

This is what you would get, but it would look much better.

content=It's only 9 p.m., but the thump-thump of a driving base line is already wafting through the tiger stripe interior of the Astro Lounge, a downtown strip club, before flooding through an open door onto the street.

These days, the wait to get in can last an hour, says Jackie Painovich, a long-time bartender, and customers have been known to drop \$800 on a payday binge.

Inside, the room is packed with men who have just spent 12 sweaty hours on the hulking derricks that pull prosperity out of southern Wyoming's natural gas fields.

They are of a breed that virtually vanished from the American landscape when oil sold at less than \$25 a barrel. Hard-bitten and strong-armed, they are a fraternity of the rugged and ready who can do a job few others dare.

Here, and throughout the West, roughnecks are back.

"They're all from somewhere else and they're all here to work. The more money they make, the more money they spend," Painovich said.

"If there is such a thing as a slow night around here, I haven't seen it."

With the West in the midst of a once-in-a-generation energy boom, industry experts say there likely will be 15,000 wells drilled in Colorado and Wyoming over the next decade and a half. The machines that do that job are 100 tons of belching, creaking, twirling steel.

For the towns that ring the region's growing gas fields, the men who work those rigs are a mixed blessing. Crime is rising fast and drunken brawls are common. But the hotels are full and grocery stores have a hard time keeping food on the shelves.

Rock Springs Police Chief Mike Lowell sees the roughnecks as men who have to be ridden, and ridden hard.

"These are people who aren't rooted to the community. They go into a bar and seem to forget everything their mothers ever taught them," Lowell said.

A young officer when the last boom ended here in the early '80s, Lowell remembers the days of prostitutes walking K Street and fights that erupted into bar-emptying brawls.

During this boom, drug arrests in Rock Springs have gone up nearly five times and alcohol-related arrests have doubled in three years. Five to 10 pounds of methamphetamine are sold in the area every week. But Lowell is determined not to let his city descend into chaos again.

"We want people to do what we say and we don't want any guff about it," he said. "We want them to feel they're welcome. At the same time, while it may not be their home, we want them to realize it is our home."

Drive in just about any direction from the place Lowell calls home and derricks rise out of the rolling prairie like iron skeletons.

For the men who work them, that iron is a metaphor. There is perhaps no other job like it in America, combining the heavy machines of the vanishing Rust Belt and the outdoor ruggedness of the empty range.

"Everything on a drilling rig is big and heavy," said Casey James, a 29-year-old driller on a rig in the Jonah field north of Rock Springs.

"You ask for a hammer and you get a 5-pound sledge. You ask for a wrench, and you get a 30-inch pipe wrench."

And it's weight that is constantly in motion. A rig typically operates 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Wrenches squeal. Pipe lurches. Chains swing. A moment of misplaced attention can maim, even kill. The workers tell a joke among themselves about a roughneck who goes into a bar and holds out the first and last fingers of one hand. What's that? the joke goes. It's a roughneck ordering four beers. It's gallows humor.

Since October, five people have died on gas rigs in southwestern Wyoming. With an estimated 2,000 rig workers in the region, that makes it one of the most dangerous places in America to earn a living. But the risk creates a bond some of the men describe as among the strongest in their lives.

"The people that you work with out here, they basically become your family," said Charles Kelley, 42, who blames long stretches in the gas fields for the break-up of his second marriage.

For a time in the '90s, Kelley said he left the job to chase a more stable life.

"One phone call and I was right back in," he said. "It can completely tear apart your family. You can lose everything you've got. But it's what you love to do."

Subhed goes here

Exxon Mobil made \$36.1 billion in net profit in 2005 as both oil and gas prices soared, or the equivalent of about \$1,100 every second.

That company, as well as others like it, turns around and pays major drilling contractors as much as \$22,000 a day for a rig and its crews to punch holes in the gas-rich fields of Wyoming and Colorado's western slope.

And so it goes.

An experienced roughneck makes \$26.50 an hour. Plus overtime. Plus bonuses.

Some rig workers on Colorado's Western Slope pulled down \$84,000 last year. Most never graduated from college, and some never finished high school.

For a far-flung swath of blue-collar America, the current energy boom is a major >>opportunity. In the packed trailer parks and hotel parking lots, the license plates tell of the draw of good pay and plentiful work: Louisiana. California. Texas. Michigan.

"Some guy flagged me down on a county road at 9:30 at night," said Roy McClure, the mayor of Parachute, Colo. "He told me he had driven 16 hours straight and wanted to know where he could get an oilfield job."

"By the time the stories get told back home and get embellished a little, it's the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow for a lot of these guys."

And if energy is gold, then places like Parachute and Pinedale, Wamsutter and Big Piney are the modern global economy's version of the '49er camps — updated with satellite TV and catered meals.

These are towns where the bars open at 6 a.m., traffic jams around shift changes can last an hour or more, and a camping spot, much less an apartment, is nearly impossible to find.

Rig crews are crowded together in housing known as man camps. The best are modular compounds with weight rooms and professionally-trained chefs. Most are little more than trailers with bunks stacked in cramped bedrooms. One shift comes in, the next goes out.

And the shifts are long, usually 12 hours. In Wyoming's high desert it can sink to 40 below in winter, and reach well over 100 degrees in summer.

For most, it's seven days on, seven days off, but with labor in short supply, it's possible to work just about as long your body can hold up. Lance Hardy, a 28-year-old from Tyler, Texas, recently finished 28 days straight.

"When you work on your days off, that's just more money," he said. "You got to make it while you