

HOUSTON CHRONICLE

Thursday, January 26, 2017 | HoustonChronicle.com and News.com | 10¢ (10¢/copy) | 82¢/copy | (713) 861-1000

WORLD
Hottest year on record - again

Earth cooled in a brief respite last year, but 2016, with its extreme weather, was the hottest year on record.

NATION
Obama vows to speak at 'Cruz debate'

President Barack Obama said he will not go to the debate between Texas Gov. Greg Abbott and Sen. Ted Cruz.

CITY/STATE
Lift expires: \$20 million grant for arts college

A grant from the state that helped fund the University of Houston's College of Architecture will expire.

LEGISLATIVE
Simsouh rebuts bathroom bill

Texas Rep. Louie Gohmert's bill to restrict bathroom use for transgender people has drawn a rebuttal from Rep. Louie Gohmert.

WORLD
Foreign troops prepare to enter W. Africa nation

French troops are preparing to enter Mali to help fight terrorism and stabilize the country.

BUSINESS
Kilinda Morgan signs recovery bill in industry

Rep. Louie Gohmert's bill to restrict bathroom use for transgender people has drawn a rebuttal from Rep. Louie Gohmert.

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Nov. 19, 2017

Dreams of prosperity

Dependent on energy industry, town is banking on Trump to help rebuild its economy

By Ryan Maye Handy



Elizabeth Conley

Lifelong Democrat Billy Bob Evans instead voted for Donald Trump, like most residents in Jewett.



Elizabeth Conley

Jewett's economic downturn meant fewer sales for Jim Salley, owner of Rodeo Western Wear.

JEWETT — Jim Salley has spent a half-century selling boots, clothes and gear to men and women working in the local coal mine, steel mill, and oil and gas fields, but the last few years have been a struggle.

The energy bust cost the country hundreds of jobs; the recent shutdown of the local coal mine eliminated another 250. The steel mill has slashed hours and pay of its employees. As for Salley's business in downtown Jewett, sales are down 20 percent.

"We are not in good times," he said.

But Salley, 72, expects that to change Friday, when Donald Trump is sworn in as the nation's 45th president. Throughout the campaign, as Trump pledged to unleash the oil and gas industries, end the so-called war on coal, and stop cheap imports from undermining U.S. manufacturing, his promises spoke to

few places as much as this community of 1,200 between Houston and Dallas.

Here in Leon County, which gave Trump 86 percent of its vote, expectations are high that a new era of prosperity is on its way. On Jewett's Main Street, in the shops among empty storefronts, in the popular restaurant CJ's Kountry Cookin', in the local library, and at the Chamber of Commerce, people talk about how Trump will lift regulations on oil and gas, impose tariffs on foreign steel, spend billions on public works and remove environmental restrictions on coal.

All this, they say, could translate into more jobs, more people moving into town, and more customers for local businesses like Salley's Rodeo Western Wear.

John Sitton, the mayor for the past four years, has served during the recent hard times. Sitton, 78, the son of



Elizabeth Conley

Joe Hardison, who grew up in Jewett, grabs a duck for customers at the Jewett Flea Market.

poor sharecroppers who rose to own a machinery company, blames the energy policies, environmental regulations and overreach of the Obama administration for his community's economic troubles.

"I am just hoping to goodness that, come Friday, things get turned around right there and then," he said.

Good times turn bad

Jewett, located about 130 miles north of Houston, is hidden in oak and cedar groves, just a few miles west of Interstate 45. For much of the last century, Jewett was a poor farming and ranching community that young people fled in



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Elizabeth Conley

Business owner Pat Schmidt said she is convinced that Donald Trump will help small businesses and towns across rural America.

search of work elsewhere. But in 1975, Nucor, now the nation's largest steel manufacturer, opened its mill, which today employs about 400.

A decade later, a surface mine began operation to feed a coal-fired power plant. In the 2000s, the shale revolution opened nearby gas fields and provided lots of work for local oil field services companies.

By the end of 2014, the unemployment rate in Leon County had fallen to 4.4 percent as the energy boom brought jobs and money that boosted other industries. In Jewett, the Nucor mill, which makes steel pipe used in drilling, was running 24 hours a day, seven days a week for most of the year.

The bust, however, hit the area hard. Leon County lost 1,000 jobs — about one in seven. The unemployment rate peaked last summer above 7 percent, more than

“I am just hoping to goodness that, come Friday, things get turned around right there and then.”

—John Sitton, Jewett mayor

two points above the state average.

Come fall, things didn't look much better. Houston-based NRG Energy, the owner of the power plant, said it would dump its contract with the local coal mine in favor of cheaper and cleaner-burning coal from Wyoming's Powder River Basin. With the loss of its only customer, the mine, owned and operated by Colorado-based Westmoreland Coal Co., shut down on Dec. 31, throwing as many as 250 people out of work.

Westmoreland did not return requests for comment.



Elizabeth Conley

Lillie Thomas helps spruce up Mt. Olive Church in Jewett, where residents expect the Trump era to revive the local economy.

‘Greatest opportunity’

On the outskirts of Jewett, the steel mill makes more than 1 million tons of steel a year, most of which is sold in Texas to construction and the oil and gas industries. During the two-year oil bust, Nucor, which has a no-layoff policy, cut hours of operation and pay of its workers. Nucor officials declined to provide specifics on the impact of the bust on their business.

The Nucor plant is only beginning to recover, with some of its operations still on reduced schedules. One day in early January, Ross Simmons, 56, stood behind two layers of protective glass as hundreds of tons of scrap metal, heated to 3,000 degrees, were melted down to make steel for an oil and gas pipe. He’s the manager of Nucor’s melt shop, the first step in the

process of turning scrap metal into steel.

Simmons grew up 30 miles outside Jewett. He hopes the Trump administration policies will help the steel industry with proposals such as increasing federal spending on highways, bridges and other infrastructure that use lots of steel.

Managers at the Nucor plant said they expect to get help on trade. They have been frustrated by what they see as lax enforcement of U.S. laws.

In particular, they claim that foreign manufacturers, including Mexico, are gaming U.S. import rules to sell their steel in the U.S. at unfairly low prices. They said they expect such practices to end under Trump, who has made Mexico a target.

“In this administration,” said Allen



Elizabeth Conley

A coal mine in the process of reclamation just outside Jewett.

Bracey, the sales manager, “we have the greatest opportunity, more than with any other administration, to enforce laws.”

‘Meant to be’

Most people think that not even Trump can save the coal mine, which produces a particularly dirty form of coal known as lignite and can’t compete with coal mines in Wyoming. At the same time, they expect that a Trump administration and its pledge to support the broader coal industry will take the pressure off NRG’s coal burning power plant, which employs about 150.

The jobs provided over the years by the mine, the steel mill and the power plant helped make Jewett into a place where people could stay, raise families and put down roots over generations, said Patricia Schmidt, who has lived in Jewett for more than 30 years. For years, Schmidt, 71, and her husband, Kenneth, lived in Houston and visited Jewett on weekends. But in 1984, they decided to move their family of three kids here permanently, because they loved the rural lifestyle.

The Schmidts own a business that makes crowns for local dentists. In recent

years, their company, Phoenix Dental Laboratory, has suffered as residents, out of jobs or struggling with pay cuts, put off dental work. Sales at Phoenix Dental have plunged about 50 percent.

Schmidt, who writes a column for the local newspaper, is convinced that Trump will help small businesses and small towns across rural America. And she expects it to happen quickly.

She sees Trump quickly repealing the executive orders of President Barack Obama that have limited pipeline expansions and drilling (both good for the steel mill). She believes Trump will also rein in the Environmental Protection Agency and its efforts to impose ever stricter emissions restrictions on power plants (good for the NRG generating station).

In short, she said, she expects the first year of Trump’s presidency to be wonderful.

“This little community has prayed over this election,” Schmidt said. “And as far as I am concerned, God had a hand in it. He did. He stepped in and changed minds and hearts. I think (Trump) is meant to be.”