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Boulder: zen and now

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BOULDER — An unlikely pairing of cultures has created a unique community here in what has been called the most remote location in the lower 48 United States.

A growing Buddhist "sangha" — the Sanskrit word for "association" or "community" — is now interwoven with generations of longtime Boulder residents deeply rooted in ranching, farming and Mormon pioneer history.

Though Boulder could be seen as the old Mormon pioneers vs. the "new agers," there is a shared underlying philosophy of living quietly and simply in concert with the land and the landscape, says Lisa Vargas, a Boulder business owner.

"That's why the original settlers stay and why the new people come," Vargas said. "There are a lot easier places to live, but none quite as beautiful."

Boulder, Utah — not to be confused with Boulder, Colo. — was named after the spectacular mountain nearby of the same name and rests at an elevation of nearly 7,000 feet at the top of Garfield County in south-central Utah. Drive down state Routes 28 and 24 through Salina, Loa and Torrey toward Capitol Reef National Park, turn right on S.R. 12 and an hour later, you'll hit Boulder at its intersection with the Burr Trail.

"It's a beautiful place," says Scott A. Gutting, president and founder of Energy Strategies LLC and a Boulder property owner.

Ranchers first brought cattle to graze here in 1879, and the area was formally settled 10 years later. It remained isolated until 1935, when the federal Civilian Conservation Corps built a road from Escalante. Still, Boulder did not get electric power until 1947.

The community is built on farming and ranching, but many residents say the heart of the place has evolved in the past several years since Blake Spalding, her business partner Jen Castle and Spalding's sister Lavinia opened the Hell's Backbone Grill in the center of town.

The business has become renowned for its wholesome food and lovely setting and has drawn workers and tourists to the town.

The three women are also committed practitioners of Buddhism and are strongly networked into the national Buddhist community. Monks make regular visits to the area, and many of the area homes fly the colorful prayer flags traditional to the culture.

With dozens of employees, Hell's Backbone Grill is one of the area's largest employers, and many workers are members of the Buddhist community.

As of the last census, the town population was 180, an increase over the 1990 figure of 126.

This is a community that in recent years has evolved from a small Mormon ranching town into a very different place, says Gutting, who bought property on the Black Boulder Mesa with a partner and is developing the land.

In the 2004 presidential election, for example, 90 percent of Garfield County voted for Republican candidate President Bush. In Boulder, where about 95 people voted, 50 cast votes for Bush and 45 voted for Democratic challenger John Kerry.

"That's the transition that's occurred," said Gutting.

This evolution is illustrated in everyday snapshots around Boulder.

One day in late summer, Boulder Mayor Bill Muse makes his way to the organic farm operated by the owners of Hell's Backbone Grill to help clear land and do some planting. A grizzled Boulder old-timer with steel blue eyes to match the sky, he has developed a strong collaboration and friendship with Spalding and her colleagues.

"They've done a lot of good for this community," he says.

After helping at the farm, Muse and Spalding travel the back road toward town. Spalding's Subaru, with its "Free Tibet" and "Support Organic Farming" stickers, follows behind Muse's chugging tractor, which he

says with a smile is "the prettiest" in his cadre of land-tilling equipment.

It's one in many contrasts in this area of deep Mormon roots.

What looks like a regular Sinclair gas station and mini-mart on Highway 12 is called Hills & Hollows and has natural foods, homemade breads, vegetarian soup and organic burritos.

A resident with extra squash will swap for an eggplant with a neighbor.

"Boulder is not normal" reads another local bumper sticker.

Indeed, some Boulder residents are living significantly off the grid.

There is a house made entirely of straw bales plastered with adobe. Another house is built out of lava boulders and runs on solar power. One family lives in a cave home that has been under construction for nearly 20 years.

Ten years ago, Vargas and her husband bought property in this remarkable community and eventually moved here. Having lived in Boulder for eight years, she is still considered a relative newcomer, although she owns the Burr Trail Grill & Deli, one of a few restaurants in town, and the outpost next door.

She built a mostly "green" home near the Navajo sandstone of the Durfey Mesa a few miles from her store and restaurant.

And it is the land itself that drew Vargas, Gutting and others like them to the area.

Although her business is a de facto gathering place, Vargas says she is not a big "Boulder booster."

"I didn't move here to make money, I moved here for the landscape," she says. "It's powerful. Very evocative. It makes people feel something. We're a little outpost on the brink of a great big wild landscape."

As such, she and residents have to embrace the rural lifestyle. Everyone here does, because it is two hours to the nearest real grocery store, and 90 minutes from a medical clinic. There are no movies for the town's residents. Instead, there is quiet and a commitment to rural life.

Despite its remoteness, the community is taking innovative steps to take care of its residents. For example, because affordable housing is scarce in Boulder, many workers at the restaurant end up living in tents and trailers during the spring, summer and fall months when the restaurant is open.

So the two owners of Hell's Backbone Grill bought a nine-bedroom house where employees of the world-class restaurant could live affordably during the restaurant's season.

Marci Milligan, president of the Lotus Community Development Institute, traveled to Boulder in July to tell the Town Council about the Utah Workforce Housing Initiative, a program that helped channel a \$25,000 grant toward down payment and closing costs for the house.

The financing alternatives also included a no-interest second mortgage that allows affordable rents for employees who want to stay in Boulder year-round, Milligan said.

Boulder is one of the five pilot communities for their program. The town has been proactive in asking for planning help from county and state officials, she said. The project was an opportunity to leverage a small amount of grant funds to make a large and lasting impact in the lives of local service workers, she said.

"The project has gained tremendous support and has generated good will amongst local neighbors," Milligan said in a written statement. "The owners of Hell's Backbone Grill followed the new local-first commitment and sought out alternative solutions ... so that all might benefit."

And in a county that has struggled economically, some Boulder residents place their confidence in their own creative recipes for a healthy community.

Garfield County officials said recently they want to develop the whole county as an off-road or ATV playground. That isn't a good fit for most Boulder residents.

"We've asked them to think of the county as a mosaic and to recognize that some areas have built business plans on a quieter form of recreation," Vargas said.

"That is the main business of Boulder," she said, "preserving what we have."

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