

Some transplants remain, but many have left since downturn

By CHRISTINE PETERSON - Special to the Star-Tribune | Posted: Tuesday, November 3, 2009 1:00 am |

Carol and Joe Weaver pose in the living room in their Casper home last week. The Weavers moved to Wyoming from Georgia last year after struggling to find work at home. (Dan Cepeda/Star-Tribune)

Carol Weaver moved to Casper with her husband almost a year ago.

She made the state her home, even blogging about their weekends exploring Wyoming. The couple packs picnic lunches and drives somewhere new: Dallas Dome, Chief Washakie's Cabin, Hoback Canyon and Sand Springs. She never tires of seeing antelope.

She also has a good job here, working as an administrative assistant for the Rocky Mountain Oilfield Testing Center. Even if they didn't like it in Wyoming, Georgia, their previous home, has far less to offer.

A number of her co-workers are also from other states, migrating to Wyoming primarily for new jobs. Some have been around for several years; others packed up, headed back to try their luck closer to home.

As Wyoming's economy slumps, the newest members of its work force feel the crunch the most, according to Tom Gallagher, the research and planning manager for the Wyoming Department of Employment.

Roughly 23 percent of Wyoming's workers are nonresident, and of the recent 12,000 jobs lost, one in four was held by someone who recently moved here, Gallagher said.

The disproportionately large number is mostly due to the nature of Wyoming's economy. When main industries such as mining and construction are booming, companies need more employees than the state has to offer, he said. As the economy constricts, like it has since early 2009, the state sheds jobs.

According to recent data, those who lost their jobs remain in Wyoming to file unemployment in hope of other openings. Wyoming's 6.8 percent unemployment rate still promises more than a national jobless rate of nearly 10 percent.

Wamsutter resident Dana Cockrell moved with her husband three years ago. He worked as a general foreman for Pat's Roustabout Service.

In July, Dana's husband John died, and she stayed in Wamsutter with her four children.

"This is home. I have a lot of people who have become my family here," she said.

The couple had friends and family interested in moving as well, but since the downturn they remain in their home states, waiting to see what happens.

While Cockrell and Weaver still have their jobs and remain happy in the Cowboy State, some transplants tend to want to live closer to both their families and their cultural backgrounds.

Those already in Wyoming can also discourage new people from staying.

"As a resident, you probably don't want to build any more vulnerability into your relationships than you have to," Gallagher said.

Newcomers, then, may not feel welcomed and will leave, reinforcing some Wyomingites' opinion that those here for jobs will ultimately return to their original homes. There are also those newcomers who will stay, despite a downturn in the economy.

Ultimately, Gallagher said, diversifying Wyoming's economy, along with better welcoming the newcomers it requires, is the only way to alter the effects of an ever-changing work force.

In the meantime, jobless residents and nonresidents will continue collecting unemployment, waiting to see what Wyoming, and the nation, will do.