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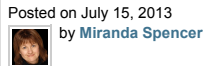
What I saw at the Revolution *

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Posted: Monday, July 15, 2013 11:17 am

Miranda C. Spencer, Shalereporter.com | 0 comments



Posted on July 15, 2013
by [Miranda Spencer](#)

In late June, I drove from coast to coast, moving from Silicon Valley, California back to Hoboken, New Jersey. My north-central route took me and my spouse across gorgeous, sprawling plains and through out-of-the-way towns like

Pinedale, Wyoming and Williston, North Dakota—communities located atop large shale plays that have been bombarded by both fracking and media attention. The trip allowed me to bear witness to the effects of the gas and oil boom on these places, and they aren't pretty.

Today's blog catalogues my impressions of contemporary life in the Bakken oil fields of northwest North Dakota, which is second only to Texas in crude-oil production.

Prior to visiting the Bakken, I'd received dueling impressions of the region. One version depicted it as a "[backwater](#)" [transformed into a jobs mecca](#), flush with money and jobs thanks to 20 to 100 years' worth of frack-able fossil fuel. (Sure, said such reports, it's having "growing pains" including strained infrastructure, inflation and drunk driving, but hey – economic growth!!) The other version portrayed it as "[hell on earth](#)," where lands are ripped out from under their owners and then poisoned by invaders who care only about maximizing profits, pronto.

Now that I've seen North Dakota up close, both depictions seem accurate, if slightly exaggerated. Places like Williston are really two towns in one. The tensions between their past and present are evident, and if trends continue, the energy companies' depredations may dominate their future.

TWO WORLDS

Old Williston features a somewhat dingy downtown of mom-and-pop shops and modest houses. Still, its schools, churches, and parks emanate classic Midwestern charm. Roadside billboards list the Ten Commandments, and places like Gramma Sharon's Family Restaurant (where I ate homemade chicken-and-dumpling soup) still outnumber fast-food franchises. It's small enough that the managing editor of [the Williston Herald recently asked readers](#) to help him pick a name for his baby daughter. Lush, undulating farmland surrounds the town, punctuated here and there by fields of electric-yellow canola. (North Dakota grows about 90 percent of the U.S. crop.)

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Miranda C. Spencer, a researcher with the online news sites Environmental Health News and The Daily Climate, is a freelance journalist and media critic based in the New York metro area. Her writing over the past 25 years, including eight magazine cover stories, has appeared in The Daily Climate, Extra! (the journal of FAIR), E magazine, American Forests, and many other publications. Miranda's investigative work has been honored by Project Censored. Her website is [Red Panda Communications](#).



Suzie Gilbert is a writer, a state and federally licensed wild bird rehabilitator, and the founder of Flyaway, Inc., a non-profit organization dedicated to the rescue, rehabilitation and release of injured and orphaned wild birds. She has written an award-winning environmental column for Taconic News Media, and has published the children's book "Hawk Hill" (Chronicle Books, 1996), and her



New Williston is a parallel universe that can be viewed near highway 85 and out on the nearby prairie. On a hill on the north side sprawls an upscale townhouse development I dubbed Flareview Acres. As yet, it has few inhabitants, though there were Halliburton-logo SUVs in several of the driveways. Perhaps it was empty because the homes were still under construction, or it may also be that folks don't want to live in a place with an oil well cranking away within a quarter-mile of the backyards. Fortunately, spiffy new Mercy Medical Center is just down the street, complete with its own heli-pad.

Further off, former farmland is being converted to makeshift man-camps and motels ("Bakken Resident Suites: Stay a week, stay a year.") Oversized trucks bearing water tanks, oil and equipment barrel along dirt roads, stirring up enough dust to completely coat my car's windshield. Fracking rigs, lit up at night like Christmas trees, tower in the distance; pumping oil wells groan as the odd cowherd tries to graze. Pipelines rip haphazardly through green grasslands, and new truck lanes and oil-waste pits are being dug. Everywhere, uncapped natural-gas flares blaze 24/7. (It's been said that it's cheaper to burn off the gas brought up with the oil than to capture it, despite that it could power half a million homes.)

memoir "Flyaway" (Harpercollins, 2009.) Her articles and opinion pieces have appeared in various newspapers, including the Washington Post. She blogs for "The Crooked Wing" and "10,000 Birds" and has been profiled in both the New York Times and on Andrew C. Revkin's New York Times blog, Dot Earth.



Tara's academic work and pursuits are focused on eco-feminism and ethics. Tara has been featured on AOL's Patch.com as a weekly columnist, Moxie Momma, exploring social concerns and parenting strategies. Writing articles on lifestyle, entertainment and local travel, Tara has been a regular contributor to the Bethlehem, Hellertown and Upper Saucon Patch. As a research and investigative journalist, Tara's work is regularly featured in the Elucidator Magazine. A specialist in the technical fields of psychology, philosophy and theology, Tara also teaches classes on Ethics and Moral Dilemmas, Death and Dying, World Religions, and Introduction to Philosophy.



Kimberley Sirk is in communications in the healthcare industry. She is also the features editor for Drug Discovery News, which reports on issues, trends and product development in the pharmaceutical industry. She has more than 15 years of experience in a broad range of professional positions, including newspaper journalism, university public relations and county government management.

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Meanwhile, nearby villages like Arnegard and Waterford seem almost completely subsumed by the oil industry and its support services. Trucks and tanks of all kinds were still moving at 10 p.m. on a Saturday night, past fields laden with heavy equipment, port-a-potties, and row upon row of RVs and mobile homes lined up like headstones in a military cemetery. And the air—so fresh in nearby Theodore Roosevelt National Park – is clouded with the kind of hazy, smelly smog I associate with the New Jersey Turnpike.

A CAUTIONARY TALE

Now, weeks later, I can't shake the residue this world left on my senses; I can't help but think of the New Yorkers who want to welcome fracking to their state. They should visit the Bakken first.

Whatever the benefits of shale exploitation, rural North Dakota seems not so much developed by enterprising residents as colonized by Oil, Inc. If this colonization is unchecked, municipalities will complete their transformation from communities into industrial zones –outdoor factories, you might say.

Corporate power as well as fossil-fuel energy surges through the region. These burghs are becoming “company towns” in which one industry calls the shots. (According to another local paper, a group of six oil companies have united to “give back” to Williston by donating some profits to local charities and joining the boards of local civic organizations. That may sound like benign P.R., but it reeks of co-optation.)

And for all the new money being ploughed into prairie towns, the benefits to the average longtime resident aren't yet visible. In some places, gasoline costs nearly \$5 a gallon. And, as Business Week reported earlier this year, Williston has had to invest so heavily in services and infrastructure that [it went broke](#).

Some call these strains growing pains, but in allowing this massive frack attack in the name of financial capital, North Dakota may be sacrificing the Bakken communities' social capital. Would Governor Jack Dalrymple like to live in

Flareview Acres?

The Herald's Bible-based slogan offers wise words: "Where there is no vision, the people perish."

##

*Apologies to Reagan speech writer Peggy Noonan

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