Charlie Steen was face of 1950s uranium boom

n March of 1952, things looked bleak for Charlie Steen's dream of finding a rich uranium deposit in the Utah desert.

He was essentially broke. He and his family were living in a tarpaper shack in Cisco, Utah, and his wife, M.L., was suffering from pneumonia.

Steen owned 12 mining claims in Utah, in the Big

Indian District Moab. And he'd spent the better part



of two years begging money for grubstakes, purchasing a small truck-mounted drilling rig to search for uranium deposits.

He searched deeper and in different geologic formations than virtually everyone else whether government geologist or independent prospector. And he was ridiculed for his theories on where uranium could be found.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the Four Corners region was crawling with independent prospectors, Geiger counters in hand, searching for uranium

Beginning in 1948, the recently formed Atomic Energy Commission guaranteed uranium prices and offered other incentives to prospectors as it sought a viable source of domestic uranium for nuclear weapons.

The prospectors sought uranium near the surface, primarily in the Morrison geologic

Steen was convinced that large deposits of uranium lay deeper, at the bottom of anticlines in the Chinle formation.

After two years of hauling M.L. and their four sons around southeastern Utah. often living off little more than rabbit or venison, Steen had temporarily tried something different. The family had moved to Tucson, Arizona, and Steen, a college-educated geologist from Texas, earned a living as a carpenter.

But, as spring approached in 1952, M.L. encouraged Charlie to give uranium one more shot. They sold their trailer in Arizona and headed back to Utah, camping along the way. It was near Mexican Hat, Utah, that M.L. caught a cold, which turned into pneumonia, and led to her hospitalization in Grand Junction.

Charlie spent almost all his remaining funds on her medical bills and wondered how he



ANDREW K. STEEN/Creative Commons

Charlie Steen and his Jeep are shown on the day after his discovery of uranium at his Mi Vida claim near Moab, Utah.

would continue.

A friend named Bill McCormick helped him acquire another rig that could drill deeper than Steen's small rig. He also provided money to bulldoze a road to his claims.

Steen's mother, Rosalie Shumaker, sold her possessions in Houston and moved to Cisco to help care for the family and provide financial support.

The family struggled on while Charlie continued to drill, hauling up core samples, looking for the elusive vellow carnotite that signaled uranium. Instead, all he found was dark gray material.

One day in early July, Steen stopped his Jeep at the only gas station at Cisco before heading to Grand Junction. Owner Buddy Cowger was also a uranium prospector, and he happened to have a Geiger counter.

On a whim, Steen told Buddy to aim the Geiger counter at the dark gray core samples in his Jeep.

Buddy did so, and the device chattered like it had found the core of an atom bomb.

Surprised, Steen realized he had recovered a different type

of uranium material — ura $ninite, or\ pitchblende --\ which$ had not previously been found in the Four Corners.

Additionally, he had proved that his theory on where to find uranium was correct.

The claim where the material was found he had named Mi Vida, Spanish for My Life.

Over the next 30 years, more than \$500 million worth of uranium ore was mined from the Big Indian district by people following Steen's lead.

The Steens went from barely surviving to being fabulously rich. Charlie rejected offers to buy his claims for \$5 million. In a few years, he earned much more than that.

In October of 1952, Steen formed the Utex Exploration Co. with several people he had once worked for in Texas. The company raised funds to mine Mi Vida and nearby claims.

The following year, he and McCormick bought neighboring claims and created a separate company, Standard Uranium Co., with assistance from several New York finan-

Steen also formed a drilling

company with his brother-inlaw. Another company was created to build a uranium mill in Moab, the first mill in the region constructed without government financial support.

Charlie, an avid pilot, began to fly around the West, often on little more than a whim — to Salt Lake City, Grand Junction and elsewhere.

He and M.L. built a spectacular home on top of a hill overlooking Moab, which they also called Mi Vida.

They held lavish parties at the house, which attracted state and local politicos. Even movie stars, such as Henry Fonda, occasionally stopped by when they were filming a picture nearby.

Charlie dipped his toe in politics, serving a term as a Utah state senator from 1959 to 1969.

But problems developed. There were disputes with Steen's original partners in Utex, and it cost Steen several million dollars to buy them

And despite his personal reluctance, the Moab mill was eventually sold to Atlas Minerals Corp.

By 1962, the Steens had sold their interest in the Mi Vida mine and other claims, as well as the mill. They left Moab and moved to Reno, Nevada.

A seven-year battle with the IRS, ending in 1975, left them broke once more. The Steens lost their Reno mansion and most other property.

The post-war uranium boom began to decline in 1960. The Atomic Energy Commission found it had more than enough uranium on hand.

By the 1970s, there was a developing uranium market for nuclear electric plants, which would ebb and flow over the next 40 years.

Charlie Steen died in 2006. The Steens' house in Moab is now home to the Sunset Grill restaurant.

The mill has been closed, and its tailings are being moved. Recreation long ago replaced uranium as the economic driv-

Information for this column came from the Museum of Moab's Canyon Legacy magazine, Winter 2016 edition, which includes articles by his son, Mark Steen, and others. Also, from "Charlie Steen's Mi Vida," by Maxine Newell. And the National Mining Hall of Fame's page on Charlie Steen, mininghalloffame.org/inductee/steen.

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THIS WEEK IN THE LEGISLATURE

DENVER - The Joint Budget Committee has completed its work on the budget bill for the 2017-18 fiscal year, which begins July 1. That begins a two-week journey through the rest of the Colorado Legislature that starts in the GOP-controlled Senate, where senators them in the performance of a case. are hoping to start debating it on the floor by Tuesday, though Wednesday is

more likely. During that time, they will try to amend it to their individual liking, but ultimately all of that will be undone when it gets sent to the Democraticcontrolled House by week's end.

Today: The House Finance Committee is to take on HB1242. the bill that would send to the voters a proposed sales tax hike to pay for transportation projects.

Tuesday: The House Health. Insurance & Environment Committee is to hear HB1080, a measure designed to protect in-state medical suppliers of durable medical equipment from out-ofstate suppliers of such products.

Wednesday: The House Education Committee is to debate HB1258 that would rename the Delta-Montrose Technical College to Technical College of the Rockies.

Thursday: The House Judiciary Committee is to hear SB115 that would

expand the state's exemption on who is allowed to have sexually exploitative material beyond peace officers in the

performance of an investigation. The bill adds prosecutors, defense attorneys and others who work with

Friday: This day is reserved for floor debate on bills that reach that stage in the House and Senate.

■ **Next week:** By now, the Senate should be done with the budget. From here, it will head to the House, which will try to put its own stamp on the so-called Long Bill, called that because of its

Ultimately, those changes, too, will be stripped out by the Senate at week's end, sending the bill to a conference committee of the same six legislators who drafted the spending plan to start with, the Joint Budget Committee.

Scheduled committee hearings are subject to change.

All floor action and committees can be watched or heard on the Legislature's website, leg.colorado.gov.

Check that website to see which measures are available for remote testimony, and how to register to speak.

Charles Ashby

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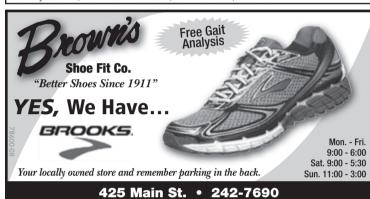
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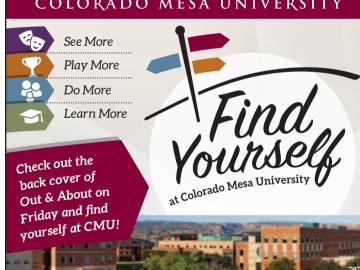


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barred from United flight Teens wearing leggings

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DENVER — Two teenage girls were barred by a gate agent from boarding a United Airlines flight from Denver to Minneapolis on Sunday because they were wearing leggings, according to an airline spokesman.

The girls, were not allowed onto the morning flight because they were traveling under an employee travel pass that includes a dress code.

The dress code bars pass travelers from wearing spandex or Lycra pants such as leggings. The teens agreed to change their

clothing and take a later flight, but the airline's actions sparked a quick Twitter backlash. Activist Shannon Watts of

Denver tweeted that she witnessed Sunday's events and questioned United's decision to police women's clothing.

Watts said the girl's father

was allowed to board while wearing shorts and called the airline's policy sexist.

Regularly ticketed passengers are not subject to the same dress code and can wear leggings. But the airline was standing by its policy for pass travelers, the spokesman said.

Fire at vacant restaurant

The Grand Junction Fire Department re-

sponded to a fire about 7:30 p.m. Saturday at

Xian Wei, 1530 North Ave. (the old Far East

Employees at a nearby business reported

According to the Fire Department, the

blaze was quickly extinguished and crews

found the building unoccupied. The cause

The Grand Junction Police Depart-

ment and the Mesa County Sheriff's

Office did not release crime reports on

of the fire is still under investigation.

the fire, which burned the northwest cor-

BLOTTER COMPILED BY SENTINEL STAFF

Strangulation alleged

Keenan Trout Bradshaw, 22, of Dinosaur, was arrested on a warrant for domestic violence and second-degree assault by strangulation after he allegedly beat up and strangled his ex-girlfriend at a hotel.

According to the warrant for Bradshaw's arrest, several tenants at the WoodSpring Suites, 659 Market St., had reported noises of a man and woman fighting in a room

about 1 a.m. March 15. The hotel manager reported to police that when he knocked on the door of the room he heard a loud "thud, like someone's head was hitting the floor," and also heard a woman scream and yell, "Please, help me!'

in any medium.

After Bradshaw answered the door, the woman ran out of the hotel, the manager

Police later found the woman in the parking lot of a nearby car dealership, and she told them she had recently moved to Grand Junction to get away from Bradshaw, but knew he was in town for a few weeks and decided to get together with him.

She said they had been drinking most of the day and she passed out in the hotel room, and woke up to him grabbing her by the head and dragging her to the floor.

She also told police that Bradshaw grabbed her throat with both hands and choked her and hit her head on the floor.

A judge set a \$5,000 cash-only bond for Bradshaw on Friday.

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