

Chapter 2. ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISTS

Environmentalists, people who work against the exploitation of the natural world, are often first shocked into doing so by threats to their own family's well-being. **Lois Gibbs** (b1952), for example, had the misfortune to live near the Love Canal in Niagara Falls, New York, a toxic chemical dump that was leaking pollutants into the earth and air around it (Gibbs, 1982). Gibbs was typical of many women of her time in that she had stopped working when her children were born to stay home with them. She was a private person who thought of herself as being painfully shy; neither she nor her husband were involved in community organizations, nor much interested in politics. Like most people they cared little about environmental issues even as recently as 1978, the year Lois Gibbs became galvanized with a Big Jolt.

When Gibbs' son Michael entered school nearby, located right on top of the covered-over Canal, like many other children he became sick with asthma and seizures, both common reactions to toxic chemicals. **Gibbs was assured by school and government officials that such illnesses were not linked to the chemicals, but she did not believe them--** she recalled reading newspaper articles that indicated the problem could well be the toxic chemicals beneath the school. She set out to fight officialdom in every way she knew how. In an interview she said of her activities against the pollution, "I never would have thought I would be doing what I'm doing now. It would have scared the shit out of me. I transcended me. And what did it was anger. My son was getting sicker and sicker. I could see him deteriorating. The motherly instinct, the anger! Somebody's gotta do something!" (Mattison and Storey, 1992, 9).

Gibbs went door to door in the area gathering information about cancers, deformed children, miscarriages, nervous disorders, suicides, asthma, and epilepsy. She urged the government to undertake research and action. Despite her shyness and previous non-political stance, her biographer notes that, "she organized a neighborhood association, was elected its president, and, in short order, learned to face down governors, senators, and mayors and to deal with bureaucrats, scientists, professors, lawyers, and the national media" (Levine in Gibbs, 1982, xiv).

The direct end result of Gibbs' amazing work, and of the Love Canal Homeowners Group which she founded, was that the government agreed to move the thousand families away from the Love Canal to safe areas. The indirect results were several. For one thing, the nation became aware of the potential danger of toxic chemicals, and made plans to begin cleaning up dump sites around the world. For another, her success empowered other citizens. Levine writes (Gibbs, 1982, xv) "If Love Canal has taught Lois Gibbs-- and the rest of us-- anything, it is that ordinary people become very smart very quickly when their lives are threatened. They become adept at detecting absurdity, even when it is concealed in bureaucratese and scientific jargon." Gibbs served as a role model for others. For example in the American south, Mowrey and Redmond (1993, 320) write about the early 1980s, "Across the 'toxic-waste belt' of the rural South, a network of small-town activists was coming together, creating a political force that was turning into the chemical industry's worst nightmare. Most of the leaders were women. Most had no previous political organizing experience. But most of them at some point had talked to Lois Gibbs at the Citizens Clearinghouse for

Hazardous Waste [her second environmental group] or to...the Louisiana attorney general's office-- and after a while, they all started talking to each other." They traded stories, tracked chemical companies, shared strategies and joined each others' rallies. "By the mid-1980s, there were more than a hundred grassroots organizations fighting toxic waste in Louisiana alone-- and when they all got angry about something, they could stir up a glorious fuss."

Lois Gibbs has kept up her wonderful work, publishing in 1995 a book called *Dying for Dioxin*. The shy woman who had originally been interested neither in community groups nor in politics had really started something.

Two people who benefited from Gibbs' work, and who themselves were housewives before becoming environmental activists to protect their own families, were **Ruth Shepard** and **Shirley Goldsmith**. Until she was 58 years old, Shepard led an unremarkable life (Mowrey and Redmond, 1993, 185ff). She was raised in a small Missouri town, spent World War II working in the factories of Kansas City, then married and as a housewife settled into a working class neighborhood there. She joined the PTA and church groups, and once helped drive out of town a local miner excavating limestone with dynamite.

In 1971, her family retired to Willow Springs in southern Louisiana where they lived quietly for six years, Ruth Shepard again working for church groups and charities. Then, one afternoon when she was driving in the country with her son Bob, they ran into a convoy of tanker trucks heading out the High Hopes Road to nowhere. They drove after the tankers to see where they went. Out in the countryside the trucks turned onto a private road from where they emptied their liquid sludge into open pits dug in the bayous. Shepard and her son, following the trucks on foot, were overwhelmed by the smell coming from these pits: "...it was strong enough to make her gasp, and the closer she got to the trucks' destination, the worse the sensation got. By the time they were close enough to see what was going on, their eyes were burning and Ruth was holding her shirt over her nose and mouth every time she took a breath." **The Shepards didn't know what the trucks were dumping, but they knew it couldn't be good for the environment**, especially when the bayous flooded most years and the sludge could readily filter into nearby ponds and wells. Ruth Shepard felt that she had to do something about this.

When Shepard approached local authorities to deal with the dumping, they gave her the run-around. Some said there were no such dumps, and others said there were dumps, owned by one of the biggest industrial waste companies in the south, Browning-Ferris, but the material in them was harmless. No one was interested in the problem. Indeed, the company was soon pouring the waste liquid into what they called "injection wells"-- abandoned oil wells that ended deep in the earth. The theory was that the noxious material would thus disappear. Shepard, however, realized that it was not that easy; the waste would almost certainly come back to pollute the area.

Shepard alerted people living in Willow Springs to the danger, listened to their stories of sickness apparently correlated with the dumping, then called a meeting which founded the High Hopes Road Committee to fight Browning-Ferris. It would "set off a

political furor that would help turn the conservative Louisiana bayou towns into hotbeds of environmental action."

Shepard's work was extended by **Shirley Goldsmith** (Mowrey and Redmond, 1993, p 292ff). Like Shepard, Goldsmith was a housewife who had moved with her husband to Louisiana from Michigan in the 1950s, settled on Lake Charles where she joined the United Jewish Appeal and the Calcasieu Junior League, and raised two children. She had been periodically annoyed by the foul air that blew into her house from the oil refineries across the lake, but she thought nothing could be done about it. In 1982, however, she read about a train derailment outside town which was releasing toxic gas that could cause cancer and poison surrounding farm fields. She suddenly remembered that toxic waste was also being dumped near Willow Springs, as Shepard had discovered years earlier; Goldsmith had then been too busy, she felt, to join Shepard's group.

Goldsmith was driven to action when her orthodontist died of cancer-- a young man with a wife and six children who didn't even smoke. "When the preacher at his funeral talked about the will of God, Goldsmith almost stood up in her seat and screamed. God didn't kill her orthodontist, she wanted to shout; the chemical companies did. The minute the funeral ended, she went home" and began to organize against the dumping. In no time at all her small group had formed the Calcasieu League for Environmental Action Now, or CLEAN for short; within two months Lois Gibbs of Love Canal fame was speaking at Willow Springs, bringing national attention to the dumping and many new members for CLEAN.

In an effort to address the concerns of citizens, an industrial waste company in 1984 introduced a new plan: to carry toxic wastes on ships far out to sea and there burn them away from any citizenry. To them this seemed like a fool-proof as well as inexpensive solution to waste disposal. Goldsmith, however, was not impressed. Her group pointed out that there were far too many possibilities for accidents-- there could be a traffic crash, a drunk driver, a leaky hose, a bad storm, a collision at sea, a hurricane. Besides, although the ash would be dumped at sea and the smoke released far from land, these waste products might still cause problems in the future. Any catastrophe could destroy the ecosystem on and off the Louisiana coast. The At-Sea Incineration company easily won a federal permit to begin business, but Goldsmith helped to prevent its operation in Louisiana when she testified against it at a congressional hearing. Networking by this time was so effective that At-Sea Incineration travelled without success over the United States trying to find a port town that would allow it to function. When it was unable to do so, it filed for bankruptcy.

Threat to his own and his community's health also motivated **Sam Lovejoy** to fight back when a nuclear plant was proposed for his town. Lovejoy was the introverted son of an Army Officer and his wife who moved with his family to a new American base every few years (Mowrey and Redmond, 1993, 109ff). He studied mathematics and physics beginning in high school, graduating from Amherst College in 1968. He settled into a commune with hippy friends in the decaying town of Montague, MA, on the Connecticut River, where his group grew organic crops and heated their homes with wood-burning

stoves, but were largely uninterested in political questions.

When these idealists learned in 1973 that a power company planned to build a major nuclear power station in the area, the largest plant of its kind ever constructed, they were alarmed for their community. Lovejoy began to research the history of nuclear power, its promise and its drawbacks. The more he read, the more disturbed he became. He found that although nuclear reactors had great potential as a source of power, they also created large residues of radioactive materials-- some of the most poisonous matter on earth-- for which there was no means of disposal. This gave him a Big Jolt. **The more he thought about it, the more he decided that his town did not need such a dangerous addition.**

The power company had built an enormous tower near the town, 550 feet high, to gather information on the local weather-- wind, temperature, humidity, and air pressure-- which would be needed in planning the nuclear plant. One night, Sam Lovejoy walked in the wintry dark to this structure carrying a crowbar and a wrench, determined to make it as difficult as possible for the plant to be built. "He was amazed how easy the job was. A few bolts here and there, a little twisting and prying, and by sunrise, the mighty tower of utility power was reduced to a pile of tangled wreckage."

Lovejoy gave himself up to the police immediately, then pleaded his own case in court. He was accused of "Willful and malicious destruction of personal property", but argued that although his act was willful, it was not malicious. His main witness testified that as NO amount of radiation was safe, it was immoral and dangerous to construct such a plant in a settled area, as the nuclear disaster at Three Mile Island was to show five years later. His case was dropped on a technicality, but he had become a celebrity in antinuclear circles.

A year later, Lovejoy helped to form a group to stop the building of the proposed Seabrook nuclear plant in New Hampshire; it called itself the Clamshell Alliance in honor of the clams that would be destroyed if the plant were built. His popularity and influence increased further with the production of a popular documentary filmed entitled *Lovejoy's Nuclear War*. Lovejoy was initially a man uninvolved in politically matters, a society drop-out; because of his reaction to danger to his community, he became a well-known nuclear opponent with technical knowledge vital for other activists.

Some people are activated to become environmentalists not by personal danger, but for aesthetic or rational reasons. Such a one was **Marcy Benstock** who grew up in a city on the south shore of Lake Erie (Mowrey and Redmond, 1993, 131ff). Because her family was moderately wealthy, she lived in comfort, attending private schools. Her father loved New York city, so whenever he could he took his family there to enjoy its amenities and exuberance; his daughter learned to love the city too. After high school, Benstock attended Radcliffe College where she majored in English literature. She seldom read the newspapers, having little time or interest for the outside world.

When she graduated in 1963, Benstock accepted a position in publishing in New York city, the only place she wanted to be. She settled down in an apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, but found there not so much culture and adventure as filth. When she took a deep breathe she could smell the pollution, for her a Big Jolt. **The soot was so thick and all-pervasive that sometimes she couldn't clean her**

contact lens well enough to insert them. New Yorkers were used to this, but Benstock was not. "With the civic pride of a recent immigrant and the outraged energy of a stern, middle-class reformer, she set out to attack the scar on the city of her dreams."

First she went to Washington for two years to work with Ralph Nader. Then she returned to tackle New York's air pollution. She found that the cause of the soot was incinerators and furnaces installed in small apartments, mostly illegally, belching out smoke. She organized the Clean Air Campaign in her community with grant money, then widened her interest to the air of the entire city. When a new city highway was proposed in 1973 which would bring far more cars into the city, creating even more air pollution, she worked night and day against it, realizing money earmarked for road construction would be far better spent upgrading public transit. She devoted the next 12 years of her life to fighting this highway project which was backed by wealthy developers, politicians and seemingly also major newspapers. She won her campaign eventually, thanks to a population of striped bass which lived at the mouth of the Hudson River and would, perhaps, have been exterminated by the building of the highway. From being an apolitical new graduate in love with a city, Benstock had become an environmental activist who set her sights on a vast goal that took her more than a decade of politicking and organizing to realize.

Many people become activists not for personal reasons, but because they love nature and consider it morally wrong to damage the environment. Such people were Amory Lovins, Judi Bari and John Baldwin. **Amory Lovins** (b1947) was a child prodigy from Silver Spring, MD, who was composing piano sonatas at the age of ten, attending Harvard University at 16, and appointed a physics don at Oxford University when he was 21, the youngest person to hold that position in 400 years (Mowrey and Redmond, 1993, 159ff). It was expected that he would spend his life at university attaining academic honors.

However, Lovins was not a physically strong man, and he spent considerable time hiking in Snowdonia National Park in Wales to strengthen himself. He loved it there so much, that he was severely jolted **when it was threatened by a copper-mining company about 1970. He wrote a book about its wonders, *Eryri: The Mountains of Longing***; the title reflects the deep spiritual appreciation he had for the wilderness. The book was not only immensely popular, but had a profound influence on British environmental policy. The idea of a copper mine was dropped.

Oxford University was abashed at this new direction their young genius was pursuing. They expected that like most physicists, Lovins would be eager in his academic work to focus on increasingly narrow research problems; instead, Lovins said that he wanted to study "energy policy". The university did not recognize such a field, so he soon resigned to become instead the long-time energy specialist for the environmental group Friends of the Earth.

In his new capacity he read widely in the fields of geology, biology, economics and political science as well as in atomic and other energy research. Eventually he built with stone, glass and wood a high altitude "think tank", the Rocky Mountain Institute, which ran entirely on solar energy. He and his staff were comfortable without having to

burn fuel even at temperatures as low as forty below zero. He offered programs to government agencies and private corporations which showed that "with a bit more intelligent planning, the United States could live even better on a fraction of the oil, coal, gas, and nuclear energy it currently used." Thanks to his hikes in the lonely mountains of Wales, Lovins had employed his immense talent not to the glory of academia, but to prove that human beings could lead fulfilling lives without ravaging the environment.

Judi Bari grew up in the 1950s in middle-class Baltimore (Mowrey and Redmond, 1993, 404ff). In the 1960s, she became involved in the counterculture epitomized by the Vietnam War, and Maoist and Marxist meetings and demonstrations. After dropping out of college, she worked briefly in a bakery until she was fired for writing an antiwar slogan on the icing of a cake. When the union filed a grievance, she was reinstated which turned her into a devout labor activist.

Bari soon became a carpenter, building a vacation home for a wealthy executive using redwood lumber. When she asked where the wood came from, the owner replied that it was from thousand-year-old trees. At his words, something in her mind snapped. **"She realized she was using the destruction of an ancient forest, an irreplaceable public resource, to serve the fancy of a man so rich he could afford to build a house that he would use only a few days a year.** As quickly as she had become a union advocate, Bari became a devoted environmentalist."

Because of her background, Bari didn't see that loggers and environmentalists should be enemies. She saw them as natural allies who should band together against common political and economic enemies. She talked to mill workers, explaining that while investors and "fat cats" in Texas became rich, the employees had to put up with low wages, pitiful benefits, and major safety risks. The logging companies fought back, however, among other measures apparently having a logging truck run Bari's car off the road causing injury to herself and her two daughters.

Because of her activity, Bari was asked to organize in 1990 the Redwood Summer project of Earth First! which involved encouraging college students and sympathizers to spend the summer in northern California trying to save redwood trees from being cut down, just as Freedom Summer, in 1964, had sent thousands of such people to the south to fight for the civil rights of Blacks. The project was a success, in large part because Bari announced that Earth First! would renounce tree-spiking (in which long nails were driven into living tree trunks to disrupt machinery should the trees be cut down), a practice of some environmentalists that could injure or kill a logger. This was a vital step in having loggers and environmentalists work together rather than against each other as the timber industry wanted. Bari's efforts were perhaps too effective, because shortly after this a crude bomb exploded in her car, maiming her and nearly ending her life. No charge was ever filed against the perpetrator.

John Baldwin, a student intern at the Great Lakes Laboratory, changed his scientific focus to environmental activism because of an endangered river (Weisman, 1994). The Cuyahoga River, which flows from near Akron, Ohio, to Lake Erie, was so loaded with untreated toxic wastes dumped into it by local industries that several times during the 1970s it actually burst into flames. **A river so polluted that it burned was too much**

for Baldwin. He decided not to be a researcher studying cancer but to dedicate himself to preserving as much as possible the natural environment. After launching a career in environmental issues he became director of environmental studies at the University of Oregon and helped found the International Society for Environmental Education. This led him to do invaluable research on radiation damage suffered at Chernobyl and on ways to contain it.

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