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Photographs courtesy of Ree Slocum

Gluten, Free: Dr. Jason Bradford harvests wheat in front of his Willits home. Bradford belongs to the town's post-peak oil group.

Past the Peak

How the small town of Willits plans to beat the coming energy crisis

By R. V. Scheide

A few miles north of Ukiah, Highway 101 shoots upward into Northern California's coastal mountain range, climbing and weaving up the Ridgewood Grade, leaving the vineyards of Mendocino County behind on the valley floor. The four-lane section of superslab peaks at Ridgewood Summit, the highest point on a road that stretches from Mexico to Canada. It then gently slides down into Little Lake Valley, where, at the first stop light on the highway north of the Golden Gate Bridge, it reaches the city center of Willits.

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An enormous iron arch spans main street downtown; it once welcomed visitors to "the biggest little city in the world," Reno, Nev. It has since been repainted the green and red colors of Christmas and beckons visitors back to a simpler time.

Willits is a timber town. Weathered men in flannel shirts rumble by in four-wheel-drive pickups and logging trucks. The town boasts the longest continually operating rodeo in the United States. One of the local museums proudly displays steam-powered logging equipment. The Ridgewood Summit serves as a cultural as well as a geographic divide. This is where rural truly begins in Northern California.

But not all is as it seems in this rustic little town. Since at least the 1970s, the promise of a simpler life has lured a large number of Bay Area hippies, alternative types and other societal dropouts to the woods of Mendocino and Humboldt counties in what came to be known as the "back to the land" movement. These so-called ecotopians, many of whom are still around today, sought to escape what they saw as the pollution, corruption and dehumanization of modern urban life. Here in Willits, they batted down the hatches and waited for the end of the world.

It took a little while, but it appears that the end of the world has finally caught up to them.

Suburbia's End

A boyish 37-year-old with a Ph.D. in biology, Dr. Jason Bradford only relocated to Willits from Davis with his wife, Kristin, a medical doctor, and their two children last August. Initially interested in energy issues while studying climate change in the Andes several years ago, Bradford didn't really know what he was getting into when he decided to sponsor several screenings of *The End of Suburbia: Oil Depletion and the Collapse of the American Dream* just two months after arriving in town. Hosting a film that proclaims human civilization is going to run out of oil and is therefore doomed doesn't usually guarantee a visit from the welcome wagon. But then again, Willits isn't most towns. Bradford's initial invitation to view the film has blossomed into a popular movement that aims to, in the words of one member, "reinvent the town."

"Thirty people showed up the first time," he says. A number of people stayed to chat after the movie, and sensing local interest in the topic, he hosted another showing. Sixty people turned up that time. Ninety came to a third presentation. Bradford, who'd never really led anything larger than a small research team, could feel the momentum building. "Oh, shit!" he thought. "What do I do now?"

As it turned out, Bradford didn't have to do too much to keep the ball rolling, other than volunteering all of his spare time. That's because there's a current running through Willits that harmonizes exactly with what needs to be done to prepare for what petroleum experts call "peak oil." That current is supplied in part by the very same ecotopians who flocked to the region in the '70s. Under Bradford's leadership, they've teamed up with concerned professionals, local government officials and ordinary citizens to form the Willits Economics Localization (WELL) project. It appears to be one of the first civic groups in the United States dedicated to preparing for the coming energy crisis. But if other communities are to have any hope of retaining some semblance to the lifestyles they've grown accustomed to during the age of cheap oil, it definitely won't be the last.

Peakocalypse Now

Put simply, peak oil theory states that we've already burned through half the oil that ever existed. Competition for what remains will turn increasingly vicious as the supply dwindles, as we are already witnessing with higher prices at the gas pump and the increasing number of casualties in the Middle East, where the world's largest remaining oil reserves are located. At the current rate of consumption, some experts estimate that the remaining supply will be exhausted by 2042. When that happens, the world as we know it will certainly change and perhaps perish. Many experts are convinced that if we don't start conserving now, the end of oil may come even sooner.

That's where the back-to-the-landers come in. They may have dropped out, but they still needed to turn on. Problem was, PG&E didn't go out to the woods, and portable gas generators weren't quite as light and powerful in the '70s as they are today. So they turned to such alternative energy

sources as wind and solar power. That legacy can be found in Willits today in such successful renewable energy businesses as the Applied Power Corporation and nonprofit research firms like the Renewable Energy Development Institute (REDI), which counts the city of Sacramento among its clients.

On a sizzling July afternoon, Bradford and the core members of WELL met at the REDI Haus--a 1950s home in downtown Willits refurbished with natural-fiber rugs and hemp window shades, and powered entirely by photovoltaic cells--where they prepared for that evening's community meeting. Most of WELL's core members are older than Bradford and have lived in Willits much longer. Brothers Richard and Phil Jergenson, inventors who've dreamed up products that include a life-sized erector set for adults, moved here in 1978. Phil is president of REDI; Richard has gained local fame with inventions such as the Sol Train, a solar-powered rail vehicle.

"We were fortunate to grow up when this was the book to have on your coffee table," says Richard, 54, slapping a dog-eared copy of the *Whole Earth Catalog*. He serves as one of the group's archivists, and his collection of Willits memorabilia includes a copy of the second issue of the locally published *Mendocino Grapevine*, featuring original tree-hugger cover art by R. Crumb, as well as fliers from the first Solar Expo and Rally in 1978, an event that eventually morphed into the Solar Living Center and Real Goods, the popular environmentally correct merchandise store in Hopland. He refers to WELL as "the usual gang of disgruntled individuals trying to change the world."

Lanny Cotler, 64, who describes himself as an "entrepreneur, revolutionary and successful Hollywood scriptwriter," fits right in with the gang and serves as its video archivist. You may have seen some of Cotler's work: *The Earthling* (1980), *Backtrack* (1990) and *Heartwood* (1998), the latter starring the late Jason Robards and set in a small town strangely similar to Willits. Ten years ago, Cotler began shopping around an idea for a sitcom, *Off the Grid*, based on "the kookiness of a town as it goes off the grid." He's still shopping it around today, but with the advent of peak oil, Cotler feels that "it would be more of a reality-based show now." At this evening's meeting, he's giving a presentation on the necessity for media

outreach.

Thin, hawk-faced Brian Weller, 59, is the group's self-described "resident alien," a British native who's served as an organizational consultant for such major corporations as British Petroleum. Weller is extremely proficient at managing small- and large-group dynamics, a skill that has proven invaluable during WELL's first months of existence. When it comes to a topic as large and frightening as peak oil, he explains, "there are different scales of what people are able to think about. I'm helping WELL understand the process as an emerging social organization. This process will be achieved through people, and people have different perceptual filters and different agendas, both open and hidden."

Put another way, Weller means that the stakes are incredibly high. The consensus among peak oil experts is that the reduction in oil will translate into an enormous fall in global population, perhaps as much as an 80 percent decrease. (Keep in mind that cheap petroleum permeates the global economy, from transportation to manufacturing to agriculture to medicine.) Just prior to the 1992 Earth Summit in Brazil, President George H. W. Bush famously said, "The American way of life is not negotiable." Peak oil says everyone must give up something, a fact that can be difficult for individuals and groups to accept.



Simple Life?: Jason Bradford and his winter wheat patch in Willits, where residents are preparing for a

peakocalypse.

Ad-Hocracy

Weller helps facilitate communication when such hidden agendas block progress, ruffling as few feathers as possible. He's fond of noting that the Chinese ideogram for "crisis," *weiji*, is made up of two characters, one signifying danger and the other opportunity. He finds both elements present in the crisis presented by peak oil. "This is a trend that plays against the overall trend of globalization," he notes. "We feel there's been an erosion of well-integrated communities. We want to reinvent what it means to be a community."

With an abundance of such enlightened individuals in the Willits area, which has a total population of 15,000, why hasn't the community already prepared for the coming storm? The answer can be partially seen along the so-called miracle mile strip of highway south of town with its ubiquitous fast-food restaurants and strip malls defining the suburban American landscape. The same economic forces that have shaped the rest of post-WW II America have been hard at work in Willits.

"Only 5,287 people live in the city proper," Bradford elaborates. "Almost two-thirds of the population live sprawled out in the suburbs. We're a rural community with agricultural land, but none of that ag land feeds us. The average person commutes to work 28 miles per day."

As the core members of WELL discovered, such basic elements of modern suburban life are merely the tip of an enormous iceberg that shadows not just Willits, but the entire American way of life. The sheer size of the problem is intimidating, leaving only one logical solution: Chip the iceberg down to size.

From the first three showings of *The End of Suburbia*, Bradford attracted roughly 60 volunteers who were willing to turn up at meetings even when there wasn't a film being shown, even when it was pouring down rain. In many ways, they're a homogenous lot--mostly white, middle-class baby boomers--but they also represent a wide diversity of skills and viewpoints.

Bradford and the core members, working as a

steering committee they jokingly refer to as an "ad-hocracy," originally identified 14 key areas of interest pertaining to peak oil and the community's survival that seemed to match up well with the interests of the overall membership. Eventually, these 14 areas were consolidated into six working groups: food, energy, shelter, water, health and wellness, and social organization.

"We need to figure out what we can do now, and what we can do in the future, when we don't have the resources coming in," says Brian Corzilius, 47, a core WELL member whose training as an electrical engineer landed him in the energy group. Working with energy-group members Richard and Phil Jergenson, as well as Willits City Council member Ron Orenstein and others, Corzilius helped conduct an "energy inventory" of Willits that provided the first snapshot of where the town is now--and how far it has to go.

Compiling existing data from companies and government agencies ranging from PG&E, the California Energy Commission, the Mendocino Air Quality Management District and the U.S. Department of Transportation, the group was able to determine that Willits uses more than 1,000 megawatt hours (MWh) of imported energy per day. Energy sources from outside the Willits area include propane, firewood, natural gas, electricity and--by far the largest slice of the imported energy pie--diesel and gasoline used for transportation. It appears that the 28 miles per day that the average Willits resident commutes costs the community a bundle in terms of money not spent in the immediate area.

"Annually, we have \$30 million that leaves the area; 56 percent of that is for transportation," clarifies Corzilius. "Bring that money back, and you've got money to grow new local businesses." In turn, creating new local businesses reduces the number of commuting miles.

The 1,000 MWh per day figure serves as an important baseline for conservation, since every megawatt saved, according to the energy group's report, results in an annual savings of \$1 million--money that doesn't have to be spent on developing new power-generation facilities. The report also estimates that there's enough unutilized space on the rooftops of city, residential and commercial structures to easily produce 25 MWh per day with solar panels,

further reducing energy imports.

The long-term conservation goal, the report contends, should be a 50 percent reduction in current usage, which could be facilitated by appointing a local "energy czar." The short-term goal is much bolder: complete energy independence by 2010. That's just five years from now.

Feud Chain

The preliminary report by WELL's food group, an inventory of the food stocked by Willits' two major supermarkets and several smaller grocery outlets, reveals the fairly startling fact that none of the stores uses local vendors in their food-supply chains. "What this essentially tells us is that we have a few days supply of food at any one time," says food group member Cindy Logan. "Safeway is dependent on daily deliveries for some items." Or, as another Willits resident puts it, "What if there's a meltdown on 101 and the truck can't get into Safeway?" Or: What if there's no diesel to fuel the trucks in the first place?

To address topics as complex as localizing food supplies, WELL invites guest speakers to talk to the group. Some, such as world-renowned bio-intensive gardening innovator John Jeavons, author of the perennial bestseller *How to Grow More Vegetables*, didn't have to travel far: Jeavons lives in Willits. Others, such as Stephen and Gloria Decater, had to come over the hill from Yolo County, where they operate the Live Power Community Farm near Covelo.

The Decaters practice community-supported agriculture. Their 40-acre farm provides food for 160 member families, totaling some 300 people, over a 30-week growing season. The families pay a subscription that provides operating fees for the farm and a modest income for those who work it. And when the Decaters christened their farm "Live Power," they meant it. Five full-time farmhands and an array of draft horses do all the work on the farm with the exception of hay baling, which is done by tractor because the farm has been unable to acquire a horse-driven baler. Apparently, they don't make them anymore.

During their presentation to WELL in April, the Decaters used simple math to solve Willits'

potential future food shortage, at least on paper. Divide the town's 13,300 immediate residents by the 300 people Live Power Community Farm can feed, and it's easy to see that all that's required to feed the town is 44 similarly-sized farms. These plots would only take up a modest 1,733 acres in total--roughly the same area as the 2.8 square miles within Willits' city limits. Because the Decaters' numbers are based on a partial diet--an unintentional vegan slate that doesn't factor in dairy or meat--the actual acreage might have to be doubled or even tripled. Still, it's doable, and in fact, it's the way things were done not too long ago, before the automobile came along. Since then, Gloria Decater told the audience, "We have not thought of farms as permanent places. As the next generation left farming and development encroached, the farms have been cashed out. . . . With peak oil, we now have a new perspective. This may not only be sad, but it's also a matter of future survival."

Green Health

In WELL, caring for the survivors of a coming calamity falls upon the health and wellness group, which includes members drawn from both the traditional and alternative medical fields.

"I've been in this community for three decades, and I've always been interested in doing alternative therapy," says Marilyn Boosinger, whose expertise includes herbology and acupuncture. She hopes the group can develop an apothecary for locally grown natural medicines. "We would grow herbs, harvest them, make them into tinctures. We see natural medicine as something that is sustainable. The prescription medications and a lot of the supplies used in modern medicines may not be as available."

That's particularly important to Dr. Kristin Bradford--Jason Bradford's wife--a medical doctor who understands that many of today's pharmaceutical products depend upon petroleum for their manufacture. She's eager to learn as much as possible about alternative therapies.

"It's something that I'm not trained in, so I'm very excited to be collaborating with people who are, so I can have something to benefit my patients when the other isn't available," she says.

The health and wellness group got an added boost when Margie Handley, president of the Frank R. Howard Foundation (established by the son of Charles Howard, owner of the famed Willits racehorse Seabiscuit), which funds the local hospital of the same name, began attending WELL meetings. Handley has been the driving force behind converting the Frank R. Howard Memorial Hospital into California's first green hospital--a goal near completion--and she's sought community input in part through the members of WELL. The shelter group, for example, has drawn up architectural plans for a hospital greenhouse that employs straw bale construction and solar power for energy.

Willits city officials are also becoming increasingly involved with WELL. When \$10,000 was recently freed up in the city budget, the funds were directed toward bringing in speakers to complement those who have spoken to the community so far at WELL meetings, such as the dark prince of peak oil, Santa Rosa author and New College professor Richard Heinberg, and Ann Hancock, coordinator of the Sonoma County Climate Control Campaign and past coordinator of the Ecological Footprint Project.

"We're trying to bring the city into a leadership role in this effort," says city planner Andy Falleri. Earlier this year, Falleri attended an E. F. Schumacher Society conference in Massachusetts, where establishing land trusts for small local farms like Live Power was discussed. He was surprised to discover that more than a quarter of the people attending the conference were aware of WELL, even though the group had only been up and running for six months. "A number of people had heard about the stuff Jason Bradford was doing with peak oil," he says. "I thought maybe Seabiscuit would be more widely known, but [he] wasn't."

Falleri admitted that there's still not a sense of urgency among city officials and the population at large about peak oil.

"We've got some real nice policies in Willits to reduce energy consumption, but people haven't really understood what they've meant," he says. "We've got to get to the next level and get some of these ideas implemented."

Going to the WELL

"I still think we should have called it SWELL," Richard Jergenson grumbles over organic Mexican food at Burrito Exquisito in downtown Willits. The S in his proposed acronym stood for "sustainable," but he was overruled by the ad-hocracy, which felt the term has gained too much of a lefty connotation. Even though many of the methods employed by the sustainability movement apply to the coming energy crisis, Bradford continually emphasizes that the seriousness of peak oil requires reaching out to as wide an audience as possible.

It's a hot, stuffy Monday night in July, but at the entrance to the Willits Community Center, where people are already streaming in for the meeting, Bradford's message appears to be getting across. Everybody's talking about peak oil in Willits these days, including members of American Legion Post 164, such as Keith Rosen.

"The post commander has instructed me to come to the meeting and see what the Legion can do to help with the issue," Rosen says, adding that his commander was following orders from the military veteran organization's national command. "The idea is to use the good name of the Legion to get different factions together." For Rosen, who describes himself as a "potter, welder and maker of things" who dropped out of mainstream society to come to Willits in 1970, there's no question that we must prepare for peak oil. Apparently, the Legion is in agreement.

"We [the Legion] came to the conclusion that if half the community is fed and the other half isn't, the half that isn't will feed off the other, and that's unacceptable," he says.

Bradford opens the meeting, held in the large hall beneath the Community Center's domed ceiling. About 40 people have turned out for the event, a far cry from the 200 or so that turn up for speakers such as Heinberg. Still, getting 40 volunteers to show up on a muggy Monday night is no mean feat for any organization. Bradford catches the group up with the latest news and sets them up for Lanny Cotler, who's pitching WELL's proposed media-relations campaign to the audience tonight.

Perhaps it's the heat, but the pitch doesn't go over well, even though Cotler volunteers to do all the work. The work--editing megabytes of digital footage, putting together press kits, is necessary--he urges, because, "we have a big responsibility for people who are coming behind us." The campaign will serve as a blueprint of sorts, and a record is required in order to secure government grants and other funding sources. Yet after Cotler finishes, several people in the audience express their displeasure, mainly because they crave action and perceive the media campaign as just more talk.

"It's going to bring more people into town," complains one man. "The energy of the group is going to be diverted to making a commercial about how cool we are." Several more people sound off before former BP facilitator Brian Weller steps in to smooth the situation over. Acknowledging the group's desire for action, he gently points out that the chance to act may never come if WELL doesn't eventually secure major funding, which in turn is dependent upon a public-relations campaign, and thank goodness we've got a Hollywood screenwriter who's willing to do all the work for us. Everyone appears satisfied, and the members break off into their assigned groups.

Just two members of the water group, Larry Desmond and Ree Slocum, are in attendance tonight. They're scheduled to give a presentation at the next WELL meeting in August, but both find it hard to get spare time to conduct the research into local water supplies.

"Most of the water resources we have require energy," says Desmond, noting the seriousness of the matter. "Being without power is one thing; being without water is another"--meaning, without water, you die.

Perhaps the chance to belong to an organization in which such crucial matters are at stake is what has made WELL such an easy sell.

"For me, it was the right thing to do," explains Slocum. "All along, I wanted to be working in a community that was sustainable. Willits is still livable and functional, but we've all gotten busy. We're small enough that we could

eventually do something." However, the question of whether that something will be enough remains. Peak oil experts such as Heinberg and James Howard Kunstler, author of *The Long Emergency*, the latest doom-and-gloom tome on the topic, seem convinced that the time for large-scale meaningful action has come and gone. Perhaps Willits could become what Heinberg terms a "lifeboat," carrying a few survivors to some unknown solution in the future. Or perhaps Willits will become self-sustaining, only to be overrun by starving, rampaging hordes from the cities. Shouldn't WELL establish a militia to defend against such possibilities?

"The questions of militias came up early on," says Brian Weller. "What do we do under a *Mad Max* scenario?" referring to the postapocalyptic science-fiction movies where rampaging hordes murder, rape and kill in a desperate battle for the last drops of gasoline. In the end, the steering committee delegates the issue to the social organization group, which in turn delegates defense issues, at least for now, to the local police and sheriff's departments.

"Most of [law enforcement's] plans deal with acute problems, like fire and disease," Bradford says doubtfully. "They haven't thought about things like long-term food security, for example."

There is, of course, another solution if the hordes come from the city.

"We'll just blow up the bridge in Hopland," Cotler says, only half-jokingly.

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