



URANIUM'S NEW HORATIO ALGER

By J. P. McEvoy

WHEN Hollywood gets around to making that colossal 3-D saga of the rugged uranium prospector — “The Great U-Don’t It” — the very last man they will cast for the romantic lead is 33-year-old “Hot Rock” Charlie Steen, the new Horatio Alger of uranium. Slight, balding, wearing thick glasses, Steen looks more like “Mr. Peepers” of TV than like the never-say-die “rock hound” who, single-handed, has ferreted out the richest uranium deposit on this continent.

Only months ago, Steen and his wife and four children were freezing and starving on the wild Colorado Plateau. Under his feet, over his head and all around him, in the desolate canyons and mesas, other prospectors were finding uranium — but not Charlie. Stubbornly he kept on borrowing and burrowing. “I spent ninety per cent of my time raising money and the other ten per cent prospecting — mostly where experts said I was wasting my time.”

Finally, his wife down with pneumonia, his credit for groceries exhausted, and obliged to walk twenty-five miles to town because he had no gasoline, it looked as though Steen was licked. Then he struck “hot rock” — stuff that drove his borrowed Geiger counter crazy.

Today, Atomic Energy Commission experts estimate he has anywhere from ten to 300 million dollars’ worth of ore-bearing uranium and vanadium in his 12 claims (600 x 1500 feet each) near Moab, Utah — 40 air miles west of Grand Junction, Colorado, as Steen careens in his new plane these days over the jagged 13,000-foot La Sal Mountains.

I met Steen all dressed up in store clothes with gold compasses for cuff links. (“I don’t need ’em now — I know where I’m going!”) He was sitting in Sheldon Wimpfen’s office in Grand Junction — headquarters of all AEC uranium buying west of the Mississippi — nonchalantly dis-

cussing the building of a \$2,500,000 mill to process the ore from his mines. Production was running away with him. "I shipped 50 tons last December," he burred, "1000 in January, 4000 in May. In some places the ore is 40 feet thick. I've named my mines 'Ike,' 'Mamie,' 'Nixon,' etc. Mamie's averaging half of one per cent U₃O₈ (uranium oxide). She's the best ore we've got, the largest U₃O₈ lode in the U.S.A."

Wimpfen nodded solemn agreement for the AEC.

THE PROSPECT of being the only individual miner in uranium history who could mill his own ore and pocket all the profits — from mine mouth to uranium concentrate delivered in sealed drums to the AEC — intrigued Steen. "You need another mill," he said to Wimpfen. "I hear you have 500 mines now in the Colorado Plateau and production has doubled over last year."

"Could be," said Wimpfen, but I noticed that glazed look which films the official AEC eye when anyone gets too close to classified information, such as how much uranium ore the United States is getting.

Thousands of amateur prospectors plus several hundred trained geologists and mining engineers are now scouring the plateau. Most of this country is so wild and rugged that planes are used for the first look-see. Equipped with Geiger counters and scintillometers, these planes fly the canyon rims as low as 75 feet

above the ground, checking for indications of uranium-bearing ores. When found and pin-pointed, field geologists slog in on foot for more exhaustive studies.

Whether discovered by government agencies or by prospectors like Charlie Steen, all the ore produced is mined by private enterprise. Where public land is involved, as on most of the plateau, the AEC leases it to individuals or companies to mine. The United States is of course the sole customer, buying all the ore at contract prices based on its richness in uranium.

As you drive over this miracle mesa, you see thousands of stakes which mark exploratory drill holes — including red-topped stakes for the AEC that pin-point immediate uranium supplies, and yellow-topped stakes which mark the borings of the U.S. Geological Survey — locating future reserves not commercially practical at the present time. Three million feet of exploratory holes will have been drilled by 1954 — more than half of them by private industry.

I ASKED Charlie Steen, "How did you find your bonanza?"

"I'm no swivel-chair geologist," said Steen. "I've been around since I worked my way through Texas College of Mines ten years ago. First job was down in Bolivia. Field geologist for Patino the Tin King. We didn't agree — and since I couldn't fire him he fired me. Then

I hunted oil in the Amazon jungle for Socony Vacuum. After a while I came back to the States and did the same for Standard Oil of Indiana. One day I told off three of their geologists from the front office. Just my luck, they turned out to be the superintendent, the assistant superintendent, and chief of operations. I can pick 'em! My wife was expecting, too. That didn't help. I've got four kids, now, the youngest three. All seemed to know how to come along when things were toughest.

“BY 1948 I had argued myself out of geology jobs and was taking anything I could get to feed the family. Looked like I was stuck down in Houston when I read in a mining journal in 1950 how amateurs were making fortunes finding uranium. That did it.

“Mother said she'd grubstake me. No one else would. She borrowed money from a loan shark and we headed for Dove Creek, Colorado. Bought a diamond drill and hit some mineralization in the first hole — not too good, but too good to forget. Meanwhile my wife was having a baby and we lived on breakfasts of 'government beef' (illegal deer). Some folks were sorry for us because we had no milk for the new baby and were feeding it weak tea with sugar. But shucks! When babies have diarrhea that's what doctors prescribe, so that wasn't so bad.

“I was getting nowhere — fast. So we pulled out for the Yellow Cat

area in Utah, arriving Christmas Eve. They told me Utah winters were mild. Huh! I drilled two hours a day and spent the rest thawing out our water, food, clothes, and babies. But there was plenty of meat roaming the hills and we were too hungry to look at the calendar to see if it was in season.

“In the spring, Mother had a heart attack and that wiped us out again. I scouted all over trying to raise money, but finally had to pull out and went to Tucson for a millionaire who had a tungsten prospect he wanted me to test on the Papago Indian reservation. I tried to drill it but it was too tough. So I went to work as a carpenter — they were building the guided-missile plant at Tucson — and I did my prospecting week-ends. I found a good copper prospect and another millionaire to back me for a few holes, but he pulled out in the middle, too, and left me flat again. I couldn't even buy coal to keep us warm, so I borrowed it from the railroad.”

“You picked it up along the tracks?”

“Hell, no! I got it where they kept it. I had no time to waste prospecting for coal.

“Two years before this I had staked 12 claims in Utah — on land the AEC had said was 'barren of possibilities' — and when April last year came around I stood to lose 'em unless I went back and did my assessment work. You know, you must do \$100 worth of work each year to

keep title to a claim. We had to sell the trailer to get the money to get back there, we were so broke. We jammed into our little red jeep, me and the wife and four kids, and headed for Utah.

"Out on the claim we lived in a two-room shack, no water — plumbing outside. I dreamed about uranium all night and drilled for it all day, and then my wife got double pneumonia, which cleaned out what we had left. We said: 'This is the end. We can't go on!' And then we hit it! — July 6, 1952 — but we didn't know until three weeks later what we had. I had no Geiger counter. Couldn't afford a luxury like that, but I borrowed one on July 28 and the black stuff I brought up — the first core drill ever drilled in that district — knocked that old Geiger counter silly! I'd finally struck it."

"Then what happened?"

"I took the core samples, but not to the big companies — too cagey for that. I had worked for big companies. I took it to a Texan in the oil business. He sent an engineer out. When the engineer saw my beat-up jeep and two-room shack and the 'government beef' bones, he made such a lousy offer I told him to go to hell. But the Texan kept his word and didn't talk, and just to show you how the cards fall, I've already turned down \$5,000,000 for the property.

"Just to give you an idea, we've hauled out more than a million dollars' worth of ore since the first of

the year. What's more, not one dime of federal, state or local money has gone into this operation. It has been 100 per cent private enterprise. I'm my own man — always been and always will be!"

"One more question: What kept you going in spite of all your disappointments and hardships?"

"I'll confess to you — I was afraid to stop. Once you give up prospecting and go back to the security of even a poor job, it's almost impossible to break away. Even when you know the sad old story that prospectors nearly always get gyped out of their discoveries. But I've held on to control of mine. Lucky, I guess."

LUCKY? An old prospector who has known Steen through the years summed it up: "Charlie Steen's got the damndest streak of pure mule stubbornness I've ever seen. It outcrops all over him. That's why he stuck it out until he made his strike — that's why he's been able to hang on to it, too. Lucky? Hell!"

I asked Sheldon Wimpfen how the Atomic Energy Commission felt about a lone prospector like Charlie Steen locating the country's biggest uranium deposit in competition with government experts and federal funds.

"We're happy about it," he said. "This country needs all the uranium we can get. If it takes more Charlie Steens to find it I just hope we find more Charlie Steens!"

THEY SAID THIS



➤ We of the military will always do what we are told to do. But if this nation is to survive, we must trust the soldier once statesmen fail to preserve the peace. We must recapture the will and the determination to win come what may, once American arms have been committed to the battle. We must reject the councils of fear which strange and alien doctrines are attempting to force upon us. We must proclaim again and again an invincible adherence to the proposition that in war there can be no substitute for victory. *General Douglas MacArthur*

➤ It is almost unbelievable that today American troops are serving in 49 foreign nations. . . . Korea has cost us \$22,000,000,000 in known spending. *Fulton Lewis, Jr.*

➤ Since the end of World War II, the United States has expended about \$6,900,000,000 in aid of all types (economic, military, and Point Four) to Asia, and about \$28,800,000,000 in aid to Europe.

Hanson W. Baldwin

➤ People react against words of high idealism without corroboration in fact. They do not want grand words. People are tired of charge-throwing in the United Nations, of accusations. In everybody is the desire for the countries to make a constructive approach in the United Nations. *Dag Hammarskjöld*

➤ General Mark Clark follows his predecessors, Generals Douglas MacArthur, Matthew Ridgeway, and James Van Fleet, in telling the American people that the Korean War could have been won had we massed our means, which is a technical way of saying that we did not do the job with all we had available to do it. . . . Men of quality will not stay with a service which deliberately rejects the prospect of winning a war and which permits an enemy to hold Americans as hostages. *George E. Sokolsky*

➤ General Ridgeway issued a warning that if Russia attempted an attack on Western Europe, our allied military forces there would be practically helpless. *John T. Flynn*