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Junction City: From Our Past Selves to Future Generations

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Junction City: From Our Past Selves to Future Generations

By Melissa Nielsen

What I remember the most from growing up in Moab, Utah is the expansiveness of the desert. To be able to grow up in a place where you could go outside and find an adventure was transformative. Coming from Long Island, I always felt claustrophobic, the stores were crammed into the houses and the signs of people went on forever. However, I didn't feel boxed in while in the desert.

In the desert, there were numerous places to choose from: a giant culvert up a canyon was a favorite spot or driving up to Sand Flats where you could encounter tourists that were usually older men that were generous with their alcohol. Often people would throw raves in the desert because it was so isolated from police and parents.

I knew that when it was time to raise my own children that I would want them to be able to have a childhood that isn't really possible today anymore. I wanted them to be able to run around in the woods for hours, to take the dog with them down to the creek to catch crawdads, and to let their imaginations run wild. I wanted them to get covered in mud and play as loud as they wanted without the rules imposed by neighborhoods. I felt like kids need places to feel free.

When it came time to choose a place to be and exist, I chose Junction City. Despite the name city, there are only a few places in the whole community. Towering over the community is the Trinity Alps Wilderness Area. There is the Junction City Store that shares the same building with the post office, there is an abandoned cafe across the highway and a storage unit. A volunteer firehouse, a grange building, a school and a Buddhist Retreat Center finish out the rest of the town.

The Trinity River is a common thread that connects Junction City. Flowing through the center of “town”, the river is the lifeblood of the community. The waters provide for the salmon and fishing guides, the marijuana grows, and gives a template for the 299 to follow. The river can also be unforgiving, washing away river banks and claiming the lives of several people a year. Local legend says it is not safe to swim until 3 white people have drowned or fed the river as some sort of trade off for eons of colonization. Whether or not there is truth to the legend, I don’t swim until it happens.

This seemingly idyllic life is not without strife. Our community has always gone without. We are a poor county and often forgotten about. Our addresses do not align with census data so when it comes to funding our schools, we are essentially uncounted. As a community, we have learned to make it on very little. We have regular fundraisers for local children to go on field trips or gain scholarships for college and all community functions are usually all out parties at our local grange hall. It is there that we all came together to discuss the rock quarry that had begun to destroy the quiet life we sought out.

The Smith Pit Mine had been there longer than I had but when I first moved to the community, it was nothing more than a pile of rocks. There were no signs of life and it is my understanding that it was slated to be a restoration project in 1997. The tailings were to be removed and the land would be reclaimed. This never came to fruition and after a large rock slide over 500,000 tons of hazardous slide material was illegally brought in. Administrators observed that over 100 trips by dump trucks past the K-8 elementary school. The frequent use of jake breaks as the trucks headed toward the school would send screeching through the classrooms. A cloud of dust covered the yellow lines on the road. This road was the only exit for over half the town and for a community of 1000 people to now have hundreds of trucks on a five mile stretch of country road was unbearable.

As the pit mine changed hands, the operation grew larger. The unpermitted work continued with no oversight or regulation

from the planning department. A rock crusher was brought in to break up material and make more rocks available for the production of cement. The Smith Pit Mine no longer resembled the reclamation project it was slated as. Neighbors would complain of the sound of the rock crusher waking them at six am on Saturday mornings. The windows in their homes would vibrate from the noise. We learned of dangerous levels of lead being released into the air from the rock crushing and moving of materials. All of these activities would occur less than a quarter of a mile from the school.

We are a community that was observed organizing unlike anything that fire and police crews had seen. When the Helena Fire ravaged over 100 homes in our community, we were banned together. Neighbors stayed behind or snuck behind the fire lines to fight the fires at homes that were deemed to “let burn,” saving neighbors’ homes who didn’t have the money, energy, or insurance to rebuild. Neighbors floated down the Trinity River on rafts full of supplies to get behind the fire lines to supply those who stayed behind with food, medicines, and gasoline for generators.

The Smith Pit Mine would have to contend with this. We survived the fire and we knew how to organize around a cause. Phone calls were made, petitions were signed and meetings were held. Despite being a small community mislabeled a city, Junction City residents packed the planning department meetings. Reading complaints, citing laws, and providing photographs of an expanding unpermitted operation that had become a full-fledged enterprise.

Over 80 students at the Junction City Elementary School wrote letters to the Planning Commission discussing the impact on their education and their lives in general. My children were among those that spoke. My oldest son, at 13, took on the validity of the sound study that was done. He brought to the attention of the commission that the decibel range measured was inaccurate as it was comparable to running a vacuum cleaner, something that would not reach the neighbors from miles away.

I read the following to the commission:

Dear Planning Commission,

I own an adjacent property to the mine. I have 4 children that attend the elementary school. The mine is operating outside the limits of its original use permit and it is to the detriment of my community. Red Hill Road is the only exit in an emergency such as a fire and it has been compromised. The road is no longer safe for our children to ride bikes to school and the disregard for the community in general is appalling. When I bought my property in 2010, the mine was not operating in the same manner. Satellite imagery confirms the growth and development of this area far beyond what a potential buyer could ever imagine. As a result, selling would be nearly impossible. The exposure of lead to my children at the site of their school is criminal. As planning commissioners, you have an obligation to this community to regulate the mine. We deserve the country lifestyle that we envisioned when we settled here. If I wanted to live near an industrial eyesore, I would have moved somewhere with more amenities. As people that live in Junction City, we forego some amenities for that peace and tranquility. We do not forego the oversight of a planning commission.

Respectfully,

Melissa J. Nielsen

As a result of the outcry from Junction City residents, the Planning Commission voted to revoke all permits of the Smith Pit Mine. Junction City had won. Despite not being able to gather in celebration due to the pandemic, we know that looking ahead, there will be grange dances, ribbons wrapped around our may pole and a community with our own “kick-it spot.”