

County Seat Haunted by Thoughts of an Earlier Empire

By M. Tye Wolfe

This is the first of two columns about life in pre-revolutionary Tompkins County.

When I was in high school, my class had a hippie-dippy science teacher who talked about "ceremonial time." The concept baffled me. She explained that ceremonial time rejects time as a linear concept, and imagines that all history exists only as the eternal now, with no past, no future.

"I can see a woolly mammoth out the window," she would say. My friends and I weren't sure if she was being imaginative, or...crazy. We rolled our eyes and made fun.

Years later I was doomed, of course, to spend years considering the idea that everything could be coexisting somehow, even if my calendar still said it was June 13, 2011. While I don't see woolly mammoths, trilobites, or, say, robots from the future, sometimes I find a new perspective that allows me to imagine vivid parallel dimensions of existence, such as when my friends and I took a canoe through a downtown creek last week. Right away I felt I was entering a different world.

Paddling under the Route 13 bridge that links Wegmans to the West End, I could easily imagine the city as raw nature. It is very strange indeed to use water for urban transportation. Peacefully gliding down a creek that cuts through an urban center will remind one of the natural splendor that existed underneath all that gross civilization, and all those who once lived in it. Again, I acknowledged what I often forget: "This is Iroquois country."

It was, at least, until the Sullivan-Clinton expedition through the Southern Tier began almost exactly 232 years ago. It was yet another triumph in the war to create this country of high ideals. News of a bloody massacre in Cherry Valley, including reports of 32 women and children scalped, allowed American general John Sullivan to harness public outrage into stark action. The great Iroquois League, whose oral constitution supposedly was an inspiration for our own

written one, would see how brutal we freedom lovers could get.

Sullivan would later get special commendation for the success of his scorched-earth campaign, during which he marched through the Finger Lakes region, incinerating 40 Iroquois villages. The Iroquois nation wasn't even all pro-British; four nations (Seneca, Onondaga, Cayuga and Mohawk) allied themselves with the Tories, but some of the Tuscarora and the Oneida, who had allied themselves with the revolutionaries, suffered the fate of their fellow natives. It makes me think of G.I.s who saw nothing wrong with shooting Southern Vietnamese because "they might be Viet Cong in disguise."

Unlike those conducting the My Lai massacre in Vietnam, we know Sullivan had explicit orders to terrorize: "You will not by any means listen to any overture of peace before the total ruinment of their settlements is effected. Our future security will be in their inability to injure us and in the terror with which the severity of the chastisement they receive will inspire them."

The writer was his boss, a certain George Washington.

Ithaca's 18th century residents included Saponi and Tutelo tribes under the aegis of the Cayugas. They were allowed to settle on hunting lands at the south end of Cayuga Lake and Pony Hollow of Newfield.

I've found it enjoyable to imagine our area with a fraction of its current population and buildings, people swimming in a crystal-clear lake devoid of phosphorus, families sitting by council fires where there are now parking lots.

But I know that it ends when Sullivan's troops arrive, laying waste to the Tutelo village of Oregonal, near what is now the junction of state routes 13 and 13A on the southern Ithaca city/town border. This attack on civilians was followed by the burning of crops, ensuring innocents would die of famine, disease, or another attack that winter.

This massacre was the end of the

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Boundaries Set for Our Operating Space

By Richard W. Franke

This is the latest installment in our Signs of Sustainability series, organized by Sustainable Tompkins. Visit them online at www.sustainabletompkins.org.

With the growing awareness in the sustainability movement that the Earth's resource base is under stress, we need to develop frameworks and appropriate indicators to assess how much danger we are in and to identify those areas in which the crisis is most severe.

The Sept. 24, 2009 issue of Nature summarized a study by Johan Rockström of the Stockholm Resilience Centre and co-authored by 28 internationally known scientists. The article is entitled "A Safe Operating Space for Humanity." It also appeared in a longer form in the journal Ecology and Society, vol. 4, no. 2, article #32.

The big idea in this article is that human civilization developed within a certain range of variation in the values of key elements of the Earth's life support system. The authors identify nine such components that are critical to human civilization. These nine components have boundaries beyond which the life support system might cease to function properly—sudden, "non-linear events" or "ecological surprises" are likely to occur for which we might not have adequate responses.

The authors propose boundaries for seven of the nine components. We have already crossed the boundaries for three: climate change, biodiversity and the amount of reactive nitrogen. On the next four—stratospheric ozone, ocean acidification, global fresh water use and percent of global land cover converted to cropland—we are nearing the proposed boundaries. For atmospheric aerosol loading and chemical pollution the authors were unable to determine an appropriate boundary at this time.

Climate Change

The authors set a boundary of 350 parts per million (ppm) of CO₂ in the atmosphere. This figure is based on paleontological research indicating that earth was ice free when ancient climates were in the range of 350-550 ppm. Among the consequences of breaching the 350 ppm boundary: retreat of mountain

glaciers, loss of ice sheets, loss of Arctic Ocean ice, sea-level rise, bleaching and death of coral reefs, pole-ward shift of subtropical regions, rise in number of large floods and weakening of the oceans' ability to absorb carbon. Other authors have predicted major threats to the world's food supply: The pre-industrial level was 230 ppm. The current level is 387 ppm.

Biodiversity

The threshold most seriously breached is biodiversity. Paleontological evidence suggests a natural average rate of one extinction per million species per year. Current rates are thought to be greater than 100 per million, while the upper boundary should be about 10. Twenty-five percent of all species in well-studied taxonomic groups are threatened with extinction. Lower diversity systems are more vulnerable to disturbances. Biodiversity provides various services to natural systems, some of which only occasionally come to mind, such as the pollination services that bees provide to agricultural production. The UN designated 2010 as "Biodiversity Year."

Reactive Nitrogen

The authors suggest limiting the conversion of nitrogen from the atmosphere to the soil at 35 million tons per year. Currently this figure is 121 million tons. Excessive nitrogen in soils and water may be responsible for increasing acid rain and global warming, causing diseases via nitrates in drinking water and bringing about ocean "dead zones," low-oxygen areas of the ocean that kill large numbers of creatures. In the 1960s the world had 49 recognized dead zones; in 2008 the number had increased to 405. How to slow the manufacture of reactive nitrogen? One way is to spread organic farming that generally uses less industrial nitrogen and more natural nitrogen. GreenStar, Healthy Food for All, Gardens for Humanity and the general high level of food consumer awareness in the Ithaca area point in the right direction.

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