May 17, 2021

Michael Patrick Flanagan Smith
Author
119 Bermuda Ave.
Lexington, KY 40505

**Written Statement to the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee of the Natural Resources Committee, United States House of Representatives**

Chair Porter, Ranking Member Gosar, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for this opportunity.

Oil field work is some of the hardest, roughest, toughest, and most dangerous work in the world. I know that because I've done it. From Summer of 2013 to Winter of 2014, I worked in the Bakken oil patch out of Williston, North Dakota. I am incredibly proud of my time as an oil field hand. I found great meaning in the work I did there. I found great comradery with the men I met doing that work. I am proud to count myself among them, and to call their families my friends. These are people who put their shoulders to the wheel of the world and make it turn.

Williston, North Dakota is a boomtown. In many ways, every boomtown is alike. Had a teamster from 1860's era Pithole, Pennsylvania stepped through a time warp and found himself and his mule clopping down Route 2 in Williston in the late 2000's, he would no doubt have recognized some of what he saw. In *Crude Reality: Petroleum in World History*, the historian Brian C. Black writes:

> "A critical portion of the boomtown's design was its ability to expand and then collapse like a tent... In the production of petroleum, towns had become an important but disposable cog, particularly for a model of development that was committed to allowing the industry—moving synergistically with the supplies—to boom and bust."

Boomtowns are built into the business model of oil extraction. They are not a bug. They are not a flaw. They are a feature. When an extractable resource is discovered, industry moves in, workers move in and the black market moves in. Much of the excitement and allure of boomtowns is a Wild West type of quality that these locations assume in the popular imagination. While this can be an intoxicating environment particularly for young men, the reality can lead to alcohol abuse, drug abuse, drunk driving, flagrant prostitution, sex trafficking, some killing, and lots of fist fights. There is, of course, good, clean fun to be had as well. But criminality is a feature of every boom. When I was in the Bakken, Williston North Dakota was home to the highest concentration of sex offenders per capita in the country. The current crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women in America has been tied to the prevalence of man camps, a common feature of modern boomtowns.

This influx of fast money into a small community creates extreme income inequality. The difference between a family who owns the mineral rights to their property and a neighbor who does not can be millions of dollars despite the fact both may have drilling rigs operating on their land. A kind of localized hyperinflation occurs. The most precious commodity in Williston, outside of oil, was housing. When I

hyperinflation occurs. The most precious commodity in Williston, outside of oil, was housing. When I first moved to town I lived in a flop house. For $450 a month I rented a mattress on the floor of a living room which I shared with four other migrant men in a small townhouse packed with as many as twelve people. It was the best deal in town. I'm grateful to the guy who rented me the space. In 2013, rents in Northwest North Dakota surpassed those of San Francisco to become the most expensive in the nation.

Boomtowns find ways to take your money as fast as you make it. Inflated prices affect every aspect of life in town. Lunch at a truck stop could cost me $30. High prices also have the effect of hollowing out local services. Schools, hospitals and restaurants have trouble staying staffed. A restaurant I liked to eat at would sometimes be forced to shut down for the day because they were short of help. A local diner took to stacking applications by the register with a sign saying "Complaints? Take one." The McDonalds was unable to provide indoor dining. When my truck broke down, it took me two months to get a mechanic to look at it. The cab driver I used during that period was so in demand that he sometimes worked around the clock, sleeping in his car between fares instead of going home and going to bed.

If you look at economic data about boomtowns, I would guess you are going to see jobs jobs jobs. If you look at the people in these communities you are often going to see prematurely lined faces, bloodshot eyes, worn and weathered brows, and other indicators of ill health. You are going to hear statements like I heard from a waitress who'd been living in a trailer for two years. She was about to return to her home state. "It's like a prison sentence," she said. "I'm going back. Good luck."

Obviously, too many jobs are better than no jobs. By definition, however, boomtowns go bust. Busts and booms are best thought of as two parts of one system. Before the 2000s, Williston boomed in the 1970s. Of the bust that followed, which coincided with a period of draught, North Dakota historian Clay Jenkinson, in his book *The Language of Cotton Woods: Essays on the Future of North Dakota,* writes:

> "I believe that the citizens of North Dakota have been suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) since the disastrous decade of the1980s...That period of North Dakota life was so unsettling, so stark, so dispiriting, that it left the people of North Dakota bewildered and frightening, numb and feeling defeated...You cannot understand the Bakken Oil Boom unless you factor in the high trauma of the 1980s."

One friend of mine, a Williston native, joked that between the booms, he'd looked for jobs by going through the obituaries. Another hand told me that during that same period he had taken to poaching, illegally hunting to put food on the table for his family. These are tough people, unbowed. But when the Bakken went bust in 2015, the guys I'd worked with who didn't wash out of town, found themselves spending more time waiting for the phone to ring than working on rigs. When I considered returning to the field, I was told "Don't bother."

At the beginning of the Bakken boom, many oil field jobs provided signing bonuses, housing, and per diems to the migrant work force. This was trumpeted by the oil industry, the national media and politicians. This enticed workers to move to town, myself included. By the time I arrived, however, these benefits had mostly dried up. Unlike the high wages, nobody I know of, outside of the local Williston Job Services Office (who I might add, do a very good job under difficult circumstances) did much at all to broadcast the fact that these opportunities were dwindling. The Job Services Office estimated at the time that eight new people were still arriving in town every day.

I landed a job as a swamper and a crane rigger for a rig moving company. I was paid $21.25 an hour. Estimates I hear bandied about regarding the great riches available to oil field workers sound to me now—when they don't sound like outright lies—like they must be based on overtime pay, as if working forty hours a week in an office could possibly be comparable to doing heavy manual labor for seventy hours a week for the same wage.

The average day in the patch is between twelve and fourteen hours of work, much of it back breaking. While some jobs require two weeks on and two weeks off, I was on call every day. The longest day I worked was 17 ½ hours. The longest week I recorded working was 95 ½ hours. I once worked 172 hours over the course of fourteen days. "I feel all busted up," I told the truckdriver I was working with. "Get used to it," he said.

Some of the men I worked with were local, but a great deal were migrant workers like me who had traveled in from all over the country. Several guys I knew had worked the silver mines in Elko, Nevada then moved to Williston when the price of silver dropped. I imagine many of them drifted down to Texas to work the Permian once Williston went bust. Many politicians, geologists, and much of the national media had predicted that Williston would continue to boom for decades to come. None of the experienced guys I worked with believed that. They understood that every boom busts and that these jobs are transient and temporary.

We worked through all kinds of weather. From the 99 degree dog days of summer to deep into North Dakota's bracing winter white outs. The coldest I ever worked in was -38 degrees. Cold weather gear was not provided for me, although I asked for it multiple times. Frostbite was not uncommon. One man I met told me that you could tell a real oil field hand by the fact he was missing the fleshy part toward the tip of his nose.

I complained about the lack of cold weather gear to my best friend Tyler, a 6'7" swamper with a big gap toothed grin, by saying I wish the job had some "perks." He responded by saying, "Well, we could die. That's kind of a perk." He had a great sense of humor. Tyler is now buried in the Bakken clay. He survived everything that was thrown at him in the field, and he died from an opioid overdose almost as soon as he left the work. He was 24 years old. To not have his dumb jokes and good-hearted counsel available to me as I have crafted this testimony is a source of incredible grief.

The danger of the work was ever present no matter the weather. The operator who trained me up, Kevin, had been driving big rigs since he was a teenager. He literally grew up in the oil patch. "You get sick of carrying dead bodies off this motherfucker," he told me. More than once. In a voice that could stop a damn clock.

I was often told that the company I worked for was stricter regarding safety measures than most. For safety training, I attended the OSHA 10 and spent a few days in a basement watching VHS tapes. As an experienced field hand told me once my boots were in the dirt, "We're just gonna yell at you until you figure it out. That's how I learned." The company employed a full time Safety Man and, in the nine months I spent in the field, I recall one instance of this man staying a full day on location.

One night, on a site I had been working, a gas leak caught the spark of a generator and burned down the tool pusher's (a roughneck's equivalent of a foreman's) sleeping quarters. The tool pusher survived, and company men from Texas and elsewhere were flown in to address the situation. At a safety meeting the

morning we returned to work on the rig, the company's representative was given a chance to address us. His exact words were, "If I were you, I'd be nervous." You'd think this would cause an uproar among a group of men risking their lives. It was met instead with shrugs. This casual disregard for our wellbeing only served to reinforce what we already knew to be true: our lives were cheap.

I currently work as a writer. This is a new job for me. Over the past decade, I have worked as a junk hauler, a furniture mover, a bartender, a stage hand, a singer and guitar player, and an oil field hand. It was my work in the oil patch that led to my becoming a professional writer.

When I migrated to Williston to join the Bakken boom, I did not do so as a journalist looking for a scoop. I was not a journalist. I did not do so as a hot shot author looking to pitch his agent on his next book. I didn't have an agent, and I'd never written a book. I packed up my truck and drove to northwest North Dakota for much of the same reasons everybody else did. I wanted money. I needed a new start. It seemed like my best option. I also continue to hold fast to a belief in the unique possibilities provided by the American experiment. Despite what I see as the dwindling prospects of working people in this country, I believe in the American Dream. The fact that I have been afforded the opportunity to make this statement before Congress is in itself a testament to the possibilities this nation provides its citizens, even those of us who grow up rough, and have never had much.

A lot of good, hard-working people have found ways to save money, pay off bills, and buy houses by working in extractive industries. That said, it is my belief that working people do this despite the systematic exploitation of the boomtown economic model employed by the oil industry. It is my belief that working people do so despite the dehumanizing labor practices of most multi-national oil conglomerates. I say this having slung chains, rigged up cranes, and harnessed up to climb the hopper tank. Do I believe oil companies are evil? No. I contracted for them, and I find the habit of demonization in our social discourse to be counterproductive to the business of making things better. Do I believe oil companies can and should do better? Absolutely. Do I think they should have been doing better for a long time already? Yes. Do I believe the Federal Government should work more on behalf of working people than for the benefit of multi-national corporate conglomerates. I do.

Oil field work is always going to be dangerous. That is part of the reason I was drawn to it. Because of the danger of the work, and because of the toll this work takes on the human body, I believe oil field workers should be more highly compensated. I believe the industry should put real money into extractive communities instead of treating them as tools that they toss out as soon as they are done with them. Not everything needs to be a cash grab. Not all the money needs to go to the top.

As a nation, we need to take care of our extractive communities. The hardworking people of towns like Williston, North Dakota have been on the front lines of energy extraction in some cases for longer than a century. In Pennsylvania, they've been at it since the Civil War. For much of the existence of this nation, these communities have literally powered the world. Much like our soldiers coming home from overseas deserve our gratitude, our respect and our tax dollars—because we owe it to them to put our money where our mouth is—so, I believe, do the workers in these extractive communities. I include coal mining towns like those in the Appalachian Mountains from which my family hails, as well as here in my adopted home of Kentucky, in this formulation as well. If sustainable green technology is the future, then it needs to provide sustainable, good paying jobs--something that frankly the oil companies have never delivered to the extent to which they have been capable. These new green jobs, should they

become available, should be placed in extractive communities. You will find no one on planet earth willing to work as hard as an oil field hand.

I thank you for your time.

With gratitude,

Michael Patrick F. Smith