

# They Saved Our Butts

A GENERATION AGO, ACTIVISTS PROTECTED LANE COUNTY FROM A PROPOSED NUCLEAR PLANT

*“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” — Margaret Mead*

**O**n May 18, 1970, the Eugene Water and Electric Board (EWEB) ran an ad in *The Register-Guard*. The ad read, in all caps, bold print: “EWEB IS ON THE COAST TO STAY. VOTE NO ON MEASURE 52. SAVE YOUR NUCLEAR PLANT.” The ad also touted nuclear as “the safest of all industries.”

Twelve miles north of Florence, Big Creek meets the sea. It’s the first of two lovely small concrete arch bridges, designed by Conde B. McCullough in the 1930s. There’s a turnout just north of the bridge where you will find a sign indicating the land is public and owned by Oregon state parks for you and me.

Chances are you are the only person there. Except for the cars driving by on the highway, it’s quiet here, compared to what it almost was.

As you wander you might spot Roosevelt elk in the forest, salmon or steelhead in the creek, harlequin ducks in the outlet or a small reddish butterfly fluttering about the salt spray meadow. In 1980, this was the only known viable population of the federally endangered Oregon silverspot butterfly.

Think about this. Were it not for a small group of thoughtful, committed Eugene citizens stepping forward and making themselves heard, it would not be like this today. Were it not for the Eugene Future Power Committee, you would likely be looking at the remains of a decommissioned nuclear power plant. Everything you see here now would be gone.

In 1968, voters in Eugene, with 85 percent support, passed a ballot measure allowing EWEB to borrow \$225 million to build a nuclear power plant “some-

where in Lane County.” By the late ’60s, even public power companies like EWEB had become infected with the nuclear power virus by the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA).

BPA was predicting a huge surge in demand for power that could only be met, they asserted, with the nuclear option. BPA proposed 20 nuclear power plants to be constructed by the end of the 1970s in the Northwest.

The original proposal was to build the plant on farmland north of Eugene. The farmers, in a classic outpouring of NIMBYism, were OK with nuclear power, just not there. So EWEB decided to build the plant on the Oregon coast, eventually settling on Big Creek, where no one lived, so there would be little local opposition.

With EWEB’s primary argument for the nuke predicated on a huge surge in demand for power in the Willamette Valley, EWEB worked to hedge its bet. They started paying residents to install baseboard electric heating in their homes and created Eugene’s first organized effort to “recruit” industrial power users.

EWEB also funded a lecture program in Eugene schools called “This Atomic World” and joined the Atomic Industrial Forum, the nuclear industry’s national trade association.

What EWEB did not tell Eugene residents was that the power from the nuke would not go to Eugene at all. It would go into the BPA grid, and much of its power would go to aluminum plants on the Columbia River.

After the 1968 vote, questions began to emerge about the cost and safety of nuclear power. In July 1969, the City Council had a public meeting with EWEB to discuss whether EWEB should hold a public hearing on the nuke. Citizens at the meeting were not allowed to speak, and EWEB announced it would not hold a public hearing.

A small group of people walked out of the meeting, determined to be heard. In the hallway outside, 16 people signed a notebook creating the Eugene Future Power Committee (EFPC).

A day later EWEB changed its mind and scheduled a public meeting. Too late. EWEB’s continuing arrogance had created a group that, in the end, would win the battle and stop EWEB’s nuclear dreams, and in the process, change EWEB forever while also saving Big Creek from nuclear Armageddon.

EFPC was led by Jane Novick, Chris Attneve and Joseph Holaday, with former U.S. Congressman Charles Porter as their lawyer. These were just regular folks, small business owners and “housewives,” and they were taking on the pro-nuclear juggernaut of EWEB and the BPA as well as the nuclear power industry.

If there ever was a David and Goliath story, this was it.

According to Daniel Pope in his essay “We Can Wait. We Should Wait,” “EWEB’s tactics probably benefited the antinuclear forces. EWEB had at first dismissed the protesters as annoyances and treated them with scarcely disguised hostility.”

Years later, when asked about EWEB’s response to the EFPC, organizer Novick said: “We were treated like dogs. They loathed us with such passion that you could see their teeth grinding in their jaws; they were livid with rage when they’d see us walk into the room.”

EFPC decided in late 1969 to put a measure on the ballot. However, rather than calling for an outright ban, they opted for a more moderate ballot measure calling for a four-year moratorium, in the hope that in four years EWEB would come to its senses. And they adopted the slogan “We Can Wait. We Should Wait.”

EFPC miraculously gathered the required 4,528 signatures in time to put a measure on the May 1970 ballot.

EWEB fought back hard and created Citizens for the Orderly Development of Electricity (CODE) to oppose the EFPC ballot measure and to promote nuclear energy. CODE assured Eugene voters there would be “zero release of radiation” and the plant would create “desperately needed electricity and jobs,” and a four-year delay would cost ratepayers millions of dollars as well as cause electric brownouts.

EFPC fought the way grassroots groups always fight, with community meetings, letters to the editor, door-to-door canvassing and organizing. With the original bond vote to finance the nuke winning with 85 percent of the vote, EWEB did not expect Measure 52 to win.

However, sometimes miracles do happen. On May 26, 1970, Measure 52 passed by a slim margin of 850 votes out of over 21,000 votes cast. EWEB would have to wait four years before fulfilling its nuclear dreams.

Shortly before the four-year moratorium was to expire in 1974, EWEB cancelled plans for the nuke. The excessive-demand predictions were proving to be bogus, while cost and safety issues had grown around nuclear power. The public had become skeptical about that “atomic world” EWEB had promoted in the local schools. And energy conservation was proving itself a safer and more cost effective tool for managing demand.

By 1974, EWEB officials had come to realize building that nuke would have been a huge mistake. At the time, I don’t believe they could even imagine how big of a mistake it would have been. Hundreds of millions over budget to build it, hundreds of millions to keep it operational until it would eventually be decommissioned, and hundreds of millions more to tear it down.

And then what to do with the radioactive waste? It is possible it could have bankrupted EWEB with Eugene taxpayers picking up the tab. And today, instead of rare butterflies, threatened Chinook salmon and elk, Big Creek might have been left a radioactive industrial junkyard.

EFPC had saved EWEB from making a horrible mistake, changing EWEB in the process.

The lesson was not lost on EWEB. In 1974, EWEB formerly acknowledged it when Keith Parks, the new general manager, said “they (EFPC) did a great favor for this community. They saved its butt.”

Parks would usher in a new breed of EWEB management. The days of treating opposing viewpoints like “dogs” were over.

Big Creek was saved from EWEB’s nuclear mistake. A decade later, another small group of committed citizens would need to save Big Creek again.

But that’s another story.

*Bob Warren retired in 2012 as the regional business development officer for Business Oregon for Lane, Lincoln, Linn and Benton counties. He is currently a member of the board of directors for McKenzie River Trust.*

