

The Guilty Environmentalist

Power Road—Not Ready for Prime Time TV

I had a good idea and now I'm starting to regret it.

With the nation's attention again focused on energy and environmental matters, I decided it was time to write a John McPhee-like magazine article or newspaper series about alternative energy development in California.

This would not be the first such article, of course. My file cabinets overflow with clippings about wind farms, solar projects, and geothermal developments scattered through the state. But I have a hook, a concept that ties all these individual pieces together into one popular package.

I call it Power Road.

A remarkable confluence of innovation exists along state Highway 58 as it cuts across the lower third of California. Bakersfield's oil, cogeneration, and agriwaste-to-energy projects, the wind farms at Tehachapi Pass, solar power at Kramer Junction, even several traditional utility power plants and transmission facilities like Midway Substation—all can be found lined up along this two-lane stretch of asphalt.

Extend the line just a few miles southwest on Route 101 to the Pacific coast and there sits PG&E's Diablo Canyon. A couple of side trips north of the main road would take in some utility hydroelectric projects and the China Lake geothermal fields.

The Power Road concept is simple. Along with a photographer friend, I would take an auto trip to visit these sites. The more than 300-mile journey could provide both a graphic illustration of our electric resource options and a vehicle for telling the story of utility and independent power development.

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A Route 66 for energy, if you will.

I typed up my proposal, complete with road map, and mailed it off to a few magazine editors and syndicators. I contacted sources at utilities and energy firms, and—to test its mainstream appeal—I showed it to a few friends in broadcasting.

Iraq invaded Kuwait, Bush committed troops to the Persian Gulf, and a TV network called. I can't say which one because I signed a pledge of confidentiality prohibiting me from writing anything about the network. Think elemental, alphabetical, "Wide World of News" type of programming and you can guess which one. A producer for a weekly news magazine show liked the Power Road concept and wanted to do it as a feature.

To protect my association with the idea, I would be hired as a consultant and narrator of the piece. "Great," I said, "I'm planning to do the trip in late December and expect it to take about 10 days . . ."

No, no, he interrupted in his breathless New York Minute manner of speaking. "We want it for Thursday night. We'll get you a car and book a helicopter. I'll fly out there tomorrow and we'll do the whole trip on Wednesday. We're looking at five minutes during prime time."

Four hundred miles in five minutes, that's like going 3,600 mph in television time. I figured on 10 stops to show the variety of energy alternatives; that works out to 30 seconds each. "I don't know," I said, "I'm not sure it will do justice to the idea." The reply: "Don't worry, it'll be great." I fell for it, lured by the promise of five minutes of network "face time"—actually voice time, since they couldn't have me on camera very much for fear of protest from AFTRA about using a non-union correspondent. That, plus a consulting fee to help offset the expenses of my later, longer trip.

Little did I know.

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What does it take to shoot a TV feature? In this instance, two camera crews with a sound technician and a director, two rented Jeeps driven up from Los Angeles, 20 hours of helicopter time at \$500 per hour, two producers flown in from New York and LA, last-minute cooperation from dozens of contacts and interviewees who arranged to meet us at specified points at specific times.

And me, a guy with a simple idea.

Nothing done for television is simple; it just appears that way. The helicopter couldn't get to Diablo Canyon at dawn as planned because of heavy fog.

The simple shots of me getting in and starting the Jeep took about an hour. "Let's do it one more time, this time a little smoother," repeated the director. Everything, except planning, was done over and over. The morning's audio tapings were all lost because of an equipment malfunction. The camera operator, squeezed into the passenger seat beside me, got a black eye when I took a sharp curve a bit too fast.

The schedule was totally blown; hours late, we eventually cancelled some interview appointments. But the network liaison neglected to convey our message to the people left waiting. I'm still apologizing.

We did reach Barstow in time for scheduled shots of the sunset as my Jeep repeatedly approached the allegorical fork in the road of energy policy choices. The problem was that after a full day of shooting, the camera battery packs had all run down. With the crew frantically trying to squeeze out these last shots, old batteries were plugged in, taken out, tried again. Color balance was lost, and we ended up with some beautiful green and blue sunsets.

No script was written because the producers wanted me to ad-lib the narration as we

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drove along. Over bumpy roads and hairpin turns we recorded parts again and again, trying for the right tone of voice.

“Too announcy, you can’t sound like a radio guy.” But I’ve done radio for 15 years, that’s what I talk like.

“You have to sound like a regular guy.”

OK, more regular.

“Too long, we don’t have enough visuals to get into that.”

So I tried to recount the 20 -year history of Diablo Canyon in fewer words.

The executive producer in New York wanted lots of little factoids to illustrate complex ideas for the supposedly simple-minded audience. “How many air conditioners does a single windmill power? How many kilowatt-hours does it take to reach the moon?”

Finally, driving through the pitch black of night surrounding Daggett, I found “the right tone” for my voice. Exhausted, frustrated, more than a little angry, I spit out the words like an S&L executive denying criminal intent.

“Perfect,” said the producer. I tried to end my narrative with a sincere pitch for energy efficiency as the best, cheapest and cleanest resource we have—all the while mentally calculating how much energy, money and fuel we were wasting on this five-minute piece of network news.

Fade to black. We wrapped up the long day of driving and shooting at a very dark and very closed airport somewhere near Barstow, waiting—praying—for another helicopter to take us to Los Angeles before midnight. There, at the network bureau, the producers had a video editor on reserve and exactly 15 hours to put the piece together for broadcast.

It didn’t happen. Too many holes in the ad-libbed narration, no pictures from the places we

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skipped, green and blue sunsets, burned-out producers.

The piece was rescheduled for a week later. The camera crew returned to Barstow the next day to retape the closing shots; luckily somebody forgot to return the rented Jeep that had become the main character of the piece.

On Labor Day, I wrote a script and went to a San Francisco TV studio to record the narration—losing the tone, but filling in the holes and adding appropriate factoids.

After telling friends, family and half of California's energy community that the piece was scheduled, I got a call from New York. The story was done and the producers loved it. But they decided not to air it yet—other stories were running long.

“Don't worry,” said my producer, “Power Road has a great shelf life. And now that we have more time, we can make it better. This is the plan. Our correspondent will fly out to San Francisco, we'll rent another Jeep, go up to the windmills at Altamont, and we'll shoot you and him driving together doing an intro to the story we already have in the can. It'll be great.”

All we have to do is wait for the network correspondent to get back from Turkey, coordinate when the producer returns from Paris, and hope the Gulf crisis doesn't end soon.

Next time I have a good idea, I'll keep it to myself.

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