

Waiting For Next Time

Resisting “The Resistance” in North Dakota.

By Dave Skinner

Where does the West begin? Well, a big brick-and-stone sign at the far end of Main Street in Mandan, N.D., marks the exact spot.

If you’ve never seen that sign, okay. After all, in most of the West, even a county seat and railroad division point like Mandan doesn’t get much attention. Anyone going to Mandan probably goes there primarily for business, family, or maybe a little pleasure rather than excitement—except maybe closing time on Saturday night. But in summer 2016, things got exciting, and stayed that way for months.

On Aug. 14, 2016, Morton County Emergency Services manager Tom Doering recalls, “I was coming back from vacation at Lake Oahe [say oh-WA-hee] and was told, ‘Be at the law enforcement center at 1600.’” Arriving at the appointed time, Doering learned environmental protesters had begun setting up camp at the mouth of the Cannonball River, intending to halt construction of the \$3.8 billion, 1,200-mile Dakota Access Pipeline, now famed as DAPL. The situation, of course, became a full-blown emergency which Doering and many, many others spent the next several months managing.

What really happened? *RANGE* hoped to find out from those who were not only left out of the big-time, big-media headlines, but left behind to clean up. We found some, but only a few, willing to talk about their experiences at all, much less on the record.

The Eye of the Storm

Tom Doering would talk. *RANGE* asked if he had considered the possibility of organized unrest in Morton County. He had, “but I always thought it would be for a tax revolt.”

From the start, he realized there would be “a lot of jurisdictional issues with this,” given the pipeline protest site involved private lands (and trespass), a state highway, the adjacent Standing Rock Sioux reservation in a different political position, and of course the actual crossing site across U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ land.

Doering acknowledges the success of protest organizers in using conventional and social media to bring in thousands of people,



“never a solid number” estimated at between 5,000 and 8,000 protesters. But he and other public safety officials immediately became concerned upon realizing that protesters were arriving and “there was nothing for them,” with organizers having “no idea” what the approaching North Dakota winter might be like. “Bottom line,” Doering warns, “be careful what you wish for.”

By early September, highway checkpoints were established to control protester access to the pipeline work areas. But protestors reacted with violence. Also in September, Doering went with a delegation “to relate my concerns about the welfare of the children with winter

coming, with food safety,” yet the camps kept filling up.

On October 10, in response to escalating disorder, including protester convoys that frightened residents, a “hard closure” with multiple travel control points was implemented. Protesters retaliated with their own illegal roadblocks and the situation deteriorated into hostile anarchy. The low point came late in November, with 26 hurt one night, including a New York woman badly wounded by an explosive at the Backwater Bridge barricade.

After textbook blizzards in December, officials opened up schools and churches in Mandan, Flasher, Cannon Ball and other places to protesters. But, as Chimney Butte rancher Doug Hille explains, “The protesters did damage to the schools and then had to be evicted—they didn’t leave voluntarily. They were given good, warm shelter and started trashing it. Completely ungrateful and disrespectful, and the media never reported that.”

Finally, in early February, the camps were abandoned. At the time, Doering told Associated Press there was “more garbage down there than anybody anticipated.” Heavy earth-moving equipment was required, and as Hille sees it, “The sickening part of the whole thing was the piles of food, clothes, donations given with the best intentions, just hauled away in dump trucks.”

By the time *RANGE* showed up in late May, the campsites were scraped up, plowed under, and reseeded, safely behind new Army Corps fences and No Trespassing signs.

With some pride, Doering recalls, “I was



Morton County Emergency Services manager Tom Doering was asked about organized unrest: “I always thought it would be for a tax revolt.”



just amazed at how all these different agencies could come together from multiple jurisdictions and work as a team.” He singles out the South Dakota Highway Patrol, which “came to help three times.” However, as is well-known, the federal government’s contribution of leadership, resources and personnel toward managing the situation was minimal until, as Doering puts it, “Trump got elected.”

As to whether or not he’s up for another round, Doering is drolly succinct. “I’m 62.”

On the Trail

Armed with background and advice from Tom Doering and friendly others who insisted on anonymity, starting at the reclaimed protest site 40 miles south of Mandan, *RANGE* traced the Morton County pipeline route, looking for some ranchers to talk to. But finding any was a whole different deal. The first encounter, while friendly, gathered “no names, no quotes and no pictures.” Next came the Strommen Ranch, headquartered roughly six crow miles and twice as far by dirt road from the protest camp. Son Cooper escorted *RANGE* to where Aaron and Sheyna Strommen were working the squeeze chute with daughter Cassidy.

“Might it be possible to set up an interview?” Sheyna, “You better not be from the *New York Times*.” Thank goodness, no—so a time was set for the next day. But looping back toward Mandan through the green grass on the back roads, nobody, but nobody wanted to talk.

Then, on the way back to the Strommens, *RANGE* found one ranch family roadside with a pen full of cattle, hoping for an interview after the cows were dealt with for the day. “I’m not talking to any press and exposing my family” was the most civil part of a



ABOVE: How water protectors treat their environment. TOP LEFT: Behind this sign is the Cannonball Ranch, sold to the pipeline company because protests made ranching impossible. OPPOSITE: This panorama of trespassing protesters greeted the Strommen family on Oct. 22, 2016.

BY THE NUMBERS

10,000	Peak number of protesters
30,310	Resident population of Morton County, N.D. (2015)
709	Protesters arrested
94	Percentage of arrested protesters from out of state
227	Arrestees with prior criminal records (1,503 priors)
223	Total days of “response support” until “event” ended
\$37 million	Final tab for public-safety response, state and local governments: North Dakota, \$33.7 million; Morton County \$3.8 million
10	Other states supporting response with resources and personnel
\$3 million	North Dakota state reimbursement to Morton County
\$10 million	Reimbursement grant from the U.S. Dept. of Justice
\$15 million	Reimbursement donation September 2017 from Dakota Access Pipeline LLC to pay down North Dakota Department of Emergency Services protest-related debts
\$18 million	Remaining tab not yet compensated
\$6 million	Amount donated to Standing Rock reservation in support of protests, some applied to cleanup effort
1	7,600-acre cattle ranch sold to pipeline company. Rancher “just wanted out.”

Sources:

ND Department of Emergency Services; Associated Press; radio journalist Rob Port.

bristly encounter.

Quite honestly, had the Strommens and Doug Hille not previously agreed to talk, this writer would have just flipped the bird to North Dakota and headed home to friendlier country. But just a klick further down the road was another producer moving a truck full of seed to his drill. Tentative to start, after being told *RANGE* puts real cowboys on every cover (almost), this gentleman literally blasted off into orbit. “Oh, thank God they’re

PHOTOS © DAVE SKINNER



While someone with a marker declared the land behind this gate on Standing Rock reservation sacred, the pipeline crossing was laid on private and Army Corps land.

gone!” introduced a tirade of pent-up frustration that, if broadcast on every major network, would win a Pulitzer Prize.

Pad, pencil and camera, of course, were 300 yards away in the pickup. “Oh man, when are you done?”

“November.”

“Aw gee, I meant today.”

“Probably full dark, maybe 10?”

Well, it wouldn’t be right to keep Don (first name only) from his rest.

After another mile, *RANGE* found Jeff Renner willing to talk, but “no pictures, please,” especially not of his cute grandkids.

Finally, the Strommens. From her kitchen table, Sheyna Strommen hints at why her neighbors are so touchy, explaining how her family and community got spun into DAPL’s bizarre political vortex: “We had some friends stop by and they said, ‘You have protesters.’ We didn’t give it much thought, we just kept on doing what we were doing.” Then the family started seeing convoys of “80 cars going by full of masked riders—instead of 10 cars a day, vehicles you almost always recognize.” Matters reached a scary head on October 22 when the Strommens heard drumming

behind the hill above their house, then saw a horde of protesters, then helicopters, then police—a “prayer walk” across posted private land that ended with the arrest of at least 83.

Renner also expresses his concern over the convoys of masked riders, as well as noting a certain illogic: “Didn’t they understand they were using fossil fuels?”

Doug Hille remains upset about “cars without plates and when you see masked people taking pictures of your place, well, that’s an invasion of privacy.” He hosted masked riders “at our mailbox several times,” 40 miles from town. “I put my pickup crossways in the road and stopped them.”

Why wasn’t this ever reported in national media? Well, as did many of their neighbors, the Strommens received telephone inquiries from various journalists, which they refused, especially after the prayer walk chaos on their



Rancher Doug Hille: “I don’t think it’s over. There will be another cause, another protest.”

front stoop: “We simply didn’t want to talk to the press. We didn’t want people to know we were here. We even asked relatives to back off on their Facebook support of us—it was not the time and place to stir the pot.”

Flown Over

Sheyna Strommen’s feelings toward “mainstream” press are rooted in a 2002 *New York Times* article by Michael Pollan, “Power Steer.” Pollan bought a South Dakota steer to learn how a “modern, industrial steak is produced...a messy business, shadowed by the shame of killing.”

Got that? Then don’t wonder why Sheyna is a former communications director for the North Dakota Stockmen’s Association. While she is presently a full-time ranch mom, her

Why Here?

Why build DAPL and cross the Missouri River at the Cannon Ball River?

Well, another long-sought pipeline, the Keystone XL, importantly planned to include a half-million-barrel-a-day “on-ramp” for Bakken-region crude, has been hopelessly bogged down in politics since 2009.

Bakken producers leased trains to reach markets, but trains created their own spectacular political baggage. Interest shifted to building a pipeline that would get around the State Department roadblock, so in 2014, DAPL was proposed, processed, and rapidly under construction by summer 2016 with completion expected in late fall. Beginning in Stanley and starting west, DAPL’s first miles capture the producing areas of the Bakken oil play. It runs west of Williston, crosses the Missouri (yep) above Lake Sakakawea, then trends southeast near Watford City. On leaving the Bakken, the line aims at its eventual connection with the Midwest’s petroleum pipe network at Pakota, Ill.

Why cross the Missouri at Cannon Ball? Simple. It’s the logical place to cross! Water velocity and flood scouring potential are often lowest at the upper end of a lake or reservoir, such as the 231-mile-long Lake Oahe. Plus, river crossings are usually much easier than lake crossings.

Even more logical, the crossing site has a history of prior, successful use. Most visible (for miles and miles) yet unremarked by most journalists, is a high-tension power line that runs from Garrison Dam upriver, feeding southeastern North Dakota. Also unremarkable (or not mentioned much) is the 42-inch, high-pressure Northern Border gas pipeline. Since 1982, Northern Border has pumped over two million cubic feet a day of natural gas from Alberta and three western states to the U.S. Midwest.

Was there controversy in the past? Northern Border’s construction 35 years ago generated no tribal objections, only “concerns” near a couple of pumping station sites. And given that DAPL’s route crosses hundreds of streams (20 “major”) besides the two Missouri River crossings in North Dakota, even the Mississippi River just north of Keokuk, Iowa, why here? Why now? Well, that’s complicated, and frankly, that story’s already been told, very badly

and carelessly, elsewhere.

The Pipeliners

One aspect of the DAPL protest circus left uncovered by the parachute media concerns the actual environmental impacts of pipeline construction, as well as landowner relations. So *RANGE* bothered to ask. Jeff Renner's relationship with the pipeline workers was very good. "One of the pipeline guys likes to shoot prairie dogs, so I'm letting him shoot mine. He even brings his wife. She can shoot, too."

Sheyna Strommen explains the pipeline layers "were on their best game, pretty easy to work with. They even filmed our operations. They hadn't seen beef on the move before." With the pipe laid, she continues, the company is "monitoring the pipeline at least a couple of times a week. Nobody wants it to break. We all want safe pipelines and clean water."

Doug Hille feels "the people who did the work are the best, all colors, creeds, everyone, black, white, Latino, whatever, I cannot say enough good things about them. You can't find a speck of trash, can't



say a bad thing about the contractors, they did a great job."

On the other hand, Hille explains he and his neighbors "dealt with the landmen as we did with the protesters, as garbage—not people I'd want to associate with."

Hille was involved with a group of roughly 40 landowners along the route who informally banded together to hire counsel to negotiate rights-of-way (and payment). Hille says the negotiations were spirited, right up to the deadline. "Finally, we told the Energy Transfer Partners that, while we'd hired common counsel, if we weren't satisfied, the pipeline would need to file 40 separate condemnation proceedings because we weren't a single legal entity. The company caved at the last minute, and we did just fine." ■



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Aaron Strommen and son, Cooper, move cattle to a holding pasture after a day of spring doctoring. BELOW: In late May 2017, less than a week before pumping commenced, Dakota Access crosses North Dakota Route 6 south of St. Anthony. Other segments laid on schedule are nearly fully greened up. The red sign to the left marks the 1982-vintage Northern Border gas line.

experience allows a professional's perspective. "A lot of the communication and messaging seemed to be coming out of Washington, D.C.," with much the "same MO as [animal rights groups], so polished and pointed, you know they had been doing it for a long time," Sheyna points out, concluding, "Energy Transfer Partners and the state [of North Dakota] could take lessons from the activists."

Doug Hille feels "law enforcement got a really bad rap because the protesters controlled the social media," and therefore a credentialed press unfamiliar with North Dakota. One example is the portrayal of tribal attitudes, as NPR wrote, "Big Oil versus Native Americans." Hille retorts, "I know for a fact [eventually confirmed by CNN] the majority of the tribal members didn't support the protests."

So, even as "a lot of us in the community felt threatened, afraid to speak out," Hille nonetheless chose to help with a strategic communications effort in cooperation with the Farm Bureau and North Dakota Stockmen. He made himself available for press interviews as well as regular calls with both the Trent Loos radio show and Scott Hennen at KFYZ in Bismarck. Hille confesses being a little nervous, but says, "Courage is not the absence of fear; it is acting in spite of it."

Get Ready or Get Hurt

The DAPL protests clearly caused tangible physical and fiscal harm to people and the

environment. But Morton County's largest loss? It is invisible, yet easily felt, deep down—hopefully not permanently. Other western communities may find themselves in similar circumstances soon, for example, if the long-delayed Keystone XL pipeline is approved.

"There are two sides to every story, but there are very few people either capable or interested in listening to the opposing side," observes Sheyna Strommen. "Until we get back to being able to have meaningful, honest dialogue, we'll never be able to truly solve real problems."

For Jeff Renner, the real problem wasn't a pipeline: "Sure, everyone should take a stand, but the protesters didn't know what they were standing on."

Doug Hille may speak for many of his neighbors in admitting he and spouse, Carol, have "become hardened by the experience. We want to heal, both sides of the river, but at this point, many of us are not ready. Our privacy was invaded. We've lived on our ranch for 27 years, never locked our doors. Now we lock everything, check our equipment, looking over our shoulder waiting for next time." ■

Dave Skinner took the long way home to northwest Montana. On the way, he met a Border Patrol agent who revealed that his agency, and multiple others, are actively planning to be ready for any possible Keystone XL protests.