

Goliath Staggered

GOLIATH STAGGERED

How The People of Highway 12 Conquered Big Oil

Steve Bunk

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PREFACE

In autumn of 2010, near the start of my investigations into the Highway 12 megaloads controversy, activist Linwood Laughy mentioned his respect for Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. I immediately warmed to this, having often described Campbell's ideas about the hero's quest to my young daughter, who is fascinated by Greek and Roman mythology. I'd tell her how the hero has to capture a rare prize from the grasp of some dark, powerful figure. To find the prize, he must travel through dangerous country, crossing wild waters, battling demons, and doing other great deeds along the way. Someone old and wise helps him, and, finally, he emerges into a beautiful land. He snares the prize, but his work is not done—indeed, it is worthless until he brings this wonderful thing back to the people. All the old stories are like that, I'd say, and she'd nod, because she had read many of them. She knew the hero always brought the treasure, the victory, the wisdom back to the people.

To be called to such a task is also to find one's way. People in the midst of this kind of work, especially the leaders among them, are running on rarified air. If they were athletes, people would say they were in the zone. Religious folk would describe it as being in direct contact with the deity. They're swept up, immersed, given over completely to the cause—and often there isn't a penny in it for them. The next generation may well find that such commitment, such resistance to the crushing confor-

mity of bureaucracy, provides the only chance to make their lives tolerable in a radically changing world.

In the fight over the megaloads—hundreds of proposed shipments of equipment about the size of submarines, which would present rolling roadblocks to all traffic on Highway 12 as they moved toward the tar sands mining developments in Alberta, Canada—bureaucracy was the people’s main foe. This facet of the capitalistic structure emerges from accumulation and size, and its method is to protect decision-makers from the public by surrounding them with minions, who function only within tight parameters. That’s why opponents in Montana of the megaload shipments went to Big Oil board meetings, to confront the leaders face-to-face. But it’s also why these resisters felt that sitting down to solve problems with oil company management was unlikely to happen without first rallying the attention and support of the masses, in part through demonstrations. It’s why activists are subject to frustration and dismay over industry’s PR machine, and over the lies of government employees who otherwise seem like nice folks. The pressure of bureaucracy is why our mainstream media often present environmental issues in terms of “for or against” business—and, more generally, why traditional journalism insists on the pseudo-objective approach of parroting whatever each side says, even after the reporters learn enough to know what’s really happening. And it’s why the hearing officers of the megaload cases in Idaho courtrooms produced blanket decisions in favor of the state transportation department, which had hired them. If they wanted another plum job from the state, they weren’t really empowered to do anything else, anymore than Big Oil employees were empowered to say what they actually thought. Big Money was the captain of the crisis, and its troops, armored in their own powerlessness, were the bureaucrats who lacked the courage to risk their jobs for the cause of truth.

This book about a grassroots campaign in Idaho and Montana is full of conflict and turns of fortune, but it is essentially about how a synthesis of idealism and practicality in leaders can

motivate thousands to overcome tyranny. Only a handful of key leaders in the anti-megaloads struggle are featured here, much fewer than the actual number, with Lin Laughy and his wife, Borg Hendrickson, at the epicenter. In enhancing a chronology of events over several years with the insights of select individuals, my goal was to portray the breadth of the human effort while avoiding a loss of depth in the process. The result, I hope, describes in detail the development and execution of a many-pronged people's movement.

Margaret Mead once counseled against doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people could change the world. Just as appropriate to this story is a well-known epigram often attributed, perhaps erroneously, to Gandhi: "First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win." Amid the frightening things happening to our environment—not least of which is tar sands mining in Canada that involves clear-cutting a boreal forest the size of Florida—it's encouraging whenever we see evidence that a mere few can galvanize the many, and force the changes that may save us yet.

—S.B.
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LOCKED AND LOADED

The most famous part of U.S. Highway 12, which crosses ten states across the top of the country from Detroit to the Pacific Ocean, is a narrow and twisting section through Idaho. In one place it is met by a state road that quickly slopes between tree-cover and bends into a small valley where the South Fork joins the Middle Fork of the Clearwater River at Kooskia (*KOOS-kee*). It's a lovely village, so tranquil that a meeting of about 110 testy people (more than a third of the population) on June 29, 2010 was perhaps the biggest civic event since the construction of a new library a decade earlier.

The street in front of City Hall, which adjoins the library, was filled with folks carrying placards. One couple held a sign that read, "Axle of Evil." Someone else's message warned, "Oil and Water Don't Mix." Another said, "You Take the Profits, We Take the Risks." Attendees were required to register for the meeting at a table outside City Hall, where three beefy security guards hired by Imperial Oil Resources Ventures Ltd., a subsidiary of ExxonMobil, were stationed with guns strapped to their sides. An additional four of five policemen were present at the start, and by the end of the meeting, nine officers were on hand, some of them chagrined at the threat they represented to people they knew as friends.

By the 4 pm starting time, the little gray-faced house was packed. Karen “Borg” Hendrickson, who had stationed herself outside, soon came indoors and said to her husband, Linwood Laughy, “We’ve got to do something, because people are starting to leave, and they’re mad, because they’ve gone through this stuff and they’re not getting the answers they want. We have to do something now.”

The crowd, whose composition spanned the socio-economic spectrum, was angry because the event had no question-and-answer session, no meeting. Instead it was set up as an open house, in which thirteen manned information stations contained posters that dealt with different aspects of the project everyone had come to discuss. ExxonMobil, the world’s richest corporation, wanted to run gigantic loads—far bigger hauls of equipment than most people have ever seen—up the little highway that meanders past Kooskia. The equipment was for their part in development of the controversial Athabasca tar sands region in northeastern Alberta, Canada, which would feed the equally controversial Keystone XL Pipeline. All the major players in the oil industry had stakes in the Athabasca fields, and Exxon had targeted Highway 12 as a money-saving shortcut to deliver huge mining equipment made in Asia. The public could go to each information station and ask questions—for example, about the route itself at one station, or about the sizes and weights of the loads at another—but the answers would be heard only by immediate bystanders. Nobody could air concerns or raise queries to the room at large.

Lin Laughy and Borg Hendrickson were the ones who had made the event happen. For several months, they had been deeply involved in the issue of these proposed gigantic loads, and it was turning out to be the biggest organizational task they had ever undertaken—way bigger than the library project they had started for Kooskia, which had taken five years to complete. That effort had gotten the couple heavily involved in the community. Their small Friends of the Library group raised \$88,000 through grants, sales of local artists’ work, and dona-

tions. A garage attached to City Hall that formerly housed the volunteer fire department was converted to the new library, with help from local tradesmen and prisoners working for two dollars per hour. The former library of three hundred square feet housed just a thousand books, which Borg described as “all the same book.” Its replacement was a two thousand square-foot space containing seven thousand books, with a new membership in the library district, which ensured rotation and availability of a much wider range of reading material.

No doubt, the accomplishment gained respect for the couple in their town, but they were far from its political center. Over the years, they had drifted to the left, partly in response to listening to the opinions of others in a section of the country where even the most extreme of Tea Party values are esteemed. Even so, their initial objections to the oil companies’ proposals did not arise from political convictions. “It wasn’t from a mindset of left or right, it was protecting this beautiful place we love,” Borg once told me.

“We weren’t looking for a war,” Lin said. “It found us.”

The two, who were both beyond their sixty-fifth birthdays in 2010, had rural upbringings and have always stayed connected to the land. Their appearance is more reminiscent of classic Americana than of classic warriors. He’s compact and stocky, his beard and hair white, while she generally pulls her hair tight in a bun, and regards you sternly but with warmth from behind rounded eyeglasses, like the schoolmarm she once was. Lin, who grew up in the orchard country around Lewiston, graduated with honors from Harvard on a full scholarship, and then earned a master’s degree in counseling and a PhD in education and psychology. Qualified as a clinical psychologist, he instead forged an impressive career in the administration of schools and colleges in Alaska before returning to Idaho and starting a cultural tour company that draws clients from Lindblad Expeditions and *National Geographic*. Borg, who taught for thirteen years, has authored two books on homeschooling, the first of which, now in its twelfth printing, was hailed by *Library Journal*