

# North Dakota's great oil rush

Larry Oakes, Minneapolis Star-Tribune, 10-31-11

WILLISTON, N.D. -- School bus driver Barb Russell heard there was good money to be made here in the oil fields of North Dakota, so last month she packed a bag, locked her Farmington, Minn., home, and headed west. She tripled her income.

The 60-year-old grandmother rose every morning at 3 a.m. in September to drive a bus full of Halliburton Co. workers to drilling rigs in a place where trucks roar nonstop and everybody who wants a job has one.

Finding somewhere to lay your head is another matter. Russell ended up living in one of the dormitory-style "man camps" that have sprung up across the booming oil patch to help house the influx of an estimated 35,000 workers.

"I wish 'em the best on getting housing for everybody, especially with winter coming," said Russell, who stands out among the men in her pink cap. "I'd hate to see people sleeping in their cars."

There's no place like it anywhere else in America.

New drilling technology has freed up vast reserves of oil in the Williston Basin of western North Dakota, fueling an economic bonanza that has become a flat-out gold rush. As the rest of the country desperately tries to skirt a double-dip recession, North Dakota boasts a \$1-billion budget surplus and the nation's lowest unemployment rate. Recruits from Minnesota, Texas and both coasts keep arriving, reversing a long population decline. Schools are rushing to hire more teachers. Towns are adding more police officers.

And the boom shows no sign of letting up — almost 200 drilling rigs are boring 100 new wells a month. The state's most recent figures show 16,435 job openings, 48% more than a year ago.

But so many workers have flooded the oil patch that many longtime residents and officials are beginning to complain about something most places in the country could barely comprehend: too much prosperity, too much rapid growth.

In a region burned twice by oil booms that went bust, memories run deep. Towns such as Williston are caught trying to foster roots for workers, many of whom have no intention of settling in North Dakota, while figuring out how long this boom could last. It takes up to 100 workers to drill and prepare a well, but only one to operate it once it's producing.

"We got caught off-guard, thinking this would be another blip on the radar screen," said Ron Seeley, a longtime Williston dentist, umpire and sports announcer. "We need schools, roads and housing so that we can welcome both workers and their families."

Experts say the industry could pump 4 billion to 24 billion barrels of oil out of the Bakken oil formation, which also extends into Montana and Canada. They say there appears to be enough oil to support drilling 48,000 more wells in North Dakota during the next 20 years and give the region a large role in allowing the U.S. to achieve energy independence.

It would have been impossible for the region to handle all the workers without temporary cities known as man

camps or crew camps. Officials estimate up to 20,000 workers are living in such camps, scattered across 17 counties.

One of the largest, Bear Paw, houses nearly 1,000 people, 15% of them women, just north of Williston, on what was a wheat field 18 months ago. Each bedroom was spoken for even before it was built.

The camp consists of 215 prefabricated buildings bolted together to form a sprawling complex of sleeping quarters, a convenience store, free laundry facilities, an Internet cafe with 20 computers, and a recreation center with poker tables and big-screen TVs. Most bedrooms have private baths, flat-screen TVs, Internet access and DVD players. Alcohol is banned.

If drilling continues as projected, western North Dakota will have 45,000 wells within two decades, each with a life expectancy of 30 years or more, supporting 45,000 long-term jobs. That's in one corner of a state with 647,000 people.

It would mean not only growth but also change — from a nearly empty landscape cloaked at night in darkness to one covered with bobbing mechanical grasshoppers and licking flames of natural gas. It means dealing with environmental concerns about wasting natural gas and the effects of so much fracking, even if it occurs 2 miles below ground.

For towns such as Williston, it means trying to remain a place where people go to live, not just work. "The town needs to catch up," said Seeley, the dentist and sports announcer, watching "Monday Night Football" at J-Dubs sports bar with buddies from their 26-year-old fantasy football league.