Wetlands to Tar Sands

Wild Tales from the Calumet Basin

You wouldn't have known this all used to be marshes. You wouldn't have dipped your toes in any of the lingering pools. You wouldn't have taken the bus or the bike or the car or the footpath down this way. Something else had to bring you, and me, and the others to this place. Some kind of call had to bring us. Come to the nearby, the uncanny, the strangely familiar. The Calumet Basin is part of Chicago, and it's another world. Today, the real-estate machine wants pieces of it. Capital always dreams of a new city, a glittering image, a price. But there are many other forces creating this territory.

The former US Steel site in South Chicago is still known as South Works. It's a huge, barren expanse of weeds and grasses, cut in half by a large waterway or "slip" where ships laden with iron ore used to offload their cargo. On the north side, a pier juts out into Lake Michigan. A pocket of sand has gathered in the angle between shoreline and pier, forming a small beach adorned with driftwood and garbage. Run your fingers through the sand. The waves are land-creating forces.

A group of us walked out here after some spring weeding at the Garden of Resiliency and Hope, located in an old South Chicago neighborhood called the Bush. One of the gardeners, Karen Roothaan, had invited us to participate, to picnic on the sidewalk and to hear about the neighborhood's struggles in the face of the massive Lakeview redevelopment that is supposed to create a second downtown right next door. We wandered toward the lake, along the north side of the slip. As we spoke about the neighborhood and the developers, Rozalinda's five-year-old daughter Liana started looking for sea shells, or maybe you would call them lake shells: tiny spiral things, very pretty in their miniature way. I started looking too. Across the water, we could see people arriving from a recently created public park to go fishing. Unfortunately, there was a cop cruiser hidden behind the immense wall of the old ore bin. So private property was protected, and no one went fishing on the developers' slip that afternoon.

One hundred and thirty-two years earlier, at the mouth of the Calumet River just south of where we sat looking for lake shells, sand had begun gathering on the north side of a similar pier, built by the Army Corps of Engineers in 1882. Given time, the lateral drift of the sand along the shore would have started forming new land, just as it did farther north in Chicago's Streeterville neighborhood. However, the sand never had time, because even before the pier was built, the South Works plant of the North Chicago Rolling Mill Company had already begun dumping slag in front of the lake-front property that it purchased in 1880. The congealed puddles of molten ore, and not the sand, would make the difference between land and water along the shores of South Chicago.

The South Works plant moved here from Evanston because space was short in the north. Soon the company became part of the United States Steel conglomerate. Working gradually, at its own pace, it eventually filled in a total of about 500 acres of Lake Michigan, which was covered with railroad tracks, ore dumps, blast furnaces, rolling mills, a power plant and a variety of other installations, all of which have now disappeared. South Works grew on its own waste, it shaped its own geology. The land itself is the surviving ruin.

So when you go cruising down the brand-new extension of Lake Shore Drive, take a moment to realize that everything to the left is artificial, made of sand, debris, dredging spoil and above all, slag from the furnaces. And when you stroll out to the green and blooming public park along the shore where the fishermen come from, be aware that it, too, has its industrial history. The slag deposited by South Works has been covered with 73 barge-loads of mud dredged up from the sediments of Peoria Lake, which is a wide spot in the Illinois River that tends to silt up and block the traffic. Let the factory farmland erode into the river. Let the dredges work the bottom. Let the barges float free. Let all that spoil bloom. No one tends to even think about any of these things. If the new Lakeview development is ever built, the children who grow up here will be lucky to wonder where their gardens came from.

So what exactly did the North Chicago Rolling Mill Company come to do here at South Works, anyway? It produced rolled steel rails, replacing the brittle iron that had been used in an earlier era. It was the first fully integrated steel mill to produce these rails, and in its day, it rivaled with Carnegie for the Western markets. Thus it laid the infrastructure, not just for the Southwest Corridor, but for the entire railroad network extending from Chicago to the Pacific Coast. It transformed the old Iron Horse into the modern Steel Juggernaut. Then it forged the girders and steel sheets that made the Loop. It built rivers of rails, followed by mountains of skyscrapers. That's what industrialism is all about. We are living in the era when human activity shapes the landscape itself, along with the air and the water, and indeed, the entire ecosystem. That's exactly the definition of the Anthropocene.

Baffling brooks

Old maps are wonderful things. By looking at a great many of them and by reading historical accounts, Rozalinda was able to sketch some of the broad expanses of marshland that used to surround Calumet Lake, in the days when the Illiniwek, Miami and Potawotami lived here. Calumet Lake was quite different then, much larger, and the slow, sinuous curves of the river had not yet been straightened. By laying a transparent USGS map over the wetland drawing, we could show both levels. First the familiar grid of city streets, the projecting masses of landfill, the slips carved into the lake so that it looks like some strange hieroglyph. Then the ancient waterways, the original shoreline, the shallow, seasonal marshes filled with frogs and migrating birds, an entire vanished world that lies just beneath the surface of social memory. The scattered ponds and water parks – Hegewisch, Burnham, Powder Horn – make ecological sense within this underlying territory of the Calumet Basin, whose still hydrology percolates in ways we can't see or imagine. Yet the flow of many streams and rivers has been reversed, and to the casual eye the random ponds and pools that you see everywhere have become exactly that, just random.

Most of this land has been drained by ditches and channels, like the wholly man-made Indian Creek that brings Wolf Lake down to the level of the Calumet River. Today you can still cross the former Hyde Lake that lies between the two: but it's just a slag heap overtaken by four-wheelers. As for Calumet Lake itself, go there if you can possibly find your way past the guards, the gates and the bright coils of razor wire that arrived in the wake of 9/11. You'll see the double row of projecting quays that make the lake look so strange on the map, like the mark of a serrated branding iron. These docks were built in the days when industry pulsed and the Calumet Harbor was full of ships carrying bulk liquids and materials. Now they are empty, windswept, ghostly, covered with waving fronds of phragmite and other invasive species. Though it retains great potential, water transport in the Chicagoland region is considered insignificant by comparison to road, rail and air. Only at its southern edge, where the inland port facilities of Calumet Terminal were completed in 1957, is this a harbor in anything but name.

In 1921, when the Main Stem of the Chicago River was already overcrowded with shipping, the State Legislature passed the Lake Calumet Harbor Act authorizing the city to build a new deepwater port. The Calumet River itself had been dredged since the removal of the sandbar in 1880. Excavation had begun in 1911 on the Calumet-Saganashkee Channel, or "Cal-Sag," which was completed in 1922. From then on, industrial cargo from the Great Lakes could bypass the Loop entirely; and river barges bound for the Mississippi had a wide channel leaving directly from the inland harbor. In the 1920's, much was made of the Great Lakes–Gulf of Mexico trading route. And throughout the mid-20th century, Calumet Harbor lay at the center of one of the world's densest concentrations of heavy industry. But the real purpose of the Cal-Sag, like that of the Sanitary Canal, was not transportation to the Gulf. The real purpose was reversing the flow of the Calumet and draining pollution away from Chicago's drinking water. The problem this time was not only sewage, but above all, industrial toxins flowing into Lake Michigan. From the 1880s to the post-WWII period, corporations would simply pump their effluent to the nearest pond or stream. Untold quantities were dumped in this way for decades. Later, with a nod to the Federal Water Pollution Control Act of 1948, they'd just stuff it in a landfill – and let it seep.

Why does a stream run blue or orange? What kinds of gases rise from that rolling green hill? Residents of industrial areas slowly gain first-hand knowledge of the consequences of modernity. They are the pioneer inhabitants of a "risk society" that every official instance wants to whitewash, dilute, erase from archives and maps, and whenever possible, consign to oblivion.

Foreign zones

We became interested in the Port of Chicago because of its status as a Foreign Trade Zone (FTZ #22), which it acquired in 1975. Foreign Trade Zones were crucial stepping stones on the neoliberal path toward a restoration of global free trade, which had been limited by the emergence of social-welfare state priorities in the 1930's. The early FTZs (in New York and Los Angeles, for example) were essentially free ports in the British liberal tradition, where imported goods could be stocked without tariff before entry to the country or re-export. Ports and nearby warehouses were surrounded with heavy fences, declared extraterritorial for customs purposes, and inspected regularly by border control agents. These kinds of "general purpose" FTZ sites can still be found at Iriquois Landing where the Calumet River meets (but no longer empties into) Lake Michigan, and at the southern edge of Calumet Harbor. The early FTZs did not have anything particular to do with industry. By the time Chicago got into the game, however, the concept had expanded into some very different arenas.

From the early '70s onward, a Foreign Trade Zone – typically but not always located on an ocean, lake or river port – became a "grantor authority" for a series of special-purpose subzones that could be located in a wide area around it, basically the radius of a modern metropolitan region like Chicagoland. The subzones could import raw materials, such as crude oil, or manufactured goods, such as automobile components, then process or assemble them into finished products which would incur a much lower import tariff upon leaving the FTZ. The Ford Motor Co., located directly on Calumet Harbor, took great advantage of these provisions, as did Chicagoland refineries such as Exxon-Amoco and Citgo in the Joliet area, or the former Premcor refinery on the Cal-Sag Channel.

Oil refineries in the United States still have massive recourse to FTZ status, particularly in Texas and Louisiana. Most manufacturing sites, however, are no longer affected by tariffs, due to NAFTA and other free-trade agreements (there are exceptions, though, such as pharmaceutical companies). Therefore the FTZ regime has shifted again, and is now employed chiefly by global logistics firms, which use special compliance-ensuring customs software to track all their goods and orchestrate delivery to and from their clients all across the earth. Tariffs, if any, will only be paid on final delivery. There is a growing disjunct between these operations and the grantor authority, which has taken the pompous name of the Illinois International Port District (IIPD). To complete its neoliberal metamorphosis, the IIPD is currently attempting to sell itself to the highest bidder. The idea is to cut through corruption and raise capital for some grand new expansion – but there's no taker. And that has everything to do with the uncertainty over what the port is today, and what it may become in the future.

Meanwhile, foreign trade in industrial materials hasn't ceased. Supplies come from around the world, but principally from Mexico and Canada – two nominal democracies which have been integrated to a single North American economy under the control of corporate elites. Oil from Alberta currently reaches Chicagoland via the Enbridge corporation pipeline 6A, which ends at a major junction in Manhattan, Illinois, just east of Joliet, and includes branch lines serving local refineries. There is no significant tariff border between Canada and the US for oil, which may be why Chicagoland refineries have let their FTZ status slip. Nor is there any significant regulatory border for environmental issues – as demonstrated by the fact that three local refineries (Exxon-Amoco, BP and Citgo) are among the top ten US processers of heavy crude from the Alberta tar sands. Where the Calumet Basin is concerned, the significant border lies not between the US and Canada, but instead, between Illinois and Indiana. Along one side of State Line Avenue, most of the old industry has declined or fled. The other side (Whiting and East Chicago) has seen increased investment. With the usual unwanted consequences.

Estranging machine

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And there we were in Marktown Park, East Chicago, maybe two hundred people, waving signs, listening to speeches and protesting in front of the BP refinery, right next to what used to be the shoreline. It's an extreme environment. All the land beyond the refinery is artificial, a huge, rationalized peninsula, built up with slag and debris by successive generations of steelmakers that have now been absorbed into a single conglomerate, Arcelor-Mittal. This gray, blasted territory is the other side of the Loop, its dark twin, the planet that the corporations made. From the air, it looks like a burnt-out landing pad for some archaic metaloid warrior race descending from the depths of the future. Yet it's a classic workplace, people lived and died for that plant, they raised their kids on those jobs, their unions struggled to defend their rights, and the steel from the mill built the American dream machine. East Chicago is the slag-solid ground of that fantastic machine, it's a megalith, an oil-soaked monster, an industrial excresence on Anthropocene scale. Individuals crawl like ants through this armored landscape.

As for the refinery itself, located mostly in Whiting, it's the biggest in the Midwest, former Standard Oil/Amoco, founded in 1889. They invented the gasoline tanker and the drive-through service station, and today they can process up to 400,000 barrels of oil a day, almost all of it tar sands crude which has come straight down the pipe from Alberta. BP Whiting is the largest single tar sands processor in the US, as of January 2014 when conversion operations were completed. By that time, the petcoke piles started had already started appearing in the Chicago neighborhoods of South Deering and Hegewisch: huge powdery jet-black mounds blowing dusty in the wind, piling up and shipping out and piling up again on the two KCBX terminals owned by the Koch brothers.

Tar sands oil is full of carbon, it's heavy, it's dense, and when refined it produces a residue that an installation called a coker transforms into a burnable substance, like coal but dirtier and more toxic. Petcoke is "the coal hidden in the tar sands." It's the little-known pollution factor that makes the new Canadian oil so dangerous for everyone on earth – Keystone XL or not. Chicago is tar sands central, because of the Enbridge pipeline system. That means the Big Three refineries are suddenly producing endless trucks and barges and railcars full of petcoke. The Calumet River terminals are just a staging area – the stuff is too dirty to burn in the US, so it's shipped out and sold in Asia and Latin America, releasing all kinds of silica dust along the way, in addition to the tons of carbon it funnels into the atmosphere when it is finally burned for electricity. Yet distance keeps none of this danger at bay. Back in South Deering and Hegewisch you might get black lung disease in your living room, that's what life is like these days. Today the "risk society" is getting excessively personal. The South Chicago neighborhoods are fighting it, the Natural Resources Defense Council is fighting it, two hundred of us out on the grass in front of that huge BP coker are fighting it, and that all folds into the larger campaign to finally do something about climate change.

The protest on May 17 was part of a national day of action called for by the Sierra Club, 350.org and other major groups. People went out around the country, responding to the summons whenever and however they could. We were there because we had met Tom Shepherd of the Southeast Environmental Task Force which is located in Hegewisch. We were also there to hear Thomas Frank, an activist from East Chicago, in Indiana, where he used to manage the Indiana Harbor Canal and now is one of the most outspoken environmental activists in the region. And we were there because BP dumped over a thousand gallons of what was undoubtedly tar sands crude into the lake on March 24, 2014 – which is more or less normal for them, but seriously criminal from our point of view.

As we arrived, we saw activists coming from Kalamazoo. There, Enbridge pipeline 6B ruptured in 2010. Over a million gallons of tar sands crude spilled into thirty-six miles of river. The heavy crude

is called “dilbit,” which means bitumen diluted with benzene and other chemicals. The benzene evaporated into the air and the rest sank to the bottom. For weeks, no one but the pipeline company even knew what they were dealing with. Clean-up has taken four years and in summer 2014 it’s still ongoing. Meanwhile Enbridge has opened a replacement pipeline that’s designed to push 500,000 barrels per day of Alberta crude from Griffith, Indiana, up to refineries in Toledo and Detroit and then ultimately on to Toronto and Montreal, when another segment comes on line soon. That’s twice as much volume as they did before the spill. And in May 2014, they announced a 56% rise in profits.

Do I hear that call again? Do you?

Powderhorn

Lying southwest of the refinery, about three miles as the crow flies – over a lot of former wetlands and current private property – is the Calumet Basin’s only residual marshland, surrounding the waters of beautiful blue Powder Horn Lake. Residual means these marshes were always here, they haven’t been restored. In the late afternoon, sunlight slants through tree branches and falls on shallow pools of water emerging out of dry grass. The forest cover is sparse, open. Pairs of brilliantly colored geese walk along the shoreline. You wouldn’t know where you were, what pathway brought you here. Volunteer stewards take care of this place, they protect it from dumping, they clean it up on the weekends. Wildlife emerges from nowhere, despite everything.

Over the course of a couple months, we’ve crisscrossed the Calumet Basin. Exploring, scouting, bringing other visitors, getting to know the place. Little by little, faces emerged from the landscape, people spoke with us, explained their struggles, their lives, their histories. Far beyond Hyde Park and the University, another world comes gradually into focus. These were the wetlands, where the Calumet River once flowed in a long slow semi-circle through the pools and the reeds. This was the blast furnace, the industrial crucible that built the Southwest Corridor. This is the uncertain place, open to different futures, now one thing, now another. You wouldn’t have come here on an ordinary afternoon. Yet something happened. Something changed. You did.