



Introduction

“**I**NDUSTRY” IS A FUNNY WORD. Sometimes it is a compliment. Think of the honeybee, which we generally hold in high esteem for its “industrious” nature. And sometimes it is an insult. After all, it is “industry” that pollutes the river.

I am an accidental “captain of industry,” which I suppose makes me a cross between the virtuous honeybee and the evil polluter. I circle the word “industrial” like a hyena approaching a carcass — not sure if the lions are done feeding.

I once went to a weekend retreat that was staged by the good people of a popular environmental magazine. Everyone said they offered the best environmental writing in the country. I’d never heard of them. And I don’t really care for retreats. But they had recently featured my friend Matt Rudolf in their magazine, and he was driving to the coast, and Bob and Camille were riding along so I reluctantly jumped in.

It was a beautiful fall weekend in North Carolina. The soybeans were still drying in the fields and the tundra swans were starting to arrive from Canada. I had just come from a meeting with Wes Jackson and Wendell Berry who had convened a group to discuss the formation of a “Fifty Year Farm Bill” for then-presidential candidate Obama.

The weekend guests were primarily self-absorbed “activists” and writers who could barely wait to read their latest poem or tome. They were swapping tales of how they strapped themselves to concrete barricades in order to stop heavy equipment from rolling. I sat quietly. I routinely order the services of bulldozers. I listened to their heroic stories of how they used activism to effect societal change. And I decided that I am not an activist. I use heavy equipment to clear weed species and trash from the woods so that another acre of sustainable produce can be put into cultivation, or so that a barn can be built.

Whenever I clear land in North Carolina I get criticized for destroying the forest. After the objectors have wandered off, I set about picking up the shards of plastic and glass and the vast amounts of metal that clutter our forests. I have never found the woods to be virgin. They have always been trashed by previous generations. At my house in Chatham County I can tell you about the previous owner’s heart medication, and drinking habits, shoe



Kimberli Matin’s brushed aluminum “Pond Scene” adorns the hill above the plant.

size, and favorite snack foods. After eighteen years of concerted effort, I still have garbage piles I haven't yet approached.

On my retreat weekend I strolled along a marshy boardwalk with one of the author hosts. In her poems she wrote about the winds on the Outer Banks of North Carolina, where she lived. I asked her opinion of harnessing those winds for electricity production and I explained that I was in the wind business in Canada with my brothers.

She said, "Not industrial scale wind I hope."

Drat. I was at odds again. It is "industrial" scale wind. My brother Glen has built 13 turbines in two discrete parts of Ontario, and each one is 1.6 megawatts or better. They have 40-meter blades, require a big gust to get them started, and they are beautiful when they are spinning. Hold the protest for a moment: we need to harness wind energy if we are to sustain human life on this remarkable planet.

In North Carolina, wind is something we write poems about. Not something we use to power our economy. And guys like me, who invest in "big wind," are suspect at writers' retreats.

It made me reflect on vocabulary. "Industrial" is synonymous with pollution, environmental racism, corporatism, war, and all that is wrong with the world.

That's too bad for me. I'm not an activist. I'm an industrialist.

I work at Piedmont Biofuels. That's a grassroots sustainability project that started in my backyard, became a cooperative fuel-making venture, and ended up as a community scale biodiesel plant. Our project sprawls across an abandoned industrial park that is currently home to over a dozen discrete, like-minded businesses ranging from hydroponics lettuce, to biopesticides, to sustainable produce, to worm castings.

For a long time everyone on our project referred to our little biodiesel plant as "the Coop," and to our "big" biodiesel plant as "Industrial."

“Industrial” was the place with the stage for live music, the playground, the giant chess set in the yard, and the place where people gathered for soccer night. In our town, Industrial is where you might be headed for lunch, or to pick up a box of sustainable produce, or to attend a Pecha Kucha presentation.

For many of us, industrial is an honorific term.

By now the boilers have largely been extinguished on the industrial age in America. Most of our manufacturing has moved away. But “industry” is a term that I would like to reclaim. Industry can evolve. It doesn’t have to look like the industry of our fathers. Ants are industrious. People can be industrious. And industry can be a good thing. Ours is an industrious project.

On one occasion I gave a tour to Pamela Bell, who was one of the founders of Kate Spade. Unlike me she really *is* a captain of industry, with an intimate knowledge of the textile trade, outsourcing, and global commerce. We finished our tour and pulled up a couple of rocking chairs overlooking Piedmont Biofarm. She has an insatiable appetite for business ideas, and she was smitten with our little eco-industrial park. She’s the one who coined the phrase “Industrial Evolution” as the title for this book.

“Evolution” is something I know considerably less about. My friend Michael Tiemann once hosted an international meeting of the Open Source Initiative in Pittsboro, where our plant is located. Some of his guests were stranded in an air traffic tangle in New York, and he was unable to start his meeting. To kill some time he brought those who had arrived for an impromptu tour. I led them around for an hour or so, and when I was done, he suggested that most people have misinterpreted the work of Charles Darwin.

“People sum it up as survival of the fittest,” he said, “but really *On the Origin of Species* is about adaptation.” He then went on to explain how Piedmont Biofuels had been forced to adapt time and again to shifting trends in the global marketplace, and to

ever-changing government policy that is not quite sure what role biodiesel will play in America's fuel mix.

In the end, I'm just a storyteller. The stories I tell are the ones I have lived, which makes me sometimes wonder if I should shift to fiction so that I could suffer less. My first two books have occasionally inspired others to start projects or take action on changing their worlds.

I think of Megan, who started the farmers market at the marina in Lion's Head, Ontario. And of Tammy who threw in the towel on her rat race life in Atlanta to create an asparagus farm in Southern Pines, North Carolina. I think of Cole, who after a day at our park with his elementary school insisted that his parents allow him to plant peanuts in their backyard. And I think of the many small-scale biodiesel projects we have inspired along the way.

In my travels, both on the Internet and in 3D, I have learned that we have many people cheering for us, and hoping our project will succeed. As such I frequently find myself conflicted when I'm asked, "How can we replicate that here?" Whether I'm on stage as a speaker, or on the net, or simply having lunch, it's a question I can't easily answer.

I *don't* have a specific system, or a plan, or a solution. But I *do* have some stories to tell...