Denver and forty minutes west of Steamboat Springs, the town is nestled in the wide, sloping Yampa River Valley. Arriving from the east, you'll pass motels welcoming hunters to the "Elk Hunting Capital of the World." Continuing on, you pass a historic Main Street dotted with vintage storefronts. You'll see century-old houses surrounded by old growth trees. Ranch supply stores. Western apparel shops. A liquor store with a marquee that reads: "We Support Coal."

And then, high on the ridge to the south: You can't miss the coal-fired power station. Its three massive stacks loom on the horizon. The Craig station is operated by Tri-State Generation and Transmission Association. Tri-State is a not-for-profit member-owned electric cooperative that serves 45 local power districts across Colorado, New Mexico, Wyoming and Nebraska. Which, yes, is four states, not three. Tri-State also owns the nearby Colowyo mine and partially owns the Trapper Mine.

After the climate action bill passed, Tri-State had a choice to make. Hundreds of jobs and livelihoods were at stake if they closed the plant and the mines. That difficult decision fell squarely on one man.

DUANE HIGHLEY: I'm Duane Highley. I serve as the CEO for Tri-State Generation and Transmission Association. I came to Tri-state on April Fool's Day of 2019, which I think is the perfect day to start a new job.

KRISTAN (narration): Duane is definitely not what you'd expect from a powerful utility leader. He's way too laid back. Way too funny. Way too self-deprecating. He cares a lot about people. And his humility reflects his upbringing.

DUANE: I grew up all over the place, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, Oklahoma. My dad was a retail store opening manager at the time when people were opening lots of stores and so we moved a lot. I went to a different school every year and we had been to 10 different schools by the time I got to the 10th grade. So, I learned to move and adapt. I think my grandfather was a great inspiration for electrical engineering, because he was a self-taught electrical engineering geek. He built the first television in his neighborhood and all the neighbors would come watch the boxing matches and all that business. He was well inspiring to me.

KRISTAN (narration): Another thing that's immediately clear about Duane: he loves electricity. Even if he was skeptical at first.

DUANE: As I was getting through with my electrical engineering degree and starting to think about where I would work, I took an internship with an electric co-op, thinking that it was just a boring job. Really. I mean, electricity, come on, it was invented in the 1880s or something. How could there be anything new happening in that space? So it was literally just a summer job with the thought being this was a way to get some money, but surely I was going to go work in microprocessors or radar systems or something much more interesting when I graduated. And at the time I came out of school, my wife and I actually had a conversation

about this - if it turns out to be boring, we'll bail within a year, and then we'll get into something more exciting.

KRISTAN (narration): But the industry won him over. He was drawn to the mission of electrical co-ops, which are member-owned and deliver power primarily to rural areas.

DUANE: I did go to work for the electric cooperatives and was never bored a day, had lots of great challenges, and learned that there's a lot of innovation going on in cooperatives, and a lot of flexibility because the members own the system. And that direct feedback from the people that own the co-op gives you license to do things that help people immediately. And I just found that to be really motivating, that we had a purpose and the purpose was -- I remember my boss sitting me down the first day of the job and said if you can figure out a way to save \$1, you just saved some poor person at the end of the line \$1 on their electric bill, and that might make a difference for them if they're struggling to pay their rent or whatever. So I always took that as a real motivation that the difference we made wasn't so a shareholder could make more money. The difference we made was so that someone, usually poor people because that's generally who co-ops serve, we serve 90-something percent of the persistent poverty counties in the country. So it's an opportunity to make a difference for people in their lives, to help them have reliable power and more affordable lifestyle.

KRISTAN (narration): By early 2019, Duane had built a successful career in the utility space, rising all the way to the executive level. And then, a new opportunity presented itself.

DUANE: So, I had been serving as the CEO for the Arkansas electric cooperative network for the previous eight years. And maybe I shouldn't tell this story, I'll tell it anyway. My wife and I were sitting on our patio in Arkansas, talking one evening having a glass of wine. And she looked at me and said, "Duane, you're bored." I argued with her, "I said, no I'm not." She said, "yeah you are." "No, I still love what I'm doing, it's interesting and entertaining and" -- for me, again, work is fulfillment of purpose, so it's not really work, it's what you do to make life better for people. And so anyway, she challenged me, and about that time, I heard the CEO of Tri-State was considering retirement. So, I made a call to the recruiter because I knew the recruiter from my former career and just said, do you think they're looking for somebody like me? And that started the conversation and what I learned is what I already knew: there are profound challenges in the West and that Tri-State sits, what I call the tip of the spear, on the energy transition. So, I came flying towards the challenge [laughs].

KRISTAN (narration): He moved to Colorado and began his new role that spring. At the same time, the climate action bill was nearing passage.

DUANE: And within a couple of weeks we saw the Colorado General Assembly pass the carbon reduction act. Al hadn't even met with all the employees of Tri-State yet. And I was scheduled to make my first visit to Craig, Colorado where we have a very large coal facility, and a mine, over 400 employees that work in either mining or burning coal. And this was

gonna be my first introduction to them. And the night before I went there, this bill passed. And so, it was clear that in order to get an 80% carbon reduction in Colorado, relative to 2005 levels by the year 2030, that that plant and mine were going to close. There was just no way around it. And I was going to meet with the employees for the very first time and my first thing I was going to tell them was, guess what, your jobs are going away.

KRISTAN (narration): The reality of the situation was gutting for Duane. He had to deliver the bad news to his employees.

DUANE: They're like, "Duane, what's going to happen here?" And I'm like, "Honestly, I just have to be honest. We will not be able to operate this plant after 2030."

KRISTAN (narration): Tri-State announced the decision publicly in January 2020.

KDVR TV CLIP: *Tonight, this city which is about four hours from Denver, is bracing for change after Tri-State, which operates mines in the city, announced they are moving up the timeline to close them down.*

DUANE: At this point, what we've announced is the first of three units will retire, will close in 2025, followed by 2028 and 2029 for the other two units. So, people have time to plan and that's a good thing.

KRISTAN (narration): Duane vowed to do right by the workers.

DUANE: I think the employees really appreciated an honest answer. And we were going to work together to try and figure out how we can make that transition one that was as good as possible for the employees, and for the community and the community is very dependent on those jobs. You think about having 400 really high paying jobs that are great benefits...everybody would want to work for the mine or the plant. You know, that's, that's the place you want to aspire to be. And then to say it's closing, what's that mean for the community?

(transition)

KRISTAN (narration): In the months that followed, Craig had to reckon with the idea of a post-coal future. And that path is unclear. Many spoke of fear and uncertainty. Others remained in denial. "Coal can't go away," they said. They believed Tri-State would change its mind. They heard whispers that the plant would stay open. When it comes right down to it, they said, Colorado needs coal. Needs *them*. We wanted to hear from the community about Tri-State's decision. So we started listening.

MULTIPLE VOICES: Honestly, it's kind of terrifying that someone can just legislate so many people out of work. // Anger and disbelief. // I don't know that people fully understand the devastation that's going to come when the mines and the plant close. // But it's a scary thing, from the beginning, I mean, every business in Craig will be affected in some way or another.

JENNIFER HOLLOWAY: It was quite a shock to the community. Although, if you look at when they put the power plant in, it's already past its life that they told us. So we've been kind of living in this perpetual state of denial that it's just gonna always still be there.

KRISTAN (narration): That last voice is Jennifer Holloway, Executive Director of the Craig Chamber of Commerce. Her goal is to help businesses and the community navigate this transition.

JENNIFER: You go down into a coal mine every night, because you're providing something for the rest of the country. You are giving the rest of the country electricity to build their businesses in their communities, and you're feeding your family well, and you have pride in that. Because your family lives in a community that respects that, that makes that something that you, you strive to do. We are raised to feel good about going to the coal and power plants to provide electricity for the rest of the country. And so that's so much part of our identity, that how can we take those basic things like, we're hard working, we love our families, we'll do anything for our neighbors, how do we take that and transfer it to a different opportunity.

KRISTAN (narration): Coal jobs pay very well, usually close to \$100,00 a year. But Craig lacks other major industries and workers may not be able to find other high-paying jobs easily.

JENNIFER: We're in bad shape. When the, coal mine and the power plant closes we're going to be losing about 60% of our county tax base. How do we pay for our schools and our roads with 60% less money when we're already short, when we already need to infrastructure improvement? We need to pay our teachers more to keep up, you know all of the same problems that school districts have except for we're gonna lose 60% of our tax base.

KRISTAN (narration): That could lead to devastating ripple effects for the local economy.

JENNIFER: It's hard to feel like you have a voice in a small community anyways because we're 10,000 people compared to several million in a big city, so even if all of us yell at the top of our lungs, are we heard?

(transition)

KRISTAN (narration): And then, there's Kirstie McPherson. She's a local entrepreneur and business owner who was born and raised in Craig. And she's not about to let the end of coal spell the end for her hometown.

KIRSTIE MCPHERSON: Welcome to Craig, America. I am your host, Kirstie McPherson.

KRISTAN (narration): On a hot, hazy summer afternoon, we rode along with her as she headed to work in the town center. Like an expert tour guide, she points out highlights from Craig's history along the way.

KIRSTIE: I mean we have a very defined, very pretty downtown. This was the original church that at the center of Craig's a lot of people get married there that's like, I mean this big, beautiful white church they recently redid and then this is where all the Victorian homes, that's kind of the money street was if you were back here in the day. Big beautiful homes then it kind of goes through, and then you -- you can see how old parts of town are based off of what the trees look like, I mean the giant cottonwoods and that's how you know you're in the old, old part of town.

KRISTAN (narration): At not even 30 years old, Kirstie is an entrepreneurial dynamo. She already owns multiple downtown businesses and is planning for more. We park outside of a renovated storefront on Yampa Avenue, the town's main drag.

KIRSTIE: This is 518 Wine Bar and The Find. And we've had this building since June of 2019. But we opened the wine bar September 27 of 2019, and then joke's on us. 2020 hit. But because we live in a town like Craig, it really, I mean, we were able to keep it through but for our very first year of our business, it was a pretty rough go. But it's a cute little building. We're still missing a sign, but we'll figure that out eventually.

KRISTAN (narration): She leads us through The Find, her mercantile shop. It's lined with cool vintage furniture and upscale home goods.

KIRSTIE: So you walk through a very cute and quaint boutique store that we've had for five years.

KRISTAN (narration): Way at the back, another doorway leads into the stylish 518 Wine Bar. It looks like a speakeasy from a different era.

KIRSTIE: And once we get back here you'll see very dark walls, very plush seating, you have gold couches, a green bar. We have all of the wine racks up, and so it feels like a space right out of the 1920s. Everybody who walks in here, definitely they either show on their face or flat out say this is not - like, are we even in Craig still? And we have a lot of people that come up from Steamboat that actually say that they wish that they had something this cool in Steamboat as well. So it's, it's pretty cool to be able to create something that people are coming in and in wishing that they had this in their own community.

KRISTAN (narration): Kirstie is part of Craig's up-and-coming generation, bringing new ideas and new creative energy to town. That wasn't originally part of her life plan.

KIRSTIE: So I was born and raised in Craig and I left right after high school as everybody does, and wasn't ever going to come back. I was going to go and be an engineer, and do all the various different things that I set out to do in the first place. I was going to be a petroleum engineer, and I made it a whole one - one year, I think. So I switched to business, and I got into the tech startup world which was a wild ride. When you're doing the startup, you also don't have any money. I decided that the best move would be to come back home, which was pretty devastating for me in a lot of ways and I made this pact with myself that I was only going to be home for three years. Well, it's been almost five. I'm likely going to get buried here.

KRISTAN (narration): She knows how important coal has been to Craig. She also knew that one day, it might come to an end.

KIRSTIE: My dad started working at Colowyo pretty much when the mine started. And so, that was a topic of conversation every night at the dinner table. My family has been talking about the potential of the mines closing since I was little. Since, I mean, the very first conversations I remember are some of those conversations so it's never been one of those cases where everybody thought this was going to be what we were forever. And I remember being in high school and listening to conversations around like when Tri-State was originally talking about when they're going to begin the decommissioning process. And so we've had a gigantic amount of time to be able to prepare for all of this and even after they officially made the announcement, we still have way more time than a lot of places were, like, ever afforded to. Like, you look at Kentucky, they all went into work on a Wednesday and were sent home by 10am. We at least have nine years to be able to really start thinking about how we're going to transition and move on. But would I say it was a shock? No.

KRISTAN (narration): Craig has the gift of time that many other coal towns didn't. But it'll still be painful.

KIRSTIE: What we do know from transitioning economies is people will do one of three things: they will stay here and they'll take a smaller job because their family's here or they have something, but it's not going to be the exact job that they've already had and it's likely a pay cut. Second is that they're going to move to find another job that is exactly like what they've already had, or the third is that they're going to create businesses.

KRISTAN (narration): Kirstie can envision a new future for Craig. A hopeful future, with a revitalized Main Street and a thriving post-coal economy. A brand new identity. She wants to be part of that transformation. But it's going to be hard work and there's no guarantee of success.

KIRSTIE: We were very fortunate to have decades doing what we did. But nothing lasts forever.

KRISTAN (narration): Craig has less than ten years until coal sunsets for good. There are no easy answers for what comes next. But change is coming no matter what.

(transition)

KRISTAN (narration): In our next episode of Coal at Sunset, we'll go inside the Craig power station to take a closer look at the science and economics of coal. 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 is 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.

To hear bonus clips and find additional resources, visit coalatsunset.org.