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Letters
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It’s 30 years since the first Earth Day. (“Environism Isn’t Just for Liberals”) My God.

As a writer for the Northwestern University public relations department, 1966-71, I had a front row seat at the 1960s-70s student protest movement, including the prelude to the first Earth Day on the Evanston campus.

Shortly before Earth Day, 1970, I helped some engineering and science students publicize a big student-organized environmental “teach-in” in the university’s Technological Institute, with Barry Commoner, Paul Ehrlich, and some of the lesser earthnicks. Commoner gave his usual remarks on chemical despoilage of the globe, and Ehrlich his neo-Malthusian message on the “population bomb.”

Folk singer Tom Paxton sang Malvina Reynolds’s “Little Boxes.” (mass-made homes on the hilltop, all made of “ticky tacky,” and they all look the same). I noticed some Native Americans with head-dress and tom tom marching through the hall in single file and followed them. Their leader, Mike Chosa, led them, uninvited, on stage, and he presented Commoner with a list of demands. Commoner said that the Indians certainly had a right to say things about the environment that we took from them.

Our boss, Vice President Franklin Kreml, was supervising the public relations. All the TV cameras in town were focused on the podium. There was a huge crowd. Gas-guzzling cars of the pre-OPEC era jammed the lakeside parking lot behind “Tech.” This was the big event of the week in Chicago.

Somebody had placed an earth symbol on the lecturn. (I bought a pendant in this configuration as a memento.) I transferred the big photogenic earth symbol on the podium to an easel and put the Northwestern seal in its place. Robert Strotz, the liberal arts dean, later president, was a speaker (he had done an econometrics study on pollution, as I recall) and this
was a semi-official university affair.

Environmentalism was a touchy subject, as one main target of the program was the smoke stack fumes of the local Commonwealth Edison Co. Mr. Ayers, its head, was a Northwestern trustee.

Another target was phosphate pollution, through fertilizer and detergents, of the rivers and lakes, causing an excess of water plants and destruction of the normal ecology.

I guess unemployed steel workers kind of missed the notorious pollution down around Gary. But middle class people, especially in suburbia, were beginning to dislike auto congestion and tailpipe-induced smog and this was something that resonated well with them.

One of my jobs was to publicize "Tech" and the sciences, and I knew some of the faculty sponsors of the program, who arranged to get the big "Tech" auditorium. Through them I met the "kids," one of whom, later a government official, was writing a doctorate on the ecology of Lake Michigan. Another, "Casey," one of the leaders, was a premed student and presumably would soon be dissecting a cadaver in medical school.

After the "teach-in" was over, I asked Casey why he had done it. "We didn't get anywhere with Gene McCarthy," he said, "and I wanted to see if we could do something with this."

A short while later, Casey and a couple cohorts picketed the local Kroger store protesting the sale of phosphate detergents. A photo appeared in the media, and Mayor Richard J. Daley of Chicago invited the protesters to visit him in City Hall.

"He was really very nice," reported Casey. "He was very sympathetic." This was the same Mayor Daley who had turned the Chicago police loose on the anti-Vietnam protesters during the 1968 Democratic Convention. Environmentalism was apparently a way to make amends. In very short order it became illegal to sell phosphate detergents in the Chicago area.