HOUSE FACING NORTHEAST

You may remember how eastern Pennsylvania looks from the movie Witness. But idyllic scenes of black-garbed Amish farmers surrounded by golden fields of wheat that formed the back-drop for that film really exist only in isolated enclaves. Increasingly, rows of tract housing and expressways are replacing the rows of grain and cow pastures that Pennsylvania Dutch farmers tended for the past 250 years.

Horsepower is of course unsuitable to the new lifestyle, and Pennsylvania electric utilities have enthusiastically turned to nuclear power to supply the new markets for their services. Philadelphia Electric Company(PECO) has built nuclear reactors 25 miles to both the east and west of where Witness was filmed, and General Public Utilities' infamous Three Mile Island is about 35 miles away.

The newest of these three plants is PECO's Limerick in the Philadelphia exurbs. The $7 billion, two reactor project(of which only one unit is now complete) currently draws 19 million gallons of cooling water a day from the nearby Schuylkill River. Unfortunately for PECO, environmental regulations covering the Schuylkill make that modest river unavailable to Limerick for most of the summer and early fall. PECO's consequent search for supplemental water has touched off a water war of a type rarely seen before in the East. The controversy's resolution will likely serve as a precedent for dealing with the East Coast's snowballing water supply difficulties.

PECO proposes to make up for Limerick's deficit by hooking into a planned Delaware River water diversion project 30 miles away in Bucks County. This project, known as the Pt. Pleasant Pump, has been on the drawing boards for several decades. Designed to pump 95 million gallons of water a day(expandable to 250 mg/d) from the Delaware, Pt. Pleasant's primary purpose is to support residential and commercial expansion north of Philadelphia. PECO wants to buy as much as 40 million gallons a day of this rather polluted water, send them to a holding reservoir and thence down a pristine stream(whose flow would be increased 55 times)

to a set of pipes that would take the water the final five miles to limerick.

There are many immediate environmental objections to turning the local watershed into a plumbing system for PECO and the real estate speculators it is allied with. These have to do with heightened water contamination and altered aquifer and drainage patterns. The problems Pt. Pleasant poses are of much wider significance than this, however, and the combination of water, land development, and nuclear issues that come together in Pt. Pleasant has sparked immense opposition to the project in the surrounding area.

Four years ago, when construction began, a vigorous civil disobedience campaign tried to stop the project from proceeding. Abby Hoffman's participation helped garner national publicity for the opposition. The, the Bucks County Commission's long-entrenched Republican majority was defeated in the 1983 elections, and Pump opponents elected. The water activists' victory was so complete that they wound up in control of the local water authority.

That should have been the end of Pt. Pleasant, but PECO and two non-Bucks towns sued to enforce their contracts for Pt. Pleasant's water. The suit finally reached the Pennsylvania Supreme Court last year, and the Court ruled that Bucks County had to go ahead with the water diversion project, like it or not.

The response this summer to renewed construction has been reminiscent of 1983, with demonstrations, civil disobedience, and Abby Hoffman all present. In August, 242 people were arrested for blocking work crews, with 11 jailed for several weeks or more.

Bucks County activists are hopeful that Gov. Robert Casey, a newly elected Democrat who opposed the Pump during his electoral campaign, will stop Pt. Pleasant for good. Casey did get the state's Department of Environmental Resources to do a thorough review of Pt. Pleasant's effects, but the people conducting the study are old supporters of the project. The local congressional representatives have reacted by pressuring Casey to appoint a more environmentally sensitive group. Still, it remains to be seen whether Casey's opposition will ever be anything more than cosmetic. It is possible that Casey will be swayed to take a stronger stand by the upcoming county elections, in which Bucks' democratic majority is at stake.

I visited Pt. Pleasant and its environs last summer. Descending through the lush greenness of the river's forested ravine and through tiny Pt. Pleasant village, I found the then-abandoned pump house site to be a gaping hole in the ground filled with concrete and rusted steel. A few yards away the blue Delaware flowed tranquilly by, unaware of the coming turmoil. Later, I went up to the place where PECO wants to build its holding reservoir. As I looked across an old field, I spied a clutch of new, custom built homes. Lo and behold, they were erected with their main windows facing north--in contrast to all the old Pennsylvania farm houses, which face south for heating efficiency in winter.

Right here was the issue in a nutshell. Is this really our future: to drain the river to cool the reactor built to heat the superfluous house that's facing backwards? Replacing free natural systems with marketable commodities may make good capitalist sense, but if the result is the debasement of our world, it can hardly be called progress. In Bucks County, PA, a water dispute that appears superficially to be of only local, limited significance has grown to take on cosmic proportions.

By David Gilden