

Interview with Sheriff Wayne Bardin by Rick Ewig for the University of Wyoming American Heritage Center's oral history program Wyoming's Energy Boom, 1995-2010, Accession # 11749, October 21, 2010.

RICK EWIG: This is Rick Ewig and I'm talking to Sheriff Wayne Bardin today. He's the Sheriff of the Sublette County Sheriff's Office. We're meeting in his office in the—in the Sublette County Offices here in Pinedale and it is October 21st, 2010, and this is for the project titled Wyoming's Recent Energy Boom, 1995 to 2010.

Well, Sheriff Braden [sic], thank you for spending some time today doing this with me.

WAYNE BARDIN: You bet. My pleasure.

RE: What I like to do at first is have you give a little personal background. When you started in the department, when you came to Pinedale, if you are not a native? That kind of thing.

WB: Well, I am a native of Sublette County for fifty-five years. I was in the agriculture business, ranching prior to 1992 and I applied for a position with the Sheriff's Office in '92. I was a detention officer and in '94 I went to patrol and in '96—'96-97 I was promoted to a patrol sergeant. In 2000 I was promoted to patrol lieutenant and then in 2005 I took over as Sheriff. I was appointed to fill out the remainder of Hank Ruland's term. He retired early and then I was elected in 2006.

RE: So then you started with the department a few years before the boom really began to happen?

WB: Yes.

RE: What was the force like at that point in '92 when you joined?

WB: I think we had five detention officers, ten to twelve on patrol, five communication officers. It was a very small department then.

RE: So, at that point, unlike today, the communities had their own police departments?

WB: No, when I started the police departments had been dissolved and the Sheriff was still over everything.

RE: Well, then things certainly have changed for the department, haven't they, in the last eighteen years or so?

WB: They have, and back then the need for twenty-four hour service wasn't there, either.

RE: And so what was Pinedale like about that time, prior to the boom?

WB: Prior to the boom it was more of a small cow town, I guess you'd say. Everybody knows everybody. Same with the Big Piney area. Everybody knew everybody. Events seemed to stem more around agriculture than it did the oil and gas fields at that time. But strong tight-knit community.

RE: And so, prior to joining the force, you were in agriculture. So what were you doing exactly?

WB: I was raised on a ranch over in Big Piney, my grandfolks's place, and that ultimately sold when my uncle took it over. So I was married at the time and my wife's family were ranchers over in the Boulder area. They had three different places. So my wife and I settled on the 'lower place' is what they called it, and we just raised commercial Hereford cattle there and Morgan horses, two kids. [Laughs]

RE: [Laughs] Well, and so quite the change then, from the ranching part of your family, then go onto law enforcement.

WB: Yup, I was a duck out of water for sure. Prior to coming to work for the Sheriff's Office, the year before I think I had been to town five times that year. So I had a lot to do.

RE: So you apparently had a lot to learn, too, I imagine. So was there any kind of training that was done at the time when you joined the force like that?

WB: Well, there was supposed to be an FTO program and I rode around two days with one of the women patrol officers. I did another day with the captain. The then Sheriff came to me in his Bronco and said, "Drive around, don't get in trouble."

RE: [Laughs]

WB: And then I was put on night shifts.

RE: [Laughs]

WB: I patrolled for a while and then went to the academy in Douglas. Another experience. I had to learn how to go back to school all over again, and at that time it was a four hundred and twenty-five hour academy. So it was a challenge for me, for sure.

RE: Well, so then some years go by. The Jonah Field starts to be developed and so what kind of impacts to the department did you begin to see as the—as the boom began to happen?

WB: Well, it was twofold, really. One of the impacts was, of course, more calls for service. When they came in, but also with the wages that were being paid at that time, we were losing people in the department going to the gas fields. So we were having a high turnover rate at that time. They called us the 'training field.' We'd train people for other departments or train them to go to the gas fields.

RE: So there must be kind of effort then to recruit more. And so what kind of searches did you have? Were these national searches that were being done?

WB: We did all the above, yeah. We went everywhere and what was sad was out of fifty applicants, after we did the background checks on them and drug tests, we might have five that we could actually interview. But we went all over the U.S. with our ads, looking for help. And the help we did find, the guys that were good, they forgot to tell their wives what the winters were like in Wyoming. We lost a lot of people because of that, too. Their wives went back home and didn't care if the husband came or not, they were going. So.

RE: [Laughs]

WB: But that's a challenge for a lot of people here. We're remote, as you know. Nearest hospitals are a hundred miles each way. We do have top notch clinics. The shopping is not what a person's used to in a big city, so it's a real challenge for the families that move in here. The husband or wife that's employed with the Sheriff's Office knows what they're getting into, but the families have to adjust and sometimes that's a hard adjustment for them.

RE: Sure. And so with these—the workers then coming in, more calls, as you said, but what were the calls about mainly?

WB: Well, it was pretty much everything that we were going through prior, it was just tenfold. A lot of traffic, traffic complaints and—oh, thefts, larcenies. Those were up, and then of course the methamphetamine problem followed and we had methamphetamine here prior to that, but it wasn't as pronounced as when the boom started coming in. So, when I was appointed in 2005, I started our own drug task force. And that proved to be a very good move. I think we have twenty-five or twenty-seven federal indictments over the past four years and of those I believe eighteen of them have gone to prison and we shut down quite a bit of the supply, I guess you'd say. And so that was a big problem that came in. The rig workers, and I don't mean to shed a bad light on the gas fields. I mean, they're great people. Sometimes it's just the people they hire that aren't the best and the gas companies started doing their own drug testing programs. And our guys were stopping folks for DUI, things like that, and when we would arrest them, we'd do an inventory of the vehicle and then the vehicle's towed and we started finding bottled urine in the vehicles. So these guys that were doing the drug tests had I think somebody else's urine. I think if they did a full battery of tests on it, they'd have found out that half their derrick hands were pregnant out there. I don't know.

RE: [Laughs]

WB: At least it was clean.

RE: [Laughs] Well, you mentioned the drug force that you started when you took office. That must have been an important thing. As you said, you found quite a few problems there. So did you feel that was a very important thing for you to do when you took office?

WB: I did, yes, and in 2005 we had seen quite an increase in the meth problem by then. We had worked close with DCI and their agents were so busy we couldn't get actually what we needed here. So that's when I opted for the task force and actually talked with—the Governor came up and we met in a room down here with several other elected officials and I asked for a drug task force and more highway patrol. At that time highway patrol, we had three and four with the—but most of the time they were either in Jackson or just on a day shift, and we needed more saturation on the highways and right now we have our own division now here with, I don't know, twelve, fourteen something like that.

RE: Oh, so you still think it's an issue and so you need to keep that going?

WB: We do. We do. Yes.

RE: So when you began that in 2005, who was all on this task force?

WB: Just two people. We—two of our folks and then we supplied an office for DCI. So a lot of the time there were three, two of our folks and DCI, but since then it's just—it's been mostly our guys that have been doing work and that work takes them, not only in Sublette County, but it will go to Sweetwater. There's always a trail that you have to follow and we've been out to California, even, with some of the stuff that's come in.

RE: Uh-hmm. Years ago when I would come to Pinedale, I was told that there were probably drugs in Pinedale and sometimes people would say, "Well, it was on the route to Jackson," and so this was a natural place to stop, as well. Is that an overstatement? Is that incorrect or—?

WB: No, that is correct. What we've found is the meth labs aren't as prevalent. I don't think I've even been around a meth lab in Sublette County. We had a rolling lab that had a few parts to it, but it wasn't functional, by any means. Where our meth was coming from was Mexico and they called it "Ice" because it was ninety-nine percent pure. So from Mexico it would go into Arizona or San Diego to be distributed to come out here and a lot of our meth would go into Salt Lake and Ogden and from there hit the interstates and come up. And, you're right, we're a thoroughfare into Jackson, so it was a natural route to come through and not only Jackson, but Idaho Falls, too.

RE: Well, you're quoted in one newspaper article as saying that when you would arrest some of the people for meth possession or whatever, they would tell you that the reason they did it is because they needed to work longer hours and make more money, and so they needed the drugs to do that.

WB: Uh-hmm.

RE: Was that really a prevalent issue?

WB: I think that was a handy excuse for it. I'm sure that maybe that's the way it started out because some of these guys could stay up five days on that stuff, but, no, I think when you get right down to it, they were addicted to methamphetamine, using that for an excuse to use it, and it sure ruined a lot of lives around here, I know that, with the workers that came in. It just raised havoc in their families.

RE: But you mentioned, too, that even when you exclude the oil field workers, there was meth being used in Pinedale, also.

WB: Small quantities of meth were here, yes, but we had a hard time tracking it down. Didn't know where it came from, didn't know who was actually being the suppliers. But when the boom started to hit, a lot more meth started to be bought and that enabled us to find more people and get to the sources where it was coming from, and our guys did a really good job. I'm very proud of them. They put themselves in some dangerous situations.

RE: When did the man camps begin to be built as a way to house the workers in the fields?

WB: I would say 2002, I want to say. That was when they started down in Big Piney, and then over a period of years they just—they would pop up in different places, which was a—you know, the ones that were out in Sand Draw were a Godsend, I think, because it kept so many people off the highways. We were working a lot of wrecks, fatalities, and just a lot of traffic infractions, but with the man camps, the guys had to behave themselves because they were getting room and board free. Three squares a day and a place to lay their head at night and get a shower. If they screwed up once, they were out and they had to go find their own place to stay, things like that. [Clears throat] And they did have recreation at the man camps, but you can only, I guess, keep their attention for so long with a pool table, and we started getting more traffic coming into town. The bar fights and things like that, alcohol, which we expected and were ready for.

RE: So when the companies were bringing in the man camps, starting the man camps, did they meet with you and your office to discuss issues that may arise? Were they planning for these kinds of things to happen?

WB: They were, and they didn't meet with me personally. They met with all elected officials in a group and would propose what they wanted to do in front of the commission and see if they could get a permit for man camps. We were all for it. I know BLM supplied some ground for one and they—they had good plans in place when they came in front of the commission and it helped us out immensely.

RE: In fact, speaking of the one on BLM land, I was out at that one yesterday. I was able to go out to the Jonah Workforce Facility and, you know, I'd never been at a man camp before. Really interesting, and that's really confined.

WB: Uh-hmm.

RE: And the workers are not expected to leave when they're on shift, and then they probably leave the area for three weeks when—when they're off.

WB: Uh-hmm.

RE: Are you finding that more and more the way things have progressed with the man camps?

WB: As far as—

RE: They are not spending as much time in Pinedale because they just leave the area?

WB: We see that quite a bit now because the drilling slacked off. I think the quality of employee is out there now and that employee has a good family life and that family life might be in Texas, Illinois, Florida. So they come in for two weeks and they go home for two weeks. And I think the best deterrent for anything is a wife and, unfortunately in the boom, the wife and children couldn't come up to live in the man camps. The housing was little to none at that time, and the guys pretty much had free rein for two weeks and—

RE: And so what happened during that free rein period for those workers?

WB: They got in trouble. [Laughs]

RE: [Laughs]

WB: Some of them, and lost their jobs. Some lost their families, but they worked hard and they played hard. And that's the way it was and we knew that was going to happen. We had a very law enforcement-friendly commission and they allowed us to put more people on to take care of the extra workload, but the man camps saved us a a lot of misery.

RE: So they were helpful to you.

WB: Very helpful.

RE: Good. Although I imagined there were some who lived in town whenever they could find a place to live or to live in an RV park or whatever, I suppose.

WB: Uh-hmm.

RE: So—and you mentioned that there was—it was hard to get officers sometimes because of other pressures to go and work in the—in the field or whatever.

WB: Uh-hmm.

RE: When all of this was going on, the boom and fewer officers than you needed, were there other areas that were not being covered because of that shortage?

WB: The county suffered. The squeaky wheel got the grease and that was usually out in the gas fields or in the municipalities, and the patrol that we would do out in the county up towards Bondurant, the county lines, it suffered quite a bit because most of our manpower was used in the towns. And with the arrival of more highway patrol, that freed my people up, too, to get out in the county and do what we should be doing.

RE: Well, did the people in Marbleton and Big Piney and Pinedale realize the impact that was being forced upon your department and what that meant?

WB: Well, I don't think so and I tried to get that information out. I just don't think it was received very well. The communities feel that there was too much law enforcement to begin with and it's hard to get across what it's like to work here and work here without the manpower that you need, and now that things have slacked off, it does look like we have too many law enforcement officers and in fact, we don't. Our jail was built at that time and it takes twenty-three people to run it. I have thirty-two that are authorized to be out on the road with me and all the investigations and that thing. So when you split that up per capita, yeah, we should be viewed as having too many law enforcement, but then when you put five

thousand square miles in there and the calls that are going—and the type of calls, the amount of overtime that I have to pay and the guys that are just beat dead tired when they go home, we're where we need to be. I just don't know how I can get that out there to the public, especially the older public that has been here and seen the first boom and this one, too. They're kind of set in their ways and now I am mine.

RE: So what's the size of your department now?

WB: Twenty-three in detentions, thirty-two on patrol and five secretaries.

RE: Okay, and you're right, for the size of the area you have to cover, that doesn't seem unreasonable.

WB: Well, and to put it in a little more perspective, the town of Evanston, I believe it's seven square miles, something like that. They have two less on their police department than I have for the whole county and the towns, and we do a good job, I think. There's a lot of miles to cover. Granted, the population isn't there, but you still have to get from call to call and everybody's going to have a problem, and from June through November I run a department that's budgeted to serve between seven and eight thousand people. Well, in this June through November period, at any given time there could be forty thousand people in this county, with what we have on the highways, what's up in the mountains recreating. Forest Service has even said that they would estimate forty thousand people in Sublette County at times, and they all have one thing in common. They can have a problem and if they do, they call me, so—

RE: [Laughs] Well, so then during those times do you have enough staff and officers?

WB: We don't and some of the younger deputies need the overtime, so they will work extra hours. Of course, it eats into their family life quite a bit, which goes back to hiring law enforcement for this department. If you are a young family just coming in with the clothes on your back, you really couldn't afford to live here, and the generation coming up now, the mother actually wants to stay home and raise the kids. Well, in this community both parents have to work if you're going to live here. And that issue there we lost people over, also.

RE: Do you feel that your staff now, your officers now, are more stable, meaning that they stay longer in the job?

WB: This is probably the best I've seen it since I've been here.

RE: Why do you think that is?

WB: Well, I think we have the people that actually want to be in law enforcement and make it a career. They have the families that are acclimated here now. They like the school systems. The salary that they make enables them to not live lavishly, but comfortable I would say, and I think another thing is they look around the country and see all the people that don't have work and they're pretty thankful that they have a job with benefits.

- RE: Also, when the boom was going on and there were more issues with the workers and the man camp and other things, and you were probably arresting more, was your jail sufficient to handle all of that?
- WB: It was. Our staff at times wasn't, but we didn't have any problem housing and classification of inmates. If we had somebody that we couldn't segregate because of the numbers, Sweetwater County or Teton County would take those folks for us and visa-versa, we'd bring some of theirs down. All the counties work together very well and cooperate that way.
- RE: Okay, good. Did you find that there was enough judges to deal with all of those people who were coming in and being arrested?
- WB: There was on the county court side. The district court, our judges were in Jackson and Riverton. So, two years ago, three years ago, we finally got our own district court judge and that's taken a lot of pressure off, also. He had a—I guess a docket from hell. I mean it was backed up and he's been whittling it down, but needed a district court judge and got one.
- RE: Well, I understand a couple of years ago you restructured in the entire department. So why did you think there was a need to do that?
- WB: [Clears throat] Well, without going into specifics, I had a small Sheriff's Office within the big Sheriff's Office and it happened to be in administration, the biggest part of it, and I wasn't getting the information I needed, and it was because of this other little Sheriff's Office. So what I decided to do was eliminate the Under Sheriff position and went with four Captains. Captain north, Captain south, a Captain over investigations and a Captain up in detentions, and that way four people were answering to me. Not just one and giving me what I needed and not—or what he wanted me to have.
- RE: [Laughs]
- WB: So that proved to be a morale booster. The rest of the department was pleased with those changes and—
- RE: And for you has it worked out better?
- WB: Oh, a lot better. Yeah. I can kind of delegate more of my work and it enables me to get out and talk with the deputies more, especially, and I like that. Down south there's always been a gap, that thirty mile gap between Big Piney, Marbleton, Pinedale and it's always, "You guys get everything and we get nothing." Well, when I restructured and put a Captain down there, I could see why. Because their requests, their complaints were going unheard and I didn't know it. But it worked out well and whoever is elected Sheriff November 2nd, I'm sure will change that to suit themselves, but it served its purpose for me, that was for sure and brought the morale up for the whole department and I think it was a good move.
- RE: What do you think are the community expectations of the department? Of course, you have Big Piney and Marbleton and Pinedale, different communities, but do they have expectations that you're able to meet or they're just too high you can't meet?

WB: I think the expectation from the—the older generations is to “leave me alone.” They expect law enforcement to leave them alone and I do, too, unless they’re needing to be stopped. The other expectation is they want to be treated with respect when they are stopped, which I agree with. Juvenile issues are—are big here, but all in all the expectation is “don’t come around lessen me call you.”

RE: [Laughs]

WB: If that makes any sense.

RE: No, it certainly does. Well, then looking back over your entire career in the department and thinking about, you know, what the boom did to your department, how would you reflect on the impact of the boom on the Sheriff’s Department here?

WB: [Sighs] The boom challenged us and it challenged us in a very good way. I looked at the gas companies as a very positive impact for Sublette County. It’s just that my department had to deal with some of the negative aspects of this positive that came in. It made us stronger. It made us more dependent on one another, I think. And in a way I think it actually brought the elected officials closer together, also, because we had to work so close together in what we were doing with infrastructure, things like that. And I had a good relationship, working relationship with all the elected officials.

RE: Of course, there were talks about the other booms going on in Wyoming like in southeast Wyoming, upcoming.

WB: Oh, the Niobrara?

RE: Niobrara, and so what kind of advice would you offer to people possibly facing a boom in the future?

WB: From there? Matter of fact, I’ve talked with Steve Kegley. He’s the Sheriff of Platte and he’s asked for any information that I can get him and I’m trying to compile everything I can. I really don’t know what to say to the folks in Niobrara because down there I think it’s ninety-five plus percent is private property.

RE: Right.

WB: And out here these folks are drilling on all state leased BLM ground. So I really don’t know what the impact’s going to be on their private property. I know the folks that do have mineral royalties are going to like it. It’s going to be a pretty good cash flow, but I think the biggest thing is to accept change because change is going to happen in those situations. Will it go back to what it used to be? I don’t think so. And that might be a good thing because it—it allowed us to build an infrastructure that we wouldn’t have had and it might be too big at the end of the boom to where we can’t afford all of it, but at least we’ve got it when the next one comes.

RE: Right, and you know, Pinedale has been known as this remote community, very safe, great place to raise kids. Do you think that’s still true?

WB: I do. Yup, it is a great place to raise kids. Good school systems. Parents watch out for one another. It's still that type of a community.

RE: Okay, so you haven't lost that feeling, even though you had to experience that boom and be challenged by it?

WB: I don't think so. The majority of the people who live here I think appreciate that, also, and that's why they stayed.

RE: Well, then you've had—getting beyond your time here in the department, you have such a long history in Pinedale. What do you think of the results of the boom? Has it been positive? Negative? What do you think?

WB: Again, positive for the whole county and there are some negative aspects of that. Air quality. Some people will talk about air quality. With the Sheriff's office it was, of course, the meth problem, but there was also the dysfunctional families that moved in. They didn't have ties to the community. They didn't have ownership anywhere and there was a lot of abuse that went on, especially child abuse, things like that. And that would be something else I'd offer to Sheriff Kegley is: you're going to see those issues. Your social services are going to be really taxed, DSF, SAFE, counseling services, they were very undermanned and still are. So.

RE: So overall you think the boom was a good thing and that Pinedale could never quite go back to what it was?

WB: I think so. Yup, it was good and it will remain to be that way because there's still more drilling going to go on.

RE: Right.

WB: I think they estimated twenty-three trillion cubic feet of gas here.

RE: Right, and I've heard recently there are going to be more and more wells being leased and everything. So there's been kind of a lull then, the last year or two?

WB: In the last year, for sure.

RE: And have you seen that in the work your officers have had to do?

WB: Yes. The rigs moved out. Those that stayed, though, we saw an increase in theft, big increase in theft and I attribute that to not being able to find work, so they have to do something else to support their habit. So they start stealing. But that's starting to slack off a little now, too. So.

RE: Well, have you enjoyed your time as Sheriff during this challenging time?

WB: Immensely. There's nights when I go home that I don't want to come back here, but I always do. It's a challenge, for sure, and when you have a good moment, you really cherish that one because there's ten bad ones that are about to show up.

RE: Well, for you what would be a good moment?

WB: Somebody coming up and saying, "Thanks, you did a good job." One my guys just the other day saving the life of a child, things like that because they hear over and over again—usually it's a constant barrage of "Those damn cops. They're out to get us all the time. They're laying and waiting for us," and that's just not the case. We haven't got time to do that. [Laughs]

RE: [Laughs] Why do you think creates that perception that you're a little aggressive or trying to do too much?

WB: Well, in the bars themselves and the people that are picked up for DUI, and I know firsthand they're treated very well when they come in here. They're treated with respect, but when they get out and they go back to the bar, it's a whole different story and [laughs] it's one that's not true and it just builds on itself and it snowballs. But for the main part I think the county is happy with law enforcement and I'm going to leave the department, I think, a heck of a lot better off than when I found it or took over, equipment wise and manpower wise.

RE: Well, if you were going to remain as Sheriff, a little conjecture here, are there some big issues you think still need to be addressed or that you would still like to tackle in some way?

WB: [Sighs] One big issue is our jail and I guess you could look at it as a new facility, but it's so split up. It was ill-conceived. It wasn't—the architect wasn't anyone that had ever built a jail before and the way it is now, I have to have twenty-three people to run it, to where if it was built the right way, I could probably do that same thing with sixteen.

RE: Okay.

WB: So that's one issue I think we'd change. Another one the next Sheriff is going to have to address is maybe downsizing and how to do that.

RE: But with more potential for more leases and more rigs, would this be a good time to downsize?

WB: I don't think so and I hope I've helped out the next Sheriff that way because of positions that have come open and people that have left, I haven't filled. I've still got them. They're still funded, but the people aren't there right now, and that was another issue that the citizens couldn't see. I had thirty-two slots for people to work here and back in those days, there might have been ten of those that were empty because I couldn't find people to fill them.

RE: Uh-hmm. Have you always felt like you've had enough of a budget to do what you have needed to do?

WB: Definitely. The Commissioners have been very supportive of me and this department, and without them it would have been a heck of a struggle, that's for sure.

RE: Well, do you have anything that you would like to add that I haven't asked that you think is important?

WB: I can't think of anything right now. Just other than that song, "If I make it through December, everything's going to be all right, I know."

RE: [Laughs] Well, only a few months left.

WB: That's right.

RE: Oh, good. Thank you. [Recorder off/on] Well, Sheriff Bardin, thank you so much for taking your time. I know you have a meeting here in another two minutes. I appreciate your time.

WB: Yup, thank you.

[End of Interview]