Portland Freedom Tribe 2010: from Palin to Paradise

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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Now the story can be told for whoever is out there to hear it. Perhaps it will help you to rebuild or create community wherever you are. We are curious if you went through a similar experience, because real news became unreliable and mostly pointless due to the struggle we had on our hands. What do you have in the way of material resources and arrangements to keep yourselves alive and rebuild society? Maybe we can help each other. We have sent this message through what's left of the internet and as a dispatch by bicycle caravan and sail transport.

We vividly recall the last gasp of the U.S. economy beginning as financial collapse, soon bringing everyone's usual activities to a screaming halt right after the election of 2008. Portland was picked for the first major military crackdown even before its rejection of the election of Sarah Palin as de facto President. Exit polls conflicting with official results helped trigger Portland's declaration of fraud and the call for Jimmy Carter to convene a United Nations inquiry. But Portland then and there made its perhaps unintended break with the outside. Fortunately, trouble with oil supplies nationally made an occupation by federal troops unfeasible after it was attempted, and our townspeople engaged in Gandhian noncooperation.

This you probably knew. The following is the rest of the story when communications and travel took a nose dive. If you are far away in the former U.S. empire, you may have been given a different story. In any event, what interests us is what you created out of the upheaval and disaster.

Our unanticipated revolt surprised even us, starting with our public suspicion and outrage over the manipulation of the vote starting in October. Even in Portland we liberals and do-it-yourselfers believed John McCain had a chance to win honestly. His worsening Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and other health issues turned him into a figurehead for the Republican ticket. He gracefully suspended himself as CEO of his team, at least publicly, with perceptibly diminishing speech faculties. He was able to urge the nation to basically put emotion first and elect a war hero. Palin took the reins at the end of October and was given a very improved script by her handlers. Palin-McCain may have gotten half the vote, aided by low turnout thanks to the October 31st surprise. And with swing-state voting-irregularities and purging, it came to pass that Sarah and John could take control of the federal government from their friends the Bushies. Cynics from Portland, Maine to our Portland expected nothing else.

Even in Portland some were afraid to vote "wrongly" if they would be targeted as "the enemy of God-blessed Homeland." The news media fell in behind this as soon as the corporados realized their interests were being protected and guaranteed (so they thought). With the phony terrorism events of Halloween and no way for the individual citizen to sort truth from lies, the vote for "national security" was maximized. Skepticism about the "domestic terrorists with connections to the Middle East" ran high, but there wasn't time to figure out what the game was in order to convince the average citizen that treachery could be afoot to swing an election.

The erratic behavior of John McCain in the weeks before the election had hurt his standing in the polls, but there was much sympathy nationally for his POW experiences now affecting him in a stressful campaign. The new hostage crisis blamed on terrorists on October 31st [Pentagon wives abducted to a secret resort taken over by Iranian immigrants] swung millions of voters over to McCain's camp. His plea for patience for his painful recovery from his PTSD flare-up appealed to those who agreed his running mate would nurture and bolster him in the White House. He would be able to assume full Commander-In-Chief duties by the beginning of the new year, when he would keep his promise of attacking Iran personally.

Portland was one of the places not buying much of it.

Not only was it firmly Obama country; the Portlanders had already been disaffected by the federal government more than any other town. Without Obama as President-elect, there seemed to be no chance of forthright opposition leadership by the Democrats. An attitudinal trend had already formed by events involving the unfriendly presence of federal law enforcement: the War On Terror conference in August of 2008 where the Attorney General announced more "tools" (control); later that month the black helicopter assault on downtown Portland, and in September the US military began to deploy an active-duty regular Army combat unit for full-time use inside the United States to deal with emergencies, including potential civil unrest. These were some of the factors making much of the citizenry feel pressured by dishonorable outsiders. With economic collapse and supplies of oil and food looking grim, Portland was on its own.

Emboldening Portlanders was the lack of any crackdown on the hugely successful Last Thursday street faire, a monthly non-commercial and unauthorized car-banning party in the Northeast district that started to spread around town. It added to the federal government's perception that the city police, for example, were just part of the problem: progressive, radical Americans doing their own thing and loving their growing independent streak. When the phenomenon took off in other cities, right-wing talk show hosts cried, "Where will it end?" Sarah Palin said she would never allow her family to go

witness such a "freak show." Integral to the festivals were anti-government, anti-Wall Street pamphlets, posters, puppets and song.

The average person in Portland had a different attitude than the typical American in Anytown, USA. Just observing the Portland residents, an image of health and rebelliousness shows through in style-statements that carry through to action. The people are better looking, fit, with informal and sometimes zany clothing. The houses and stores, with a wild touch of foliage in the neighborhoods, spoke of the happy locals' lives. When neighbors on any particular street found, starting in the 1990s, that coming together benefits the individual, the family and community, there grew priceless solidarity and hope for the future. To see so many people on bicycles, and transforming residential intersections to places for sharing dreams and skills, uplifted the citizenry. There was still a divide among those who wanted more such changes and greater independence from authoritarian government and its pro-corporate agenda, and those who wanted to consume more and more while waving the Stars and Stripes. But the government bailout to Wall Street and the worsening track record of the feds, starting with the Katrina debacle, brought most of the people of Portland and many other towns across the land to realize "We are the leaders," as one slogan went.

Meanwhile, there was a growing sense among those who had awakened to the flaws of mainstream culture that we had relied on false resources. Getting more stuff had been unpopular in Portland for years. Spending was focused on necessities with local origin. The unsustainable abundance of food from thousands of miles away, in plastic packages to throw away, and the endless electronic gadgets that made our lives more convenient, were frowned upon by city policy and more and more Portlanders. But the biggest false resource was increasingly seen as money itself. In a place like Portland, where ongoing exchange between people was about creating systems for rain water catchment, for example, and bartering for fruits gown in yards, the realization was growing that monetary wealth as one's only resource was not only an error but profoundly unwise.

Events of nature helped erode the misplaced faith in our top-down, incompetent technocratic state. When the tornado ripped through Portland in the heat wave of December 2008 we were all given a wake-up call. Some were so frightened and depressed that they almost ceased functioning. Those who were not surprised were energized to take action, either to organize their families and neighbors to protect themselves, or in a whole range of community circumstances. We become more self-reliant as we reached out to the extended community of Portland and beyond. The symbol of a tornado with corporate logos flying apart became well known for one Portland network, the Transform Portland Coalition. The TPC became part of the new governing Council of Councils, as did networks such as Transition Towns and Postcarbon.

After climate destabilization accelerated in December, the ecological wing of the Council of Councils tried to tie in all changes in society that were also accelerating. But people were continuing to focus on politics and basic needs, as before. But we agreed the climate suffered by even one day's additional emissions, as we finally realized after the complete disruption of rainfall and late freeze on fruit trees in nearby areas. So the 2010 agenda for the Council of Councils prioritized dismantling all possible sources of greenhouse gas emissions, and the policy was pulled forward to take effect in June 2009. A carbon footprint calculation yielded a theoretical maximum population for Portland to be either 50,000 to 80,000, depending on what other population centers had in numbers of burners (consumers) and how much they were burning (or deforesting).

We are fairly certain that the global financial crisis and its morph into petrocollapse -- causing food riots and violent desperation -- affected your area as much as Portland, but perhaps worse. On the other hand, you may have been in a rural area where there was food growing, and you had responsible neighbors. Or you may have been one of the few with a boat to skirt the meltdown of Western Civilization and gain enough renewable resources to survive until the urban threat subsided. Vermont was the first to secede from the U.S.A., starting a trend.

Portland did not melt down entirely, unlike most cities dependent on petroleum. In recent years we had been able to put through many programs through city government, such as depaving (funded by the Bureau of Environmental Services), distributing stored seed for food gardens, putting tens of thousands of free bicycles on the streets, and holding neighborhood councils where people made group decisions. Right away the regulations against roosters, compost toilets and gray water were thrown out. Green building (e.g. cob houses) had already been launched, made known to thousands of people through garden-tours, for example. Citizen groups such as City Repair and city agencies such as Portland's Office of Sustainable Development were leading the way to a more sane urban future. These efforts fell short of what the true demand was when it was unleashed during the Great Unraveling of 2008-2009.

Farmers markets were popular, but in late 2008 Portland put out the call to create many more of them. The urban growth boundary (greenbelt) had preserved farmland and foraging areas, and this state law had served other Oregon towns (even though sprawl development had crept through here and there). When farms could no longer keep all of us fed, despite the ramping up of unprecedented projects using manual labor, pedal power, and maximizing biofuels and river-barged transportation, die-off had been staved off a while to a significant extent. Our worst phase of collapse was after other places went down. Such that, Portlanders later fanned out to now empty lands in many cases. Creative cooperation in the communities of Portland and the Metro Regional Area delayed and minimized die-off enough to allow people to migrate to areas that had already endured a faster collapse. Some of those who escaped by sailboat down

river to the Pacific returned with trade goods on a regular basis.

With the end of urban and economic growth, it seems quaint that there would still be an urban growth boundary today. Some of us doubt "growth" will ever return, and it seems unthinkable and against our survival. Green zones are blossoming and melding within the city, much like Havana's experience in the 1990s when Cuba lost its Soviet oil. With our good growing season and the fertile Willamette Valley, and no more exports of food or the useless, wasteful sod crop -- due to unavailable shipping by oil -- food self-sufficiency went up to 100% for the surviving population. Acorns and other wild foods such as seaweed also helped fill the gap.

The Portland Freedom Tribe was one of the local groups that saw its priorities as common defense, neighborhood organizing for social redevelopment, and far-reaching change in culture in conjunction with neighborhood communities. Like other local groups or councils, our organizational chart was more circular than hierarchical. It fit within the new Council of Councils. Sam Adams, former city Commissioner, played a unifying and visionary role. But it was Everyman and Everywoman who shined. As with Cuba during their petrocollapse, a farmer became the toast of the town. Agribusiness with lots of machines and chemicals was no longer possible, and its tragic, widespread failure made for angry rejection. So community gardens and permaculture sites involved half the population most actively, turning gardeners into farmers.

Some policies were just bans: commercial air travel, factories making energy-inefficient engines, large and heavy loads being moved unnecessarily, and unnecessarily rapid transport. Clothes driers were banned; the appliances were required to be put out on the sidewalks for pick-up to be salvaged. Electrifying more rail systems could not be simply turned on; it was a priority that required a long-range effort. When the petroleum infrastructure broke and fossil fuels, alternative energy systems for large application were stymied.

Originally the concerns over anticipated social collapse due to food shortage were among only among the grassroots, as corporate and government suppressed the concerns. In late 2008 we saw it was time to do what we had to do. By 2009 mobilization of all fit people, even the hungry, was in full swing. By then no reporters or surviving publications were denying what was going on.

When the $500-a-barrel-for-oil price spikes subsided, it was decided to put local taxes on gasoline and diesel to place these fuels at $15.00 a gallon via taxation. This produced some usable revenue despite driving and trucking coming to a near halt. Before the regular transport system collapsed, the federal government tried rationing and higher taxes, but it was too late. And local governments and community councils saw that very little revenue would come down to the local level. Little in the way of biofuels, including ethanol, methanol, veggie oil and algae oil were feasible, so the small quantities were allocated by consensus -- reflecting a new ethic for common survival -- to ambulances, fire engines, and ecological restoration in watersheds to bring back salmon and retain water.

To engender good cheer and reinforce our break with the past, we hold Blast The Past parties. An example recently was to take the Portland Tribune's September top-of-the-fold headline and laugh and heap sarcasm on those responsible for it: "Trendy Shops Put a Shine on Home Values". With pedal-power generation we enjoy re-viewing the famous recording of the Saturday Night Live lampoons of our would-be President Palin. Street skits ridiculing Palin, McCain and George Bush are immensely popular for nostalgia, as we say farewell every day to our silly, wasteful, stressful past. Now that Palin's and the feds' authority has shrunk to retaining only sporadic power, mainly in the mid-Atlantic region, we raise our microbrew tankards for her unintended role in accelerating our liberation. She hasn't been able to get back to Alaska last we heard, but for all we know she's on a voyage around Cape Horn right now.

Here in 2010 when we can forget our recent losses, some of us believe we are so well off we're in a reinvented paradise. We can only look ahead, as you probably do too. We have a bet going amongst us about your sharing our spirit, if you have survived and reconstituted into a tribe or bioregional nation. Most of us believe you would have learned a lot of what we had to. We look forward to hearing from you, and we welcome a delegation to our still rosy city. We wish you peace.

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Further reading:

City Repair:
cityrepair.org

Portland's Office of Sustainable Development:
portlandonline.com

Depaving, actually funded by the Bureau of Environmental Services:
portlandonline.com

Portland's Mayor-elect Sam Adams, currently trying to ban plastic bags:
commissionersam.com

Portland anti-terrorism conference/Attorney General speech, "FBI to get freer rein to look for terrorism suspects" by Marisa Taylor, McClatchy Newspapers, Aug. 13, 2008:
mcclatchydc.com

"Black Helicopters Swarm Downtown Portland: Urban Military Drill comes unannounced, creating a sense of panic and confusion in the streets" by Alex Ansary:
alexansary.com/

Ecotopia, a novel by Ernest Callenbach, self-published 1975, re-issued by Bantam Books 1977