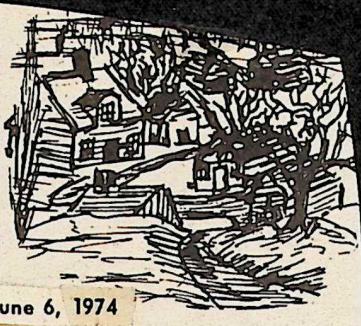
Village View

by Andrea Leonard



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Several months ago Americans came face-to-face with our country's oil shortage.

It may seem now the shortage was contrived. I, for one, believe it was. I also believe America does face, and will continue to face, a rapid depletion of its energy resources. Unless we conserve those resources, all of us, day-after-day, in every way possible, soon we'll face oil shortages neither contrived nor shortlived.

The small sacrifices made the winter of 1973-74 will seem like luxurious living, in retrospect, if we continue to waste oil, gasoline, natural gas, coal and electric power.

Because the gasoline shortage has been relieved, most people seem to have forgotten the entire experience. Speed limits are still posted, but cars are zipping along at old, pre-crisis, pace.

The rapidity with which Americans have adjusted to and accepted the 55¢ gallon-of-gas indicates our society's affluence. If you can afford a car, apparently, you can afford to pay for the same amount of gasoline you always could.

The outcry for turning off lights or unnecessary appliances has dwindled to a whisper. Electric companies are pushing appliance sales again, just as they did before the crisis.

Yup. 'Twas all a hoax to get the prices up. Still, the shortages actually exist, despite the prices. The shortage has been mitigated in no way.

We're draining the bottoms of the barrels; there isn't any more where that came from. Eat, drink and make merry, for tomorrow we die. Burn, waste and light up the sky, for tomorrow may never come.

But it always has.

Tomorrow isn't going to be such a pretty day, for any of us. There's a measurable end to oil, gas and coal reserves. It's not far away.

There's a measurable end to the goo, gorm and corruption we can pour into the ocean without nature's collecting her penalties. They're entirely decimating the fishes and destroying completely this important source of food for our growing population.

There's a measurable end to the amount of fresh water we need.

Our water supply -- nationally -- comes from rainfall. We use industrial cooling and cleaning; we use it for irrigation, again to increase our food supplies; and we waste it.

All there is comes from rainfall. The U.S. Geological Survey estimates the fresh water run-off in our country is 1,200 billion gallons a day. Right now, for all purposes, we use about 400 billions a day.

That's about a third of our potential supply.

Water consumption is increasing at the rate of 5% a year. This figure, compounded each year, indicates this country will experience a fresh water shortage in three decades.

Are Americans going to ignore this, just as they are ignoring the facts of impending energy shortages? We received warning this past winter, but it's all but forgotten because now we can get enough gas to drive wherever we want. Our heads are buried in the sand.

When the fresh water crisis comes, there won't be anyone to negotiate with. There won't be anyone but ourselves to deal with it. Will we, then, staring it in the face, start conservation practices? Too late?

Will we wait until we reach chronic shortages, a crisis, before doing something to increase supplies or decrease consumption, or both?

It's all up to us.

When we look around at the tremendous oceans, it appears probable desalinization is the answer.

It's been proposed new atomic power plants be located off-shore and waste heat they generate be channelled to boil seawater, then condense the resulting steam to fresh water.

If the United States generates 1,000 billion watts of electrical energy in off-shore atomic energy plants, (up from 400 billion watts generated by all types of plants daily now), and uses all the additional 600 billion watts to distill fresh water from sea water, we'd get only about 50 billion gallons more fresh water a day.

Fifty billion gallons is a lot of water, but it won't go far toward easing a water shortage in a country that, right now, uses 400 billion gallons a day, and in thirty years anticipates needing 1200 billion gallons a day.

Consider, too, the ecological effects of dumping the salts back into the sea, and increasing the salinity of our oceans. How long before that process will have disastrous effects on life of sea creatures?

In any event, our present use is eight times greater than the amount of extra water these hypothetical plants could produce.

Furthermore, it's extremely unlikely a short thirty years will see 600 off-shore atomic power plants constructed.

The water shortage is coming faster than we can possibly remedy it by desalinization, even if that were a good idea.

What's needed right now to head off this impending crisis -- and it'll be a crisis far more serious than the energy crisis when it comes -- is budgeting of fresh water supplies.

We can impose this budget upon ourselves as individuals, or we can wait until the government does it for or to us. Or we can wait for the day we turn the tap, and nothing happens.

By then we won't be able to walk down to the pond and scoop up a bucket of fresh water; the ponds will be drained dry. We won't be able to get it anywhere -- except maybe from our own rainbarrels, or off the grocery shelf in bottles at a higher price than we now pay for alcoholic beverages.

Industry will grind slowly down as water becomes scarce, because without it's cooling, engines will over-heat, motors will burn out; your car won't run, either, without water in the radiator.

Air-cooled engines are an answer, [illegible], the number of them on the market now is limited.

Every time we flush a toilet, seven gallons of water dump through the system. A brick or large rock in the tank will displace some water; the toilet will work just as well with five or six gallons of flush, as with seven.

A dripping faucet wastes hundreds of gallons each year. Watering grass and gardens when they don't require it for survival pours thousands of gallons away. Multiply it by every family with a sprinkler, and you begin to see where 400 billions of gallons of water a day goes.

Does water run uselessly down your drain while you brush your teeth? If you had to pump it, haul it, boil it to purify it, would you let it run away like that?

People are exhausting the basic resources of the world. Like the Gingham Dog and the Calico Cat, we're eating each other up. We don't have to be!

The handwriting is on the wall; what are we going to do about it? Go blissfully into oblivion, knowing, but ignoring?