

# The GRAND PLAN (part 5 of 6)



An essay by [Ray Wheeler](#)

## Boom and Bust



*Old trucks once used in a mining operation at the bottom of Grand Canyon. Photo by [Ray Wheeler](#).*

Because of their heavy reliance on federal subsidy and their historic dependency upon highly unstable mineral and energy markets, the economies of Colorado Plateau communities have always been notoriously volatile. Mineral prices oscillate wildly as new ore bodies are discovered, as new technologies create instant new markets that rapidly destroy existing markets, and as the chaos of global geopolitics daily raises and lowers the price of competing

foreign reserves. The profitability of ranching fluctuates too, knocked about by the vicissitudes of weather and yo-yo-ing energy, land, feed, fertilizer, and beef prices. Tourism is far more stable, but it too can be affected by energy prices and changing trends in the national economy.

Between 1950 and 1962 Moab's population grew by 900 percent, ballooning from 1,100 to 11,000. But in 1963, after the first uranium boom ended and a mining explosion shut down the nearby Texas Gulf potash plant, Moab's population plummeted 50% in one year.

At the climax of the uranium boom in 1956 McCall's magazine had dubbed Moab the richest town in America after computing that there were twenty millionaires for every 250 citizens—48 times the national average. But three decades later, after the collapse of the Arab oil embargo and the abrupt end of the so-called "energy crisis", the region's economy imploded dramatically. Between 1980 and 1986 Grand County lost more than 1,000 jobs—thirty percent of nonfarm wage and salary employment—sending the county's unemployment rate soaring to Depression-era levels of nearly 20 percent.



*Moab, Utah, and Spanish Valley. Colorado River in foreground. Most towns on the Colorado Plateau are tightly constrained by canyon walls, non-arable land, and federally-owned land.*