

My friend and his wife are devotees of the principles presented in Living the Good Life. That is, self sufficient, do it yourself living. They even met the authors Helen and Scott Nearing back in the day. After college they bought around 20 acres just west of Salladasburg PA, designed and built themselves a house, raised a family. Today I got an invitation to partake in garden surplus lettuce, broccoli and snap peas so I hopped to it.

His road is off a little country road, and along this road I pass three junctions of construction. The last one, right before his lane cuts uphill, is lined with vehicles. I didn't count but I'm guessing over a dozen with plates from PA and all over. Idaho was in there. They are laying a gas pipeline, and a swath of clearcut runs up the mountain where trees used to be. Big hoes, what I called steam shovels when I was a boy, and men in lime green safety clothes building the trench and laying pipe. There is a clang clang clang of machinery and the drone of diesel engines revving, pretty loud. I know my friend is upset about this, and I am too.

As I pull up his lane he is swinging a trimmer along the roadside. I keep moving up the hill and park my bike. As he strides up to greet me I make a remark about the construction and he nods and says he disagrees with my last writing which says the pipeline in place is benign. He explains the pipe is being put everywhere, and wells will be drilled to attach to them throughout the Marcellus Shale, including the pipeline next to his property. The results we fear are contamination of the water and ruination of the flora and fauna and his way of life. I see his point, the distinction I made about the 'good pipe' is a pipe dream. It's all connected and the proliferation is frenetic.

We talk about many things, among them one local politician reported to have received over \$700K in contributions from the gas industry. Around here that's a lot of money. The next chapters in his story will tell if our fears are well founded. I expressed sympathy, and the realization that my home is still bucolic. If my neighborhood was experiencing what is happening to his, I'd be even more upset. We also talked about pleasant things: photography, motorcycles, things to see in Philadelphia.

His garden is beautiful, lush, well kempt, overflowing. It was good visit as usual. He cut somethings from his garden for me and I went down the way I came. The workers' vehicles were still on site as I went by but there were no workers. I wondered where they were. And I worried. The fate of my friends' quiet clean place in the country, and thousands like it, is of growing concern.

Epilogue.

I met another friend in the supermarket. He is easygoing, and gained my respect when he shaved his head to support a young daughter also bald from chemotherapy. He started a gas leasing company and got rich. In the supermarket the small talk turns to the gas right away. I mention Gasland and concerns raised therein, especially hydraulic fracking. He said the movie is untrue, the drillers don't put all those bad things in the fluid except in rare cases when they have to counter what's already in the ground, the methods are safe and Dimock PA disaster was from human error. (!) And he repeated the standard line, the frack fluid is thousands of feet deep and wells are only hundreds of feet deep. Having heard industry experts admit they don't know what will happen with the foul frack water left in the ground, I say it's not smart to roll the dice with our water and that I hope he's right. He also admitted an oversupply of housing will spring up and then be fallow when the gas industry leaves in ten years.

The day after my visit to Salladasburg my friend sends me this note:

“Talked to one of the gassers this AM. The supply pipe they are putting in is 12 miles long -- 12 inch pipe. Contract was signed yesterday for another pipe 30" 70 miles long also in this neighborhood. The shit is not even near the fan yet.”

Here is the situation I see at this point in time. The pipeline and drilling horse is out of the barn and in full gallop. The forces of industry with their money and influence seem to have a stranglehold on policy. They are aided by a population eager for jobs and landowners wanting the fast buck. I can't see how it is going to be stopped. Two things that can be done realistically:

1. Remove the 2005 EPA exemptions for the gas and oil industry to the clean air and clean water acts, and reveal contents of fracking fluid currently undisclosed under the guise of trade secrets.
2. Levy a severance tax on the gas companies to deal with future cleanup and problems.

The third thing to be done I'm afraid is impossible in the current climate. Stop hydraulic fracking until its methods are understood and effects evaluated and safely managed.

As I consider my two friends' positions, my sympathy remains with the environment. If there are pipes in the ground and wells all around we will have to deal with it. My Salladasburg friend and the rest of us living in Bucolia can still prosper if the water and soil stay clean. Right now that's a big 'if'.