

Marko Ruble

Marko Ruble is a graduate of the University of Wyoming and a former student in Pete Simpson's class, "Wyoming's Political Identity." Marko is a founding partner of A&R Trading, LLC, an import and export management services company. He resides in Cody, Wyoming with his wife, Lindsay, and two sons.

From Hamburgers in Jeffrey City

So, I sit down, and of course there's a guy bellied up to the bar and Fox News is on the TV. Yet to each their own. I just want to eat my burger and wonder what things would be like in Jeffrey City when the US energy demands make it worthwhile to go after uranium in the hills around the town again. And I'm down to the last few bites of my burger and the ketchup is starting to squeeze out from underneath the bun, as always happens when I eat a burger, which takes some concentration to keep it from dribbling onto my clothes. Mind you, I would be happy sitting there eating and wondering about this town which has a look of post-apocalypse when the guy at the bar wants to make friends. Small talk ensues, and before I know it we are talking politics. I'm a poli sci major, and he asked what I did in school and what on earth I planned to do with a poli sci degree. "Hopefully not much," I said. "Of course that depends on how good is pays." And then, boom! He laid it out on my table. The time for concentrating on not getting ketchup on my pants came.



The iconic Top Hat Motel sign in Jeffrey City is recognized throughout the state. The uranium-mining boomtown established around 1957 went bust when the mine shut down in 1982 and 95% of its population left.

PHOTO BY LELAND RUCKER



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“Them sons-a-bitches out there in Washington makin’ their deals with liberals and lobbyists and tellin’ us what to do all the time. I swear to Christ they should all be shot.”

Damn it! It would be so much easier for me to say “yep” and go on, but I can’t ignore the logic gene switching on in my DNA. It’s time to chat.

“Would you be the one pulling the trigger?” I ask.

“Hell yeah, but I wouldn’t be the only one.”

“Is there a lot of people out here who feel this way?”

“God damn right there is,” he says.

“But, this is a ghost town; nobody lives here.”

“Well, I know people around this state.”

The conversation could take a turn right into Fort Poordecisionton if not played right, so I ask him: “What’s the first three digits of your social security number?”

“Five-two-zero, why?”

There’s a reason this guy lives here. He’s been screwed by people before, and there is a trust issue that will never be resolved by anything except living out here by uranium mines, sage brush, and the Sweetwater River.

“Just wondering if you’re from Wyoming. And, you are. Whereabouts did you grow up?”

“Rawlins,” he says gruffly—the last of his bear foam caught on his mustache.

“You ever heard of Jay’s Drive-In?”

“You kiddin’ me? I used to go there all the time. They had the best burgers.”

“Yeah, that was my mom’s family’s business. They had another restaurant over in Rock Springs, too.”

“I’ll be damned, you’re a Santich?”

“No, a Ruble. My mom was Peggy Santich, but she married a guy with the last name Ruble.”

“S..t, I went to school with yer mom. I always had a thing for her,” he says.

Things could have gotten messy. It would have been easy to play devil’s advocate and proclaim my bleeding heart liberalism, but it seems that would be about as productive as flickin’ rattlesnakes just to see if it can be done. But, this conversation is part of Wyoming’s political identity. The guy is ready to declare a call to arms against the federal government if enough people stand by him, but since that’s not going to happen any time soon, we both realize there is a connection between us, and for him it involves having a school-age crush on my mother, and the best burgers he’s ever had.

By the way, I don’t remember if I got any ketchup on my clothes. I don’t even remember if I finished the burger.



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Anyway, the moral of the story: Wyoming is a small world, and here we are living in it. In a ghost town one can make a connection with a person one click shy of being a hermit. In essence, citizens of Wyoming can't get too mad at too many people for too long because there just aren't that many people to be mad at if indeed one wants to still be a part of Wyoming society. And, it's also a fixture of that glaring tenet of Wyoming's political identity: independence. A truly independent person will respect another's argument. It's inherent in the ability for one to call oneself independent. I love this place.



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