

Where the Hell is Hanksville?

August/September by Jen Jackson

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Despite its remote location, Hanksville, Utah, has always been on the road to somewhere. In the early days, horse and cattle rustlers passed through, taking their loot to Colorado markets. It was a place of rest for the Wild Bunch outlaws. It has been a supply post for miners of many eras roaming the Utah desert in search of hidden fortunes. And now, the tiny town is a stopover for tourists traveling to Lake Powell, Capitol Reef National Park, the San Rafael Swell, and other redrock, outback adventures.

Hanksville is forever on the route and never the destination. Its population has remained virtually unchanged - around 200 residents - for a century. It's a dusty piece of desert surrounded by millions of acres of undeveloped canyon country. Paradoxically, it is this isolation that guarantees the town's survival. For more than 100 years, it has been the only supply post for miles.

Hanksville is truly the middle of nowhere.

Hanksville sits at the convergence of two lonely desert highways and the confluence of two fickle desert streams. Here, highways 24 and 95 meet, travelling through Cedar Mesa, Glen Canyon, Capitol Reef and more to get there. The Fremont and Muddy rivers combine just north of town, forming the Dirty Devil, the river boundary for the Wild Bunch's Robbers Roost hideout. The area, once known as Graves Valley, holds all these intersections in its tired and weatherworn fingers.

This improbable little town has survived floods and droughts, booms and busts, lawlessness and religious persecution. And its people have stayed. They've endured. This hardscrabble life works its way into the blood of residents, moving through the family genealogy. The town cemetery honors but a handful of family names: Mecham, Ekker, McDougall, Weber. They are buried in the same dusty earth they fought all their lives. It is said that Wayne County's biggest export is its children, but enough return to Hanksville to keep it breathing the same century-old cadences of the same clans.

Barbara Ekker knows the meaning of hardscrabble, of eking out a life, and of an unfriendly land getting under one's skin to eventually become home. After growing up in Green River, she moved with her new husband to Hanksville - his family home. The Ekker family owns the famous Robber's Roost Ranch near town, and they hold a treasure trove of memories - of outlaws and miners, of local celebrity and scandal - stretching back to the town's earliest days.

"Before I came over here from Green River, we had indoor plumbing, we had electricity, an automatic washer; we had all these things," recalls Ekker. "When I came here in '54, we moved into Grandma Ekker's old place. We had an outdoor toilet. They had water, but I don't think they even tested it. They used to just go up the river and settle it in cisterns."

The town didn't receive electricity until the '60s, and the roads into the valley were unpaved until 1962. Even phone lines were scarce until the '70s. But Ekker found her niche, she stayed, and she raised a family. Now she has stories to tell - in pictures, in words, and across her weather-worn, cancer-scarred face. She is quick to smile and laugh, but they are the expressions of one who has come to embrace harsher realities.

Ekker speaks to me from a sagging and stained chair in the town's iconic rock shop. Decades of cigarette smoke permeates the walls. We are surrounded by dinosaur bones, geodes, fossils, petrified wood, and numerous Native American artifacts whose display (like the arrowheads marking the points on a clock), would cause an archaeologist some discomfort.

Barbara is watching over the shop for her friend Ernie, the owner. He recently passed away after several weeks in the hospital, leaving the title of Hanksville's oldest citizen to someone else. Now, the future of the rock shop, a Hanksville institution, is uncertain. Ernie's store is without pretense - no flashy displays, no marketing, no gimmicks. Just rocks. Obviously, Ernie was not in the business for profit, but for a love of rocks. And Barbara is not there because she's worried about the shop's contents; she's worried about a dear friend and his legacy.

Over the years, Ekker has been a bit of everything to the town of Hanksville. She's worked at the post office, waitressed at the Red Rock Café, served as an EMT, mined uranium, restored electrical service during outages for Garkane Energy, and continues - after 40 years - to be the official weather observer for Hanksville. (When asked by residents what the weather might bring, she responds, " I don't know. Don't matter. I can wash my car and it'd probably rain.") She's also a writer - penning pieces for regional newspapers and putting out the local, semi-monthly Tumbleweed newspaper - and she delights in research, assisting many authors of regional texts in their information sleuthing.

One such project was a text on Ebenezer Hanks, Hanksville's namesake and founder. Hanks came to Graves Valley in 1882

with his two wives. Though he died just two years after his arrival, the town thought enough of Hanks to name the settlement after him. He was remembered as an upstanding Mormon and father. But Ekker's research uncovered a less rosy image.

"He was kind of a rogue. When his wives would go to church, he'd sit outside and sing and swear," she says, also noting, "His first wife, she didn't go for this polygamy bullshit." (Apparently, when Mrs. Hanks was visiting her parents back East, Ebenezer picked up a second wife and tried to wrangle a third.)

Ekker also knows a bit about Hanksville's outlaw history. The Ekker family hosted Butch Cassidy and the Wild Bunch at their ranch numerous times. And Ekker developed a friendship with Cassidy's sister, Lula. Though Butch is one of her favorite topics now, Ekker recalls with a laugh, "I never heard of him until I married into the Ekker family." Cassidy and the Wild Bunch frequented Hanksville in the final years of the 19th century, as the days of the Wild West were winding down. The town was at the southern tip of the famed Outlaw Trail and was the closest settlement to their hideout at Robber's Roost. Many locals came to appreciate Cassidy and some of his outlaw friends; they were charismatic, well-mannered gentlemen who only took from the rich - Western versions of Robin Hood.

Ekker's mother-in-law, Edna (or Grandma Ekker in later years), was full of Butch stories. She'd often recall Butch riding up to the ranch, handing over the reins and saying, "I'm gonna go play with the girls!" Apparently Butch was fond of Edna and her sisters. But Ekker was fond of interrupting Grandma Ekker's story-telling to say, "Tell people you were six years old! It sounds like you were running a brothel up there!"

Little Edna played jacks with Butch Cassidy at the Robber's Roost Ranch, using \$20 gold pieces as jacks. She was also nearly shot by the Sundance Kid. Edna's mother frowned upon the outlaws bringing guns into the house when they'd dine with the family, but "Sundance was an ornery-type person," as Ekker recalls, and he refused to part from his firearm. One evening, sitting down to dinner, his gun caught on the chair and discharged into the ceiling. The girls' bedroom was above the dining room, and the bullet pierced their mattress and pillows, slicing the space between Edna and sister Dora.

Ekker also has mining memories. Her father and his brothers helped finance the historic Wolverton Mill that now sits by the Hanksville BLM office - one of the town's only tourist attractions. The mill was originally built in the Henry Mountains by Edwin Wolverton in 1921. It was an engineering marvel, used to mill wood and crush gold ore, operational only until Wolverton's untimely death in 1929. The miner had prostate problems that required a strategically placed copper wire to urinate each day, and while the hospital in Grand Junction cured that malady, the window they left open in his hospital room led to the pneumonia that killed him.

The Ekkers have history of their own in the realm of mining. They were among the many uranium miners during the mid-century frenzy. Ekker worked the claim while tending three girls and pregnant with a fourth child.

"My husband, Jess, once asked the doctor, 'Am I gonna get a boy?'" And the doctor said, "Well, get Ekker off that jackhammer down there. You're shaking the balls off your boys!" recalls Ekker with a knee-slapping laugh. "We finally got a boy!"

As Ekker's memories keep pouring forth like the Fremont at high-water, I am entranced, unwilling and unable to stop the torrent. Yet, Hanksville's unassuming façade remains mute on its spectacular history. Secrets are held tight. The dusty wind and empty expanses obscure the town's true depth.

Ekker tells me about the bison transplanted in the area in 1941, how exciting it was to see them transported in crates from Yellowstone to the desert. A group of local doctors organized the deal, paying one-dollar-a-head for the beasts, only to have all the bulls run home the first year. "You'd think those bulls were gay, they didn't want nothing to do with them cows," says Ekker. "They only had one calf that winter."

Since then, the bulls have developed a liking for the cows. From an original \$21 private venture, 500 bison now roam the Henry Mountains, one of only four free-ranging, genetically pure herds on public lands in North America. I recently dined on a gift of Henry Mountain bison meat, tasting the desert, wildness, and a hint of big dreams from a small town of another era.

In the rock shop, this bygone era still exists, from the "Indian artifacts" on the wall to the conversation. Ekker says nothing of today's Hanksville. When I gently attempt to guide talk that direction, we return to the past. That's where the stories are, the comfort of history lived. Perhaps the now-gone hardscrabble life - of outlaws, rogues and families working the mines together - is more palatable than its current incarnation. Cancer now reaches loved ones before the government uranium compensation does. The 100-year flood of 2006 demolished Hanksville's diversion dam, leaving local ranchers without irrigation water for a second scorching summer, leaving a town's tenuous economy in question. Land-use wars rage on, pitting neighbors against one another, inspiring death threats toward those who support restrictions on off-road vehicle use. And Hanksville is increasingly dependent on tourism dollars while gas prices rise and Lake Powell water levels fall.

As I leave the rock shop, Ekker trails me out the door, more stories following each step. I wonder how long it's been since someone new was in town to listen to them. I wonder if, despite the fact that the same families have lived together in Hanksville for generations, perhaps this town is a very lonely place.

A city park sits at the edge of Hanksville, off the beaten tourist path. Replete with a playground, ball field, rodeo ground, picnic area and tennis court, this park seems incongruous with the dusty patch of mobile homes I've just navigated. At the edge of the park lay miles of open desert. No sprawl, just abrupt wilderness. The Henry Mountains - the last-mapped patch of the contiguous United States, the last bit of terra incognita - rise above all of it.

I sit on a swing and ponder life lived on the edge of the map. What would it be like to grow up in this town, to glide down the blue tunnel slide after school, the tunnel opening to a barren desert and an uncertain future? If I had to bus 140 miles each day for school, if my only option was to work at the gas station to help my family, how much hope would I carry with me?

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Former Hanksville mayor and self-described town "motivator," Stan Alvey is responsible for the new park. He and his son built most of it. Alvey has carried hope for his hometown for the last three decades, fighting an uphill battle to ensure a brighter future for Hanksville. The park is emblematic of that. It's been a lonely crusade. Now, he says, "I've come to the end of my road." He just resigned his post as mayor in January. He's retiring from the business of motivating.

Alvey acknowledges that his town has a lot of rough edges, that the amalgam of trailer homes and desiccated lots isn't much to look at. "It's sometimes kind of discouraging, to me it is, because of the way it looks," he says with decidedly un-mayor-like candor. I can hear the end of the road in his voice. "I really wanted to see things get better than that, you know? I think people haven't done anything with Hanksville because they don't want to change anything. But I do."

Alvey came to Hanksville in 1978 with big dreams for the town, and he promptly opened up Stan's Burger Shak. His first battle as town motivator concerned a municipal sewer system. Hanksville lacked one, and the clay upon which the town is built isn't porous, and is thus ill-suited for septic systems. Sewage would just sit on top of the ground. Despite the town's pressing need for a sewer, it took four years of motivating to move the idea forward.

"That's how it's been every since I've been here. It's just fight, fight, fight," says Alvey, acknowledging that change does not come quickly in Hanksville, if it even comes at all.

"Right now, all that we are is a pivot point for all the parks. We're kind of a stop-off point. I don't know if we'll ever be anything other than that," says Alvey with a hint of resignation. "I don't know if we can ever make a big enough change to make people to want to come here and stay."

Transforming Hanksville from a pit-stop to a place of interest is someone else's fight now. Alvey says, "I've just quit getting involved in things, but I love it here. And that's why we live here."

The gift shop at Blondies (the best milkshakes for miles), sells T-shirts emblazoned with "Where the hell is Hanksville?" I own one. I think it's funny. It's also appropriate.

I ask a large family from northern Utah - on their way to Lake Powell - what they think of Hanksville. We are standing in front of the town's Hollow Mountain gas station, which is literally built into the hillside. As far as gas stations go, it's locally renowned.

"This isn't even Hanksville, is it?" asks the mother.

No wonder Alvey's motivation was exhausted. Where the hell is Hanksville, indeed.

Thirteen miles west of Hanksville on Highway 24, at mile-marker 102, is Randy Ramsley's Mesa Farm Market.

So, it's technically in Caineville (population 50) rather than Hanksville, but big spaces like this allow for such stretches in locality. Mesa Farm Market is a regional diamond in the rough. And it's known the world over for its fresh bread and organic veggies. In fact, while I was speaking with Ramsley, foreigners strolled in, asking in a thick accent, "May we still purchase the dark bread?"

Looking out over his unlikely farmland - Caineville badlands of bentonite clay, soils that were deemed sterile when tested - Ramsley laughs. "What brought us to this area? Insanity."

By age 19, Ramsley knew he wanted to be an organic, sustainable farmer. However, the family farm had already sold, so he set out to earn the money to buy his own. After 25 years of hard work in Salt Lake City, he was ready. Fifty acres in Caineville came open. He jumped on it.

Now, after 10 years of cover-cropping, "we've just begun to cross over into a modestly fertile realm," says Ramsley. If nothing else, this land has taught him patience.

Ramsley and his wife came to Caineville in 1994 with nothing more than \$2,000, a walk-behind tiller, some handtools, and big dreams. Somehow, these meager resources and soils were fertile enough to bring the dreams to fruition. As I sit inside the market today, the operation is casually chaotic but successful. In the midst of sterile badlands, I am able to eat still-warm cinnamon rolls, buy fresh-baked, hearth-fired, whole-wheat bread, and snag a couple bags of organic mixed-greens for the evening salad. Ramsley now has goats that help in the garden, turning weeds into milk. He's using invasive tamarisk to construct an outbuilding on the farm. Plans are in the works to grow seed oil for fuel; the leftover pulp will feed the chickens and goats. And all the while, a handful of young farmers work with Ramsley, learning a millennia-old trade whose value has all but been forgotten. It is Ramsley's work to help us remember.

Ramsley lives an ascetic life. There are no big returns in this work. He's making just enough money to keep the farm and market afloat. But his idea of productivity is not measured in dollars.

"The energy we're drawing from agriculture today is all negative energy," says Ramsley of the industrial farming upon which

we rely. "It's all about profit and productivity. In my opinion, to hell with productivity. What about community? What about the people involved in the agriculture? We've laid way too much emphasis on productivity and forgotten about reality and happiness and family. That's what we're trying to do here. We're shifting that emphasis."

He describes the foundation of his business as, "the sustenance of the body so that the body can grow spiritually." He believes in the power of his work to change the world. Farming, for Ramsley, is about more than just food. It's spirituality, consciousness, connection and hope.

"The tao of the hoe is an incredible thing. We use the word mundane, but mundane means earthly. It's not boring. It's just earthly." He explains, "It's feeling that vibe coming up through your feet and knowing that you're connected to the land, and knowing that without the land, and without consciousness regarding that connection, your life is diminished. The people that eat my food, I hope they're aware that they're eating the love and the energy that we have for this thing. By giving me a few dollars or trading me something for my food, you become a part of the energy. You become a part of the process. You become a part of the conscious connection to the land."

As Ramsley shares this vision with me, his voice and face are animated, and the small store is filled with his vision, with the creative juice that sustains Mesa Farm Market. His hopes for connection and community are palpable. Ramsley is a diminutive man, always sporting suspenders and a shaggy mane. He also possesses an enormous smile - and a heart to match.

"This life is heaven. I know I'm doing earthly things, but when I'm doing them, I'm in heaven."

As I leave Mesa Farm Market, stocked up with goodies and good energy, I can't help but ponder the dichotomy between the characters I've spent my time with in this one area. It's an example of Old West versus New. With different languages, worldviews, and senses of place, how will we ever get the two to communicate and coalesce? Will this landscape's people ever embrace change? Will we ever see a unified Hanksville, where history provides the roots that help the fruits of hope flourish?

Hanksville is a town of intersections: of rivers and roads and routes to elsewhere. It is a dry and dusty land that can hold outlaws and organic farmers with equal care. But, as a place forever on the way and never quite there, where the hell is Hanksville? Perhaps at the intersection of its area residents, where hopes and history converge.

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Inside/Outside Southwest magazine

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