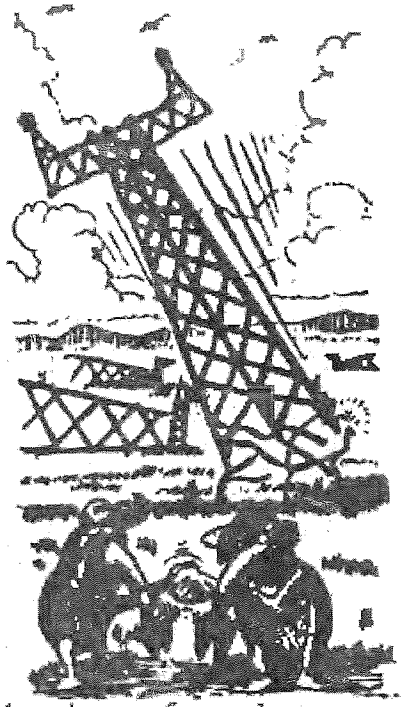
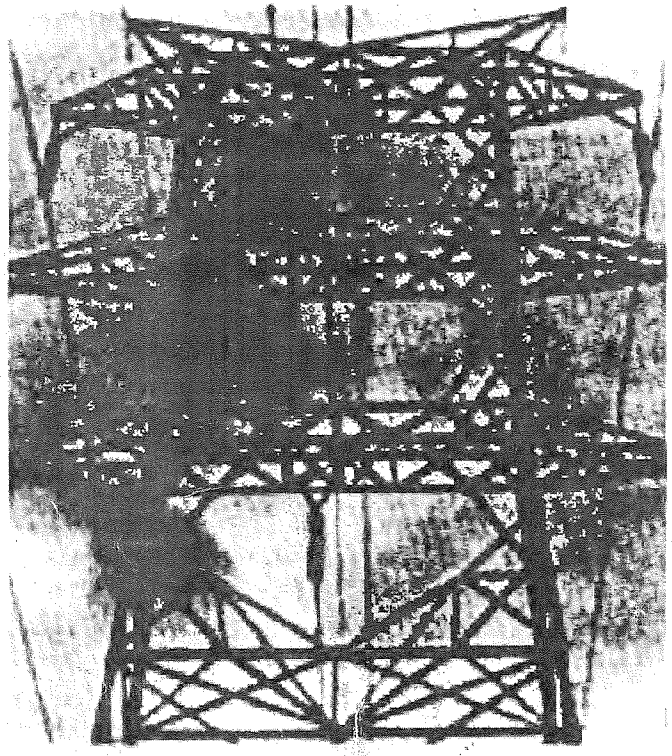
of sabotage continued to hit the power line. Within only two years, fourteen showers were toppled, and over 10,000 insulators were shot out. The project could only continue after the energy corporations turned ownership over to the U.S. government. This was a direct result of the economic losses caused by sabotage, and the costs of security. Even with this turnover to the State, a fifteenth tower was toppled on New Year's Eve in 1981.



Many lessons can be drawn from the experiences of those who fought against this project. Legal channels only revealed that in the eyes of the State, industrial development would always take priority over the health and livelihood of its citizens. As a result, a social struggle manifested and directly attacked the source of the problem. Sabotage proved to be far more costly to the energy corporations, and direct action was a manifestation of public sentiments, especially the sentiments of those most ill-affected by the project.

The Bolt Weevils



an account of a direct action struggle against infrastructue by rural Minnesota farmers

Power: Electrical, Political, and Popular in Rural Minnesota

An interesting example of popular sabotage was born in Minnesota during the late 1970's. It was here that a group of farmers in Western Minnesota perfected the art and science of toppling high-tension electrical towers. After federal agents began investigating these incidents, the farmers would only reply, "Hmph...Must've been those bolt weevils."

The trouble began when United Power Association and the Cooperative Power Association were looking to exploit coal reserves in North Dakota and needed a 453-mile transmission line through Minnesota farmland to the industrial center of the Twin Cities. As is typical, poor people were screwed so that rich corporations could benefit. Most of the electricity would be used by industry, not people. The utility corporations chose to plan power lines through land belonging to poor farmers rather than huge corporate farms.

What these corporations did not expect was opposition. And that is exactly what they received.

Virgil Fuchs, one of the farmers, became aware of what this would mean for the small farmers. The plan would require strips 160-feet wide cut through their fields, and 180-foot pylons erected to support the pylons. The health problems associated with electromagnetic pollution (from the currents running through these power lines) were also a concern. It was already known

Minnesota Public Radio reporter Greg Barron visited West Minnesota and described the situation as nothing short of "guerilla war." Helicopter crews patrolled 170 miles of power lines, and squad cars combed the countryside. The governor eventually called out the FBI to help conduct heavy surveillance.

Seventy-two arrests were made in just one county. Six of these were for felony charges. Everyone refused to testify against the farmers arrested. The only information the cops got from farmers was the response, "Hmpf! Must be the bolt weevils." And even though two farmers were eventually convicted of felonies, they were only sentenced to community service.

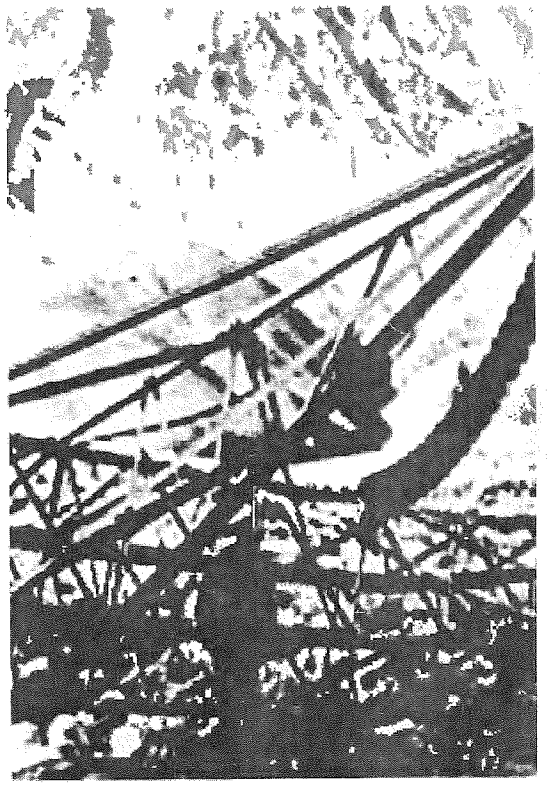
An interview with dairy farmer Tony Bartos revealed the sentiments of most the farmers:

"Yeah I go along with it. I wish a few more would come down, and I think they will, as time goes on. They shouldn't have did this to us in the first place. We've did everything we could lawfully. We went to Minneapolis, got lawyers, went through the courts. But either the judges are paid off, or they just don't realize what's going on out here. I think there's a lot of different laws and ways you can look at it. There's moral laws, too. I don't know, I don't figure it's wrong what we're doing out here. Sure people think you gotta stay with the law, but what is the law? Who makes it? We should have more of a say with what goes on in this state too, you know. They can't just run over us like a bunch of dogs."

The power line was eventually constructed, and operations began in 1979. Despite this loss, an impressive wave

More than 60 percent of Minnesotans supported the farmers against the power line. However, they were outmatched by the power companies' lawyers and technical experts. In the end, state government and the courts took the companies' side.

In the winter of 1978, the confrontations in the fields would span weeks, and governor Perpich sent in nearly half of the highway patrol. Many of the cops who had been sympathetic turned against the farmers and told them they couldn't assemble, couldn't drive on country roads, couldn't stop on township roads, etc. When confronted about this,cops stated, "We will do whatever we can to get that power line through."

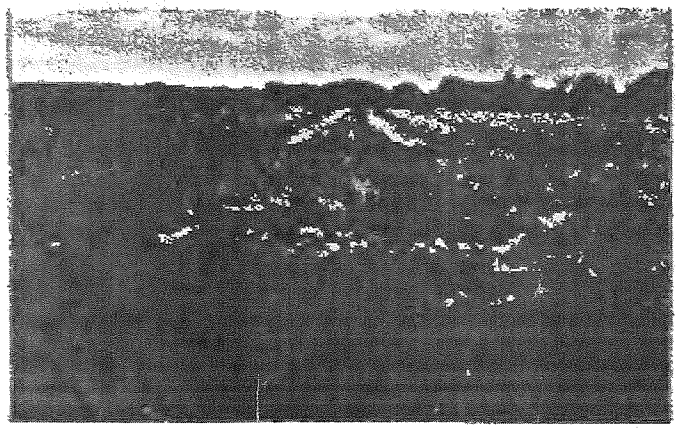


In August 1978, a 150-foot steel transmission town came crashing to the ground. Upon inspection, authorities found that the bolts at the base of the tower had been loosened. Over the next few weeks, three more fell down. Guard poles had been cut in half, step bolts had been cut three-quarters through, bolts at the base were loosened or removed,and insulators were shot out.

that electrical lines lower conception rates and milk production in dairy cows. And the state's own guidelines warned farmers against refueling their vehicles under the transmission lines and warned school bus drivers against picking up or discharging children under them.

Fuchs went knocking door-to-door at his neighbors', informing them of the plans. Soon after, corporate representatives were on his tail trying to get farmers to sign agreements, but not one farmer signed.

Local townships soon passed resolutions disallowing the power lines, and county boards refused to give permits for the power line construstruction. The corporations planning the construction ignored the local concerns and turned to the state. The farmers also



turned to the state looking for help from their "representatives." The state's Environmental Quality Council responded by holding public hearings. The public opinion at the meetings ran overwhelmingly against the power lines, but these unfavorable testimonies were left out of the transcripts.

Throughout the years 1974 to 1977, farmers tried lengthy and ineffectual legal channels such as these to block the construction. They were only permitted to request that the construction happen on someone else's land, rather than their own.

Not surprisingly, the state granted the permit for the construction in 1977. One county attempted to sue, but the case was dismissed. At the very least, government representatives promised they would let the farmers know when construction was to begin. But again, they lied.

When surveyors showed up in Virgil Fuchs' fields, he fought back. He drove his tractor over the surveyors' equipment and rammed their pickup truck. Farmers from across the counties began gathering and planned to fight the surveyors anyway they could.

Such tactics included getting permits to tear up roads, and running chainsaws or other loud equipment so that the surveyors couldn't communicate. The network of farmers that had formed through legal battles helped to increase the resistance to the construction. When surveyors would show up to begin work, hundreds of farmers would block their way.

Even the local sheriff was sympathetic. "In my opinion this is a situation that began with the Environmental Quality Council, at the request of the power companies,

and that's where the problem should be remanded for resolution. . I will not point a gun at either the farmer or the surveyor. To point a gun is to be prepared to shoot, and this situation does not justify either. It does justify a review of the conditions that bring about such citizen resistance."

It also seemed as if Phillip Martin, the head of United Power Association, sympathized too. He had grown up on a farm and had even known Virgil's mother. He had said of her: "She reminded me somewhat of my own mother." But that did not stop his decision which would affect so many small family farmers.

It seems to make sense why Martin was so upset. In North Dakota, they had faced only one protester and dealt with him quickly. In Martin's own words: "The law enforcement there initiated the action to put him in prison, or jail. And pretty soon he said 'I'll be a good boy, I won't do anymore,' and they let him out, and we built a transmission line."

However, in Minnesota: "The law enforcement refused to enforce their own laws. We could go out and try to survey, and they would simply pull up all our stakes, they would destroy everything we had out there. And there was never anything done."

The farmers continued to file lawsuits, which ended up going to the Minnesota Supreme Court. However, the Supreme Court decided against them. This act radicalized many of the farmers.