

Book Review

E.B. Maple (Peter Werbe)

1982

A review of

Powerline: The First Battle of America's Energy War, Barry M. Casper and Paul David Wellstone, The University of Massachusetts Press, 1981, 314 pp.

In many ways this is a hard book to get a handle on. It would be easy to dismiss the protagonists as middle-income, conservative, small-landholding farmers pitted against a giant power company and only squawking when their ox is suddenly gored. But it's more than that. The farmers who tried to stop a 430 mile long direct powerline from trespassing across their property in the middle '70s were propelled along by the deceit of politicians and corporations until most of them had experienced a profound transformation in how they viewed their isolated rural world of western Minnesota.

Undoubtedly, the power companies who desired to bring electricity from a generating plant in North Dakota to the Twin Cities could never have envisioned the opposition that was to spring to the fore. When the line was first publicly announced, the farmers were flabbergasted to learn that the massive 180 foot high tower sites had been chosen by a computer which was programmed to assign a number from 0 to 6 depending upon how highly the area was valued in order to minimize an "adverse environmental impact." So, while airports, highways, and wildlife areas received a coding of 6, farmland was designated 0, and that is where the powerline was to zig-zag; across the farms of people never consulted as to its advisability.

The farmers rapidly formed a number of county organizations to combat the line and the first half of the book laboriously details the bureaucratic hearings, legislative committees and court actions that these believers in American justice undertook to get relief. However, the protesters quickly came to realize that all of their protests were for nothing. The alleged beneficiaries of the line, the city dwellers miles to the East, were hungry for energy, and the farms were to be sacrificed regardless of their feelings.

The opposition to the line was based on a variety of rational, tangible objections such as health and safety questions (the effects of living close to high voltage direct current powerlines are still not known conclusively) and the interruption of irrigation, but mostly it boiled down to a commitment to and protection of the land. The farmers were insulted by the obvious disregard for their feelings by the power companies and state government, but perhaps most importantly they did not want this symbol of the cities and the modern world parked in their back 40. Verlyn Math, one of the protest leaders put it thusly: "[Farmers] have assumed protection of the land,...and they are the stewards, and outsiders are desecrating it with this massive thing against their will." Or by another, Gloria Woida, who said, "I love farming. I could never be satisfied in the city. I like to be able to step out the back door and let out a holler."

It was these sentiments which led the farmers to direct action when the charade of the courts had finally played itself out and held that the state had the right to seize the land for the powerline. Moments after the surveyors came on Virgil Fuchs' land in June 1976 a tripod was smashed. This was the beginning of a long series of violent clashes between farmers and the powerline crews and the state police. Ball bats and riot batons flew, crowds of

angry farmers routed the surveyors and construction workers, a protest newsletter appeared, resistance meetings sprung up and, finally, arrests—arrests of people committed to law and order, but who had finally been pushed to the limits. The conservative nature of these West Minnesotan farmers had been broken. Gloria Woida, a protest leader: “I will never shut up and be a quiet person again and I will be involved in other struggles. Had I known what the Indians were going through in Wounded Knee, I’d have been there; and if I’d known more about the Vietnam war protests, I think I would have been there.”

By 1978 hundreds of farmers had joined the fray and went into the fields daily to stop the surveying and construction. It finally took the stationing of half of the entire force of Minnesota State troopers to stop the angry protesters who had moved to mechanized protest utilizing tractors, manure spreaders and ammonia sprayers. Civil disobedience tactics were employed with some of the participants smearing themselves with pig shit making their arrest and detention a decidedly objectionable process to the guardians of the law. Community solidarity was so intense that several of the local sheriffs refused to enforce the court decisions against the farmers and one long-time county prosecutor resigned rather than bring charges against his neighbors.

The 200 armed troopers eventually prevailed, and the towers were erected, but the struggle did not stop at this point. The idea that since all legal remedies had been exhausted, the farmers should relent, occurred only to those within the power companies and the state government to whose benefit the judicial process had been manipulated. The farmers undertook a sustained campaign of sabotage against the powerline equipment which seemed even to the participants out of character for people raised on respect for private property.

Tower after tower came tumbling down; suspiciously soon, some said, after whole families of protesters would meet near the line for a “wienie roast.” The farmers complained that “bolt weevils” had attacked the supporting structures and this is what caused them to crash to the ground. The companies soon offered large rewards for convicted saboteurs. Also, the towers suffered a rash of what the farmers called “insulator disease” as thousands of glass conductors were shot off the towers. The companies employed private guards, helicopters and state police, but no arrests were ever made and the sabotage delayed considerably the opening of the line. One farm wife, Patty Kakac, expressed much of what the farmers in the area felt: “It’s funny. Several years ago I would have thought pulling towers down was extreme. Not now. I am almost to the point where it is not extreme enough.”

But this is where the story leaves off and where it poses its ultimate question (or rather suggests it since the book never goes beyond the narrative): What do you do to move a struggle beyond the point where life is impossible for you?

The farmers tried one less extreme measure: a gubernatorial candidacy of a protest leader that contained a surprisingly radical reform platform of reduced military spending, minority and women’s rights and slogans which said “Tax the corporations, feed the poor, deliver wealth to every door” and a song which ended with the New Left slogan of the decade, “Power to the People...” Certainly, changes of immense proportions had overcome these people.

This “small” struggle, defeated and overcome, still had the capacity to transform its participants, to affirm their commitment to the land and their community, and to strengthen them in their search for something “extreme enough” to liberate their land from the powerline.

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