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I had lived in Cheyenne for several years when, in 2006, an Albany County resident urged me to attend a hearing in Wyoming's capitol. She was acquainted with Alexandra Fuller, a well-known writer who had become interested in the case of Colton Bryant. In due course I got to know Fuller and eventually bought several copies of the book she wrote about the young father who died from a fall off a Patterson-UTI oil rig.

Even though Wyoming's Occupational Health and Safety (OSHA) found six serious safety violations in connection with Bryant's death, his widow and two small sons got no compensation for the loss of their breadwinner. OSHA fined the company a mere \$7,031; naturally, the company's number crunchers would conclude it was cheaper to pay the fines than correct the violations.

In 2012, safety improvements were still only small potatoes for the company. "Patterson-UTI is known for spotty safety record," wrote Donald Gilliland on April 8, 2012, in the Patriot-News, citing company employee deaths of the past few years.

Less than three months after Bryant's death, Patterson-UTI Energy announced record results for the first quarter of 2006. Their net income for the quarter had increased 174 percent, and their revenues for the quarter were up by 70 percent to \$598 million.

Fuller cites an article in High Country News of April 2, 2007, on fatalities in the oil fields. "At least 89 workers died on the job in the interior West's oil and gas industry from 2000 to 2006" that included 90-foot falls, massive explosions, poison gas inhalations, and crushings by safety harnesses. Of those, Wyoming is responsible for 35 deaths, by far the highest percentage.

"No rig hand I spoke to beyond those of fatalities on the rigs," writes Fuller in her book, "even those who had worked in the industry for decades, has ever seen an OSHA compliance officer on the oil patch. It would have cost Patterson-UTI two thousand dollars, a most, to have safety rails where Colton fell."

A year before she published "The Legend of Colton H. Bryant," Fuller wrote a guest column for WYOFile. The overpowering whiff of injustice drew her, she writes, when she was "out there on the oil patch, counting dead mule deer," and wringing her hands over the rigs where roughnecks died, first Bryant, "then another, and another." Bryant was the fourth roughneck in just over 18 months to be killed near Pinedale, Wyoming; in each case, "the well site was owned by Ultra Petroleum."

On the day of Colton's obituary in the Pinedale Roundup, an article on the same page announced Ultra's record-breaking profits. On May 3, 2006, less than three months after Colton's death,

Patterson-UTI Energy, owner of the rig of Colton's fall that snow-blowing night, announced record results for the quarter.

"There were no safety rails where Colton fell. No one saw him fall. No one can, or will, tell the Bryant family what happened to Colton the night he lay, alone, in freezing conditions for no one knows how long—30 or 40 minutes—until he was discovered, severely injured and hypothermic.

"He was flown from Pinedale to Salt Lake City where he died in the arms of his mother. . . on the afternoon of February 15, 2006."

The family received a plaque from the Governor of Wyoming thanking them for the service of their loved one. Colton's mother threw the plaque in the back of her closet.

"They received \$7,000 to bury Colton," Fuller notes in her WYOFile column. Colton's widow and his two small sons got a bit of worker's compensation that ran out later that year. OSHA, in spite of the safety violations that led to his death, "did not find Ultra culpable of any infractions related to the fall that killed him.

"If Colton's death had been an isolated incident, and if his family had been able to seek justice for his wrongful death, there would have been no story and I would not have written a book," adds Fuller. "But Colton's story represents the stories of scores of other roughnecks whose deaths contribute to Wyoming's woeful workplace fatality statistics."

A year after Colton died, the federal Center for Disease Control reported that Wyoming had the highest average annual fatality rate in the oil industry. A report published by Wyoming's Department of Employment, Research, and Planning revealed that Wyoming set a record in 2007 for the number of workers in all industries killed on the job. Colton Bryant is one of too many men who lost their lives drilling for oil.

Fuller notes the irony of a judge ordering a Greybull man to pay \$15,000 for killing a moose out of season. Poach a moose, and you'll be facing justice, yet four roughnecks can die in an 18-month period on wells owned by Ultra and still, the company is held responsible for nothing, even when reports abound of dozens of safety violations that led to the men's deaths, fumes the writer, adding, "Since 1988, not one roughneck's case against a major oil company has survived summary judgment." She angrily notes "the court's baffling decision to interpret Wyoming law as granting immunity to oil and gas companies."

Since then Wyoming and Texas have consistently had the highest fatalities from falls like the one that killed Colton Bryant. The operators running off-shore drilling, spurn safety and environmental regulations with impunity, and so do inland drillers. The cost-cutting by BP, Halliburton, and Transocean "called the entire industry's safety culture into question, according

to a national commission report released four months after the [Deepwater Horizon] well was plugged,” wrote Sarah Sneath in *Southerly* on August 18, 2021. Offshore oil and gas worker fatalities are underreported by federal safety agencies, she reports. Inconsistent and missing data, as well as loopholes that allow some fatalities to go unreported, make the drilling industry look safer than it really is. Big operations as well as marginally producing wells continue to endanger their workers.

Hence, it is difficult to understand why Governor Gordon would refuse millions in federal aid to shut down marginally-producing oil wells. The federal program offers \$5 million to close low-producing and idle wells to prevent errant methane gas emissions, wrote Dustin Bleizeffer in *WYOFile* on October 5, 2023.

The [Mitigating Emissions from Marginal Conventional Wells](#) program would pay the costs of voluntarily closing and remediating wells that produce less than the equivalent of 15 barrels of oil per day—aka “stripper” wells, Bleizeffer explained. Though these wells are not particularly lucrative, they account for about 10% of the state’s oil production and about \$265 million in annual revenue to the state, according to Gordon’s office.

“This approach . . . shows a complete disregard for the importance of this industry to Wyoming’s economy,” the governor said in a prepared statement. Not a word about the lives lost drilling for oil, the environmental damage the state has suffered and will continue to suffer as a result of fracking for oil, and the industry’s contribution to climate change.

I recently spoke to an employee of nearby Sinclair, the largest oil refinery in Wyoming, which processes mostly crude from Canada. “They’ll never shut down the place; its environmental contamination is too wide-ranging,” he told me. So much for our once-pristine skyline, swathed last summer in smoke flowing from our northern neighbors.