

Windmills split town and families



(AP Photo/Heather Ainsworth)

John Yancey stands on his property with a wind turbine from the Maple Ridge Wind Farm in background on Thursday, August 7, 2008, in Harrisburg, N.Y. The \$400 million Maple Ridge wind project, the largest in New York state, brought money and jobs and a wondrous sense of prosperity to a place that had long given up on any.

Helen O'Neill, AP Special Correspondent

"Listen," John Yancey says, leaning against his truck in a field outside his home.

The rhythmic whoosh, whoosh, whoosh of wind turbines echoes through the air. Sleek and white, their long propeller blades rotate in formation, like some otherworldly dance of spindly-armed aliens swaying across the land.

Yancey stares at them, his face contorted in anger and pain.

He knows the futuristic towers are pumping clean electricity into the grid, knows they have been largely embraced by his community.

But Yancey hates them.

He hates the sight and he hates the sound. He says they disrupt his sleep, invade his house, his consciousness. He can't stand the gigantic flickering shadows the blades cast at certain points in the day.

But what this brawny 48-year-old farmer's son hates most about the windmills is that his father, who owns much of the property, signed a deal with the wind company to allow seven turbines on Yancey land.

"I was sold out by my own father," he sputters.

Yancey lives in a pine-studded home on Yancey Road, which he shares with his wife, Marilyn, and three children. The house is perched on the edge of the Tug Hill plateau, half a mile from the old white farmhouse in which Yancey and his seven siblings were raised.

Signs for fresh raspberries are propped against a fence. Horses graze in a lower field. Amish buggies clatter down a nearby road. From the back porch are sweeping views of the distant Adirondacks.

But the view changed dramatically in 2006. Now Yancey Road is surrounded by windmills.

Yancey and some of his brothers begged Ed Yancey to leave the family land untouched. But the elder Yancey pointed to the money — a minimum of \$6,600 a year for every turbine. This is your legacy, he told them.

Yancey doesn't want the money or the legacy or the view.

"I just want to be able to get a good night's sleep and to live in my home without these monstrosities hovering over me," he says.

For a long time he didn't speak to his father. The rift took a toll on his marriage. He thought about leaving Yancey Road for good.

The Tug Hill plateau sits high above this village of about 4,000, a remote North Country wilderness of several thousand acres, where steady winds whip down from Lake Ontario and winter snowfalls are the heaviest in the state.

For decades dairy farmers, Irish and German and Polish immigrants, and lately the Amish, have wrested a living from the Tug — accepting lives of wind-swept hardship with little prospect of much change.

Then, a few years ago, change came to Tug Hill, and it arrived with such breathtaking speed that locals still marvel at the way their land and lives were utterly transformed.

Overnight, it seemed, caravans of trucks trundled onto the plateau, laden with giant white towers. Concrete foundations were poured. Roads were built and for a couple of years the village was ablaze with activity.

Today, 195 turbines soar above Tug Hill, 400 feet high, their 130-foot long blades spinning at 14 revolutions per minute.

The \$400 million Maple Ridge wind project, the largest in New York State, brought money and jobs and a wondrous sense of prosperity to a place that had long given up on any. Lately, it has also brought a sense of importance. Lowville and the neighboring hamlets of Martinsburg and Harrisburg, which also host turbines, are at the forefront of a wind energy boom that T. Boone Pickens and Al Gore have hailed as the wave of the future.

But for all the benefits of clean, renewable energy, the windmills come with a price — and not just the visual impact.

"Is it worth destroying families, pitting neighbor against neighbor, father against son?" asks John Yancey, whose family have farmed Tug Hill for generations. "Is it worth destroying a whole way of life?"

Similar questions are being asked across the state and the country as more and more small towns grapple with big money and big wind. For many, the changes are worth it. With rising oil and gas prices and growing concerns about global warming, wind is becoming an attractive alternative. The U.S. Department of Energy recently released a report that examines the feasibility of harnessing wind power to provide up to 20 percent of the nation's total electricity by 2030. U.S. wind power plants now produce less than 1 percent.

The Maple Ridge project produces enough electricity to power about 100,000 homes. Other wind projects are going up all over the state. Pickens is talking about building a \$10 billion wind project — the world's largest — in the Texas panhandle. Everyone, it seems, is talking about wind.

Yancey understands its seduction. An electrician, he knows as much about the turbines as anyone. He helped build and install the ones on Tug Hill. He can rattle off statistics about the bus-sized nacelle at the top of the tower, which houses the generator and the sophisticated computer system that allows the blades to yaw into the wind. He talks about the 1.65 mw Vestas with authority and respect.

Turbines have their place, Yancey says, just not where people live.

And he accuses the wind company of preying on vulnerable old-timers like his father.

Ed Yancey sits in the front room of the little house on Trinity Avenue where he moved after retiring from farming. His eyes are bright and his handshake is strong and the only concession to his 92 years seems to be his poor hearing.

He says doesn't feel preyed upon. He feels lucky. He feels proud to be part of a change he thinks is inevitable.

"It's better than a nuclear plant," Ed Yancey says. "And it brings in good money."

Next to him, daughter Virginia Yancey Lyndaker, a real estate agent who infuriated her brothers by siding with her father, nods in agreement. You can't stop progress, she says.

Ben Byer, a 75-year-old retired dairy farmer, feels the same way. Like Ed Yancey, Byer felt lucky when the wind salesman knocked at his door. He was one of the first to sign up.

Now he can count 22 windmills from his Rector Road home. Seven are on his land.

"The sound don't bother me," he says. "And it sure beats milking cows."

But Byer, who is John Yancey's uncle, understands the lingering resentments the windmills fuel. The wind company signed lease agreements with just 74 landowners over a 12-mile stretch and "good neighbor" agreements with several dozen more, offering \$500 to \$1,000 for the inconvenience of living close to the turbines. In a small community, that kind of money can cause tensions between those who profit and those who don't.

Byer also understands the strain windmills can place on a family. His 47-year-old son, Rick, lives higher up on the plateau in a small white ranch house with a two-seat glider parked in a shed. The glider is Rick Byer's passion. He flies on weekends when he's not working at the pallet-making company.

In order to launch, the glider has to be towed by truck down a long rolling meadow across the road. When the wind company began negotiating with his father to put turbines on his "runway," Rick Byer delivered a furious ultimatum.

"I told him if he allowed turbines in that field he would lose a son."

The son's rage won out over the father's desire for easy cash, but Rick Byer still seethes at the forest of turbines that sprouted across from his home. Now he speaks out in other area towns where windmills are proposed.

"I tell people it's not a wind farm, it's an industrial development," he says as he mends wooden pallets in a barn one warm summer night. Rock music crackles from a radio propped crookedly on a pile of wood. Every now and then, Byer adjusts the set for a better reception. The windmills interfere with the signal, he says. They interfere with television too.

And they transform the night. As dusk falls, red strobe lights appear on every third windmill, glowing eerily atop the blades spinning ghostlike in the moonlight.

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Like most of their neighbors, the Yanceys and Byers had a hard time believing the wind salesman when he first rolled into town in 1999. Years earlier there had been talk of natural gas on Tug Hill, but nothing ever came of it. People assumed the wind project would go the same way.

"No one thought it would happen," John Yancey says.

But Bill Moore, a Maryland-based energy consultant and investor who worked on Wall Street before going out on his own, was persistent. And persuasive. For several years he drove all over Tug Hill in his Land Rover, knocking on doors, talking to farmers in fields, hosting meetings at the Elks Lodge, preaching the gospel of wind.

At first local officials were skeptical, too. But they listened, and learned, and they started hammering out agreements with Moore's company, Atlantic Renewable Corp., and its partner company, Zilka Renewable Energy. (The companies have changed names and ownership several times and the Maple Ridge Wind project is now jointly owned by PPM Energy of Portland, Ore., which is part of the Spanish company, Iberdrola SA, and Houston-based Horizon Wind Energy LLC, which is owned by the Portuguese conglomerate Energias de Portugal.)

Eventually officials from Lowville, Martinsburg and Harrisburg, along with Lewis County legislators, negotiated a 15-year payment-in-lieu-of-taxes agreement that gave the three jurisdictions \$8.1 million in the first year.

"We knew we were going to change the landscape, maybe forever," says Martinsburg supervisor Terry Thiesse. "We knew some people would be unhappy. But the benefits far outweighed the objections of a few."

Martinsburg, with a population of 1,249, got the biggest municipal cut because it hosts the largest number of windmills — a total of 102. Thiesse, who receives payments for a windmill on his own land, says Martinsburg's budget went from just under \$400,000 to more than \$1.2 million with the first wind payment in 2006. The municipality is currently negotiating a deal with another wind company for an additional 39 turbines.

In Lowville, school Superintendent Ken McAuliffe is thrilled to be buying new computers, expanding school buildings and planning new athletic fields. The school district, which serves all jurisdictions, received \$2.8 million in 2006 and \$3.5 million in 2007.

Still, McAuliffe said, negotiating the deal was the most demanding experience of his professional life.

"I'm an educator, not a wind expert or an investor," McAuliffe said. The hardest part, he said, was understanding the amounts of money involved, trusting that the community would get it, and "the great unknown, which is how much the wind company is making."

Wind finances are a source of great confusion for many locals, who assumed they would get free electricity once the turbines were installed. In fact, the energy is sold to utility companies and then piped into the grid.

Though the wind itself is free, companies have enormous startup costs: a single industrial wind turbine costs about \$3 million. In New York, companies benefit from the fact that the state requires 25 percent of all electricity to be supplied from renewable sources by 2013. They also get federal production tax credits in addition to "green" renewable energy credits, which can be sold in the energy market.

In this context, the annual payments of about \$6,600 per turbine are relatively small. But for some cash-strapped farmers, they amount to a retirement supplement.

"It's the best cash cow we ever had," booms retired dairy farmer Bill Burke, who has six turbines on his land. "This cow doesn't need to be fed, doesn't need a vet, doesn't need a place to lie down."

Burke, a blustery 60-year-old, is proud of his credentials as the wind company's biggest local cheerleader. A school board member and county legislator, he also works part-time for the company, giving lectures and tours. His son, Bobby, works for it full-time.

Burke sold the last of his herd in 2004. Without the income from the turbines, he says, he might have had to sell his 100-year-old farm too. He has no regrets about grabbing his "once in a lifetime chance at prosperity."

"This project was happening, like it or not, and you would have to be a fool not to participate, to be excited and take advantage of it," Burke says.

Not everyone agrees.

For many, the realities of living with windmills are more complicated than clean energy and easy money. People have mixed feelings about the enormous scale of the project and the speed at which it went up. They question what will happen when the 15-year agreements expire. There are concerns about the impact of turbines on bird and bat populations. Some accuse lawmakers of getting too cozy with wind developers in order to profit from turbines on their land — allegations that prompted New York Attorney General Andrew Cuomo to launch an investigation into two wind companies and their dealings with upstate municipalities. (The investigation does not involve Maple Ridge.)

Such concerns have ignited furious debates in upstate towns where more than a dozen wind power projects are being considered — in Cape Vincent, Clayton, Prattsburgh. Some towns passed moratoria on industrial turbines in order to learn more. Malone and Brandon recently banned them completely.

"It seemed like the cost, in terms of how it changed the community, was too high," Malone supervisor Howard Maneely, said after visiting Lowville.

Pat Leviker, 60, who grew up on Tug Hill, thinks so too. Leviker cried the day the first turbine went up, "like a giant praying mantis peering at my home." Now she and her husband Richard, who both work for the state Department of Environmental Conservation, plan to sell their home and move off the plateau when they retire.

"We want clean energy as much as anyone," says Leviker, who rejected a \$1,500 payment from the wind company for the disruption of her view. "But we also want quality of life."

Over on Nefsey Road, which runs parallel to Yancey Road, Dawn Sweredoski, a sixth-grade teacher, finds a certain beauty in the windmills.

But she is sympathetic to her neighbors' concerns. The Amish farmer across the road, who bought her husband's farm seven years ago, rejected the wind company's offer of two turbines. He hates how the towers have changed the scenery and disrupted the sense of tradition and tranquility that lured his family from Maryland in the first place.

Sweredoski, whose house has magnificent views of the valley, sees the windmills only in the distance. She understands John Yancey's annoyance at living with them up close.

"It's hard when change is for the common good but some people suffer more than others," she says.

No one understands that better than the Yanceys, struggling to patch fractured family relationships, even as they struggle to come to terms with the turbines.

High on Tug Hill sits the Flat Rock Inn, a popular gathering point for snowmobilers and all-terrain vehicle riders. Twenty years ago, Gordon Yancey carved out this chunk of land with the help of his father, creating miles of forest trails and camping areas, set around a six-acre, man-made pond.

"People come for the scenery, the serenity," says Yancey, 49, proudly driving through his property, describing the "jungle" that he and his father cleared. He rolls to a halt in front of the inn, a rustic wooden structure with a bar, restaurant, a few rooms and a large wraparound porch.

All around stretch windmills, miles and miles of them. Yancey chokes up just looking at them. They have hurt his business, he says. And, like his brother, he hates the view and the noise.

"Dad taught us such respect for the land. For my father to be part of this..." His voice trails off and he shakes his head and walks away, too angry to continue.

This particular weekend is a busy one for Yancey's inn, which is hosting a huge watercross event — in which snowmobiles roar across the pond, their speed keeping them from sinking. Campers roll in to watch. There are campfires and barbecues and squealing children darting about. The atmosphere is festive and carefree and very noisy as racers' engines scream and a helicopter whirs overhead giving 10-minute joyrides for \$25.

In the distance, Rick Byer's glider floats above the turbines. On the ground John Yancey works an enormous homemade gas grill turning 50 sizzling chickens on spits. Gordon Yancey is down by the pond, bellowing race results through a loudspeaker. Another brother, Tim Yancey, wanders by with his girlfriend, anti-wind activist Anne Britton. Patriarch Ed Yancey is there too, cooling off in a storage shed near the grill, talking about the old days — before snowmobiles and turbines.

All around the windmills spin. John Yancey looks up from the grill occasionally and grimaces at them. Right now, no one else seems to care.