

**Coal at Sunset: A Colorado Town in Transition**  
**Episode 7: “The Center of the Universe”**  
**Presented by the Institute for Science & Policy at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science along with House of Pod**

**KRISTAN UHLENBROCK:** Let’s go back. Like, way back. Tens of millions of years ago. There was rock, and there was water. Two elemental forces shaping northwestern Colorado and the Yampa River Valley, even today. This entire region sits on the Colorado Plateau. And like a bubble on the Earth’s surface, it’s slowly rising, even now. Over the course of millennia, the Yampa River cuts through this rising rock like a hot knife. It forms deep canyons and dramatic formations. It’s created fertile soil for plants and wildlife.

Dinosaurs roamed here. Then, the first native and indigenous people, the Ute and the Eastern Shoshone, arrived. Ute tradition holds that Sinauf, a half man, half wolf god kept the world in balance. As he walked, he molded humans out of sticks and scattered them on the landscape. He placed his creations across what is today Utah and Western Colorado, telling them to go forth and roam the beautiful mountains. They did so for thousands of years before white homesteaders forcibly displaced them in the pursuit of land, furs, and gold.

Today, the Yampa is one the last wild rivers in the American West, without a large dam. Its water is a lifeline for this region. And no one appreciates the Yampa’s transformative power more than Tom Kleinschnitz.

**TOM KLEINSCHNITZ:** 50 years ago, my life changed. I found the Yampa River, and that was it, that’s all there was to it.

**KRISTAN (narration):** It’s almost strange meeting Tom on land, given how much he seems at home on the water. His deeply weathered features have soaked up decades worth of sun and spray. The creases around his eyes reflect a lifetime of studying the river’s every detail. A natural storyteller, he lights up as he remembers the moment his own journey began in June of 1971.

**TOM:** I saved all through the winter to go on a raft trip when I was a kid. And I grew up in the Denver area and jumped on a school bus in Arvada, Colorado, and made my way across the state of Colorado in the school bus you know, the trip was arduous.

**KRISTAN (narration):** The bus was old, and in its lowest gear, it strained over the mountain passes as he headed west.

**TOM:** We left at eight o’clock in the evening and arrived about seven o’clock the next morning. I remember we got to Craig in the early morning hours and it was really kind of dusky and that kind of thing. And just greeting on the east side of town was “Welcome to Craig” and it had four pillars of natural gas blowing these flames up into the air. It was so different to me than what I experienced as a kid growing up in Denver.

**KRISTAN (narration):** Finally, Tom arrived in town. His brother was with him. They walked down to the river they’d heard so much about.

**TOM:** I reached in and clearly at that time, the water's got to be freezing cold. But it felt hot. I don't know what it was, but it felt hot, and I pulled back and my brother gave me a hard time, "What are you doing down there?" I said, "I'm seeing what we're in for." He said, "Ah," you know, you know like brothers do, give you a hard time. 'Bout two minutes later I saw him down on his knees checking out, putting his arm in the water trying to figure out what we're getting ourselves into but that connection at that moment, I can tell you, I remember to this day, and it's kind of nice to know what you're going to do for the rest of your life. It's dedicated to that creek and figuring out what river running is all about so I'm connected to this, this piece of water like no one.

**KRISTAN (narration):** Tom's moment of discovery sparked a love that never faded. For years afterward, he made overnight drives from Denver to Craig in a '65 Buick Skylark. He joined a local rafting outfitter and never looked back.

**TOM:** So I started as a scrubber kid that washed all the pots and did everything to make my way so I get to go on river trips. I worked for the company for quite a number of years, and then, with the help of my grandfather and, and some pointed help from the former owner, I purchased Adventure Bound River Expeditions. I ran it, ran it for 33 years.

**KRISTAN (narration):** Today, he's the Director of Tourism for Moffat County, which includes Craig.

**TOM:** On my business card, I put "Moffat County advocate," and I think that's the number one goal of what I am. I'm a person that promotes responsible tourism to my community. But second, I want to make sure that the people that come here know how precious and wonderful this place is.

**KRISTAN (narration):** There's one particular section of the river that still takes his breath away.

**TOM:** Steamboat Rock is right there at the confluence of the Yampa and Green Rivers. That is a, a 1,500 foot straight wall of sandstone, that is a sliver that the mighty Yampa River could not conquer and it has to go around it in a giant horseshoe.

**KRISTAN (narration):** There's something transcendent about being at that spot.

**TOM:** Many people say that that is the center of the universe and I tell you, as the Director of Tourism for Moffat County having the center of universe right in your county is a wonderful thing to promote.

**KRISTAN (narration):** Tom knows that transition is coming. He knows that coal is going away. In ten years, Craig might look very different. But Tom thinks on even longer timescales.

**TOM:** We have to make long term decisions for our community, in our region. We have to think generations down the line. What is this place gonna look like in 100 years. What is this place going to look like in 500 years. What are we going to leave the people that are on this planet 1,000 years from now, and how will it look. I think we all need to, you know, there - there's some dramatic things happening with a coal industry that wasn't here 50 years ago, and now it's going to be gone again. In geologic time, 50 years is a whisper. It is something that is nothing. We

need to be thinking in terms of what do we want our community look like for our kids or grandkids, and that's what we have to do, and there's such a sense of urgency for me is because I'm toward the end of my career, and I'd like to accomplish a lot of this in a short period of time. But I've realized right now what I need to do is plant seeds with the next generations to say how important this is and what we have needs to be passed on.

*(transition)*

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

Last episode, we heard from Craig's next generation. We looked at the role of the nearby community college in retraining coal workers and attracting new students to programs like aviation and paleontology. We looked at the role of the local art community. Everywhere we went, we found new emerging opportunities. For one local entrepreneur, that opportunity is tied directly to the Yampa River. We visited Josh Veenstra at Good Vibes River Gear, his outdoor gear shop on the main drag in downtown Craig.

**JOSH VEENSTRA:** We manufacture some of the best river mesh products on the planet.

**KRISTAN (narration):** Today, Josh is working through a stack of orders for his custom rafting gear bags.

*(sewing & machinery)*

**JOSH:** I'm sitting in front of an industrial sewing machine, and I'm making, I make custom drop bags for people and so they come and they order their colors and then their webbing, and right now I'm getting ready to install the final band, or there's two bands that go on the inside around the top edge.

**KRISTAN (narration):** Josh's story could be a model for other entrepreneurs as Craig shifts away from coal production.

**JOSH:** I was born and raised in Craig. My grandpa, Bob Richardson, he was one of the first scraper operators to start pulling land off of Trapper Mine. He worked there for like 30, 35 years. My dad worked out of Trapper for 25 years, I worked out at the plant for about five years. And I was about the only dude that would go out and help the insulator sew these custom insulation pads that go around high pressure steam valves. So you had to go make your steam valve, cut out this cut out material and then basically build it in the shop sew it on a sewing machine and then go, tie it on to these valves. And I was just like, "Man, I want to do this for a living"

**KRISTAN (narration):** When a promotion came up at the plant, Josh was passed over for someone with more seniority. He felt held back. Then, just like Tom, he found inspiration on the Yampa.

**JOSH:** I did a big rafting trip and in the middle of it I was like, I'm just going to start my own company when I go home, and quit on my job and started sewing river gear, and it just took that transition that skill that I learned out at the power plant that they told me that this was as good

as life was going to ever get for me. And I was like, I wouldn't take that for, as my answer, I was like no I'm going to be controlling my own destiny and so on that trip I was like, let's do it and my other buddy who works for a power plant. He watched me sew a couple buckles on he's like, you should go ask for your job back. And it was kind of like man, maybe I should but I just, I had this dream and I wasn't gonna slow down and I just kept sewing and sewing and sewing and now I can turn out, you know, five or six of these bags a day, and, which can't even keep up with the demand on where we're at with our company.

**KRISTAN (narration):** A successful transition for Craig might hinge on more people taking a chance like Josh did.

**JOSH:** I started in my garage, about four years, five years ago, and worked out of there and then I just kind of grew and was in a little shop up the road a bit and then just kind of expanded and the downtown area, the lady that ran the business here for so long was moving and I was like, this is a perfect opportunity for us to move and, I'm so glad we did my. My wife has who made us move, I was like I don't want to do it so much work and yeah and so she made this move, and then within, I think it was two months later there was like nothing in here, Governor Polis came to visit. And so I had to do a mad push to build my tables and put trim up and it turned out to be really good and from that momentum, from that season has just continued for about two years now and we're in our best year ever and I don't see it slowing down till I want to slow down and that's not going to happen.

**KRISTAN (narration):** With the coal plant now scheduled to close, he says he's hearing more stories like his own.

**JOSH:** You kind of see the welders out there. I talked to a couple of them, I'm like, so what are you gonna do when they close up are you gonna get moved down to Texas or wherever that company is needs him to move? And he's like, "Nope, I'm gonna start welding custom handrails up in Steamboat." We've been here for a while and it is so cool to see one industry brought us here, but another industry is going to keep us here. It's been a dream come true. I'll tell you that much. American dream right here.

*(transition)*

**KRISTAN (narration):** It's easy to fall in love with the Yampa. It's a beautiful part of the natural landscape. It's a potential economic powerhouse for a town that needs one. But the river is also under threat. 2021 was one of Craig's warmest and driest summers of the last 30 years. Water levels dropped so low in some sections that even kayaks couldn't float down it. For Tom, that's a flashing red warning sign. One hot day in mid-July, we spoke with him at Yampa River State Park, just east of Craig.

*(walking)*

**TOM:** My uniform is cowboy boots every business day.

**KRISTAN (narration):** He walked us down to the banks and shook his head at what he saw.

*(birds chirping, water splashing)*

**TOM:** Looking at the river, right now we're in drought conditions, and these are years that happened just once and every 20 years or ,who knows, it's -- this should not be this low at this time. So we're looking at whatever's happened to our climate, whatever has happened to water use, whatever's happening out there. The river can be in jeopardy, particularly at this time. And that puts fish in jeopardy and puts a lot of other things in jeopardy, including our wonderful agriculture industry here.

**KRISTAN (narration):** Tom has seen this river nearly every day for decades. And his observations match the latest state climatological data. Here's Colorado Public Radio.

**CPR NEWS CLIP:** *Colorado's Western Slope is considered a climate hot spot where temperatures are increasing faster than the global average. This warming has contributed to more than 20 years of dryness, which scientists are calling a megadrought.*

**TOM:** We have a lot of people in our community that really don't believe climate change is a reality. In my opinion, climate change is here. It's in evidence with my own personal life experience with being somebody that I consider as an outdoorsman and I've watched what the water has done, what the temperatures are like over my lifetime. I've hunted in this community for many, many decades. The falls are without question much warmer and drier than they were when I was a younger person. There is no way that there hasn't been some kind of average change that has occurred here. There is no way that people should be looking at this as something that isn't happening.

**KRISTAN (narration):** As I listened to Tom, I couldn't help but think about how climate change is such a divisive topic here on the Western Slope. But the river is not. We see the realities right here in front of us. Farmers know. Ranchers know. Outdoor enthusiasts know. Craig needs the river more than ever. But the Yampa's flow has dropped by 25% over the past century. What happens if it keeps dropping? What would it mean to protect it with the same vigor that many defend coal? Could it be a new identity? A new way of life?

As he so often does, Tom reminisces about the past. Sometimes, he finds helpful lessons there.

**TOM:** I did business in, in Grand County Utah, Moab, Utah, as a young businessman. When I came to that town, and after purchasing Adventure Bound River Expeditions in 1983, I went to a BLM meeting there, and during lunch, I walked down the street and three quarters of every residence was for sale or foreclosed on, bank foreclosure. It was a place that was just in the, in the doldrums of a bad place. It was big, the economy was, it was going to heck because the mills had just shut down. And it was tough. I have a park service friend that bought a house down in Moab, Utah for \$17,000. It was time for, well I guess the opportunity, but, but what happened after that was, we'll take whatever we can get and let's just build this place out. I'm not sure that we want to be like Moab, Utah. We have a canvas here in Moffat County that we can think about our future. What is the best way to have people travel through our community? What's the best places for them to play? What are places that we should not have open for people to play? We have a lot of wilderness areas here, we have a lot of different land management agencies that manage the land differently. We need to embrace them, work with them and get it right, because this is the time to do it.

**KRISTAN (narration):** There's more in Craig than many even realize. As Tom alluded to, outdoor recreation doesn't have to stop at the water's edge. Hiking, biking, off-roading...he can picture that new future very clearly. But some in town still can't see past the coal plant.

**TOM:** The coal mines, I think some people - I was at a public meeting a few weeks ago, one of the constituents stepped up and said, "See those power plants out there south of town, they're not going anywhere. People are crazy. This is not going to change. People need that electricity and that is not going away." That kind of denial will be there until I guess they close, there will be people in our community that will not accept the change that's coming. There are people that have already understand it's coming, are making adjustments to their business plans and doing other things that are important, flexible things that need to happen. And there are some that will see it when it happens.

**KRISTAN (narration):** As we spoke, I sensed Tom choosing his words delicately. Those are his friends. His neighbors. And he feels for their loss. But he knows it's time to move on. It's possible to grieve for something even while still embracing the new possibilities it creates.

**TOM:** The coal plant provided electricity to our state, in our region for quite a number of years, and helped develop our state. It was a critical element for a while, how we produce electricity is evolving, and the consequences of that are being made evident in, in coal production. We produced the cleanest electricity with coal that we have in the time on Earth. There is no way that you can't say what's happening up at tri state right now isn't the cleanest coal production ever. It's just not clean enough. There are alternatives that will, will change things, but the market is what's really changing things. And so there's a tragedy in that, there's an absolute tragedy in that. The other side of it is, we need to find other ways to make a living, and, and by gosh I hope we do, and I hope our families in Craig, find those adjustments and stay right here and help make our, our community viable.

**KRISTAN (narration):** Along the riverbank, the mid-morning heat is starting to build. We start to turn back toward the ranger station. With his gaze somewhere far away, he returned to his story about Moab.

**TOM:** But I went back to that story in Moab, Utah. My friend that bought a house for \$17,000, because it was up for auction. It was a foreclosure and he bought a beautiful home for \$17,000. I think of the family that lost that home.

We don't want that to happen here. We have to think about the transition. We have to think about not driving away the people that have lived here forever, and having newcomers come in and like vultures sweep down on what we have on the carcass of what's here. We need to think about the transition.

**KRISTAN (narration):** Tom looks out at the Yampa again.

**TOM:** Beautiful place. There's something about being next to the river it just does big stuff for you.

*(transition)*

**KRISTAN (narration):** In our final episode of *Coal at Sunset*, we'll take one last look at Craig. How will it change by the end of the decade? How will this story impact the rest of Colorado? And what do the residents really want for their future? 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.

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