

Durango's people an interesting mix

NOTE: This was John Peel's second human-interest feature for the Durango Herald as a front-page columnist. It appeared on March 21, 1998.

By John Peel

Some hang out at the coffee shop all day. Others work the land and watch for rain.

Many simply serve their 40 hours and look forward to those two days each week they can ski, hike, mountain bike and kayak.

A few are trying to put children through college, and a few are collegians trying to remain children.

Our county, with Durango as its centerpiece, is fascinating in its mix of people. Ranchers and farmers have learned to commingle with yuppies and college students. And there are the many tourists, some of whom come back months later with worldly possessions in tow.

All are human and all, in some fashion or another, are interesting. Thus, the human interest angle.

This column's aim is to zero in on the people of our community and find out what motivates them, what's important to them. To find unique perspectives. To find the bonds that connect us.

The talents of the region's citizens should amaze recent immigrants, who must come to this off-the-beaten-path community and expect an off-the-beaten-path mentality. That vision just doesn't hold up after meeting the skilled doctors, professors, athletes and overqualified employees found throughout La Plata County.

This column proposes to underscore issues and problems and triumphs and oddities by spotlighting the people involved. They may be decision-makers or unemployed, natives or newcomers, hard workers or fun-hogs.

It's a growing, dynamic community. In a sense that's good. But the longer one stays here, the more frightening the word change becomes. Once we put some stake in our land, and our heart in the hills, we want to mold those changes into something we will enjoy five, 10, 20 years from now.

From a recent perspective, the changes in just the last decade have been drastic. The Animas River valley north of town has gone from a bucolic outpost to a pockmarked suburbia. Other county roads display much the same urban sprawl.

Fast food has become ubiquitous. There are factory outlet shops. We have Kmart and soon will have Wal-Mart. Aren't we lucky?

It's the montage of a big city -- Denver, Albuquerque, or whatever metropolis you came from -- on a much smaller, but just as important, scale.

La Plata County has lost much of its rural roots. Agriculture and mining have given way to tourism and recreation. What do the old-timers think about the changes? Why do newcomers want to make changes?

If it ever was a sleepy little place, it is no more. Through its ski areas, mountain biking and other recreation, Durango has been placed on the national and world maps. It has been listed on several national magazines' list of top towns to live and recreate.

With that popularity has come an influx of newcomers and the corresponding problems. Where will they all live, where will they work and, of course, where will they go shopping?

This column will be about the people of this variegated region. It will be about the newsmakers, but also about the common man and woman, whoever that is. U.S. Senator one day, skateboarder the next.

Sometimes the column will be tied to news events. Sometimes it will be tied to nothing at all. Sometimes it might come untied. But always, the human angle will be foremost.