

FLAMES OF DISSENT:

The local spark that ignited an eco-sabotage boom — and bust

BY KERA ABRAHAM

Part V: The Ashes

More than a decade ago, a 21-year-old Lacey Phillabaum danced barefoot in a blue sundress on the downtown Federal Building lawn. A recent UO graduate, eco-radical writer and defender of the old-growth trees at Warner Creek, she jumped with other activists to the live lyrics of Casey Neil's "Dancing on the Ruins of Multinational Corporations."

Nine and a half years ago, an emboldened Phillabaum watched a truck roll within arm's length of a fellow activist during a forest defense protest on a highway near Detroit, Ore. Less than a month later, she and other *Earth First! Journal* editors defiantly perched in doomed downtown Eugene trees until police pepper-sprayed them down.

Seven years ago, after quitting the journal, Phillabaum joined the protests against the WTO in Seattle. As the host of Tim Lewis' documentary *Breaking the Spell*, she later defended the actions of the black-clad anarchists who looted and vandalized corporations they'd viewed as destroyers of the Earth.

Five and a half years ago, Phillabaum acted as the lookout during the arson of a University of Washington horticulture center — a crime she committed in concert with her new boyfriend, Stan Meyerhoff, and other activists. On the same night in Clatskanie, Ore., eco-radicals torched the offices and trucks of Jefferson Poplar Farm. The coordinated arsons, executed in the name of the Earth Liberation Front, were intended as a statement against genetic engineering.

But by the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, a combination of mounting paranoia and infighting had shattered Eugene's eco-radical scene like glass in storefront windows at the Battle of Seattle. Phillabaum and Meyerhoff moved first to Bend and later to Charlottesville, Va., where she

wrote for an alternative newsweekly and he studied engineering. They appeared to be on a straight path, their criminal past left in ashes.

Until December of last year, when the FBI busted Meyerhoff for participating in nearly a dozen of 20 environmentally motivated sabotage acts across the West between 1996 and 2001. Phillabaum turned herself in soon after and began working as an unnamed cooperator with the feds. (The bust may explain why she called off a freelance assignment for *EW* on "sustainable" beef production last winter. "I am having some heavy family problems," she wrote in a Feb. 24 email, "and I thought they were clearing up but they are not." As recently as Autumn 2006, Phillabaum was listed as a copy editor for *Eugene Magazine*.)

Today, Phillabaum is facing three to five years in jail — or 25, if federal prosecutors can nail her as a terrorist — because she'd slipped, even briefly, from the Earth Day of above-ground activism into the Earth Night of underground sabotage.

Phillabaum is one of 12 defendants who have pleaded guilty to a flare of environmentally motivated arsons in the federal sting known as Operation Backfire. One targeted activist has pleaded

not guilty, another committed suicide in jail, and four are fugitives. One more, the government's first informant, lives in Eugene and has not been indicted. The cooperators face recommended sentences of three to about 16 years (for Phillabaum

and Meyerhoff, respectively), but federal prosecutors have said they will try to tack 20-year "terrorism enhancements" onto each sentence.

The 10 defendants before the Oregon courts are scheduled for sentencing in April. Washington defendant Briana Waters will face trial in May, and Phillabaum and Jennifer Kolar — whose plea deals may hinge on their testimonies against Waters — are to be sentenced in July.

The domino effect of the arrests and cooperation agreements have been surreal for local eco-radicals who knew the defendants. Generally speaking, second only to the community's disdain for the authorities is its disappointment with the cooperators. Most loathed is Jake Ferguson, the apparent ringleader of the eco-saboteurs and the feds' primary informant, who still walks free; U.S. Attorney Karin Immergut has said that prosecutors haven't yet decided "what to do with him."

Nearly as resented is Meyerhoff, apparently the feds' secondary informant, followed by Phillabaum and Kolar, who likely began working with authorities around spring 2006. Many local eco-radicals are likewise upset with Chelsea Gerlach, Kevin Tubbs, Kendall Tankersley, Darren Thurston and Suzanne Savoie, who had begun cooperating by July.

out incriminating others, and Olympia resident Briana Waters, who maintains her innocence.

"What's upsetting is how quickly people are folding and how namby-pamby and weak Earth First! looks when you compare it to the Black Panthers and the American Indian Movement, where people have held out for decades without talking," said former *Earth First! Journal* co-editor Jim Flynn. "It just makes our movement look weak and soft and middle-class. For people like me, who have spent years in the movement, it's embarrassing. How will we recruit new people?"

But another movement veteran, former Earth First!er James Johnston, attacks not the cooperators but the people who criticize them. "It's a bunch of dimwits who talk a big talk about arson and anarchism and a bunch of other crap," he wrote by email. "Now they don't seem to have anything better to do than make up bunch of lies about the people who actually did the arsons and ARE taking responsibility for it."

Johnston, an ex-boyfriend of Phillabaum's, sat next to her at the Dec. 11 sentencing hearing in Eugene. Other activists in the courtroom avoided them both.

Eugene's eco-radical era was a fire that blazed through town for half a decade, bringing together Earth First!ers, anarchists, artists, feminists and animal advocates who rejected authority and envisioned a freer, greener world. Their flame manifested in art projects, housing cooperatives, forest defense campaigns, anti-globalization rallies, independent media and, notoriously, the flare of environmentally motivated arsons.

By mid-2001 that eco-radical fire had

It may no longer be so radical, but Eugene's environmentalist community continues to nurture seeds sown at the peak of the movement in the late '90s.

Most of the community insiders who spoke with *EW* maintain their support for Daniel McGowan, Jonathan Paul, Nathan Block and Joyanna Zacher, who struck an unusual deal with prosecutors allowing them to confess to their own crimes with-

consumed itself, sputtering out as activists split over dogmatic differences and personality clashes. In subsequent years federal surveillance pressed down like a fog, nearly extinguishing the remnant embers.

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