



NAWVO NEWS

HILGENDORF LEGACY



Artist P C Meyers



Ralph Hilgendorf

NAWO Board of Directors Vice Chair

The Year 2021 had difficult times for the North American Water Office. We lost our longest-serving Board Member, Ralph Hilgendorf, who passed on June 7. Kay, the love of his life, followed two months later, on August 7.

NAWO Executive Director George Crocker first met the Hilgendorf family at People Camp, sponsored by Friends for a Non-Violent World, in 1973, the year George finished his sentence for refusing to cooperate with the Selective Service System and for organizing opposition to the war in Vietnam. Shortly after, George moved in upstairs with the Hilgendorf family in St. Paul, which was a joyful and bouncy place, what with the doings of Kris and Cherry and Betsy and Dhavyd and Larry and a bunch of foster kids and all their friends. George lived there for about a year. After he moved out, Ralph did some remodeling on the room George had occupied (along with everything else, Ralph was a very competent carpenter, electrician, and plumber), and he discovered a bugging device planted there by Authorities intent on keeping tabs on Crocker, who, to this day remains unrepentant regarding his crimes against the War Machine, Oligarchs, and their Corporate Reich. From then on, no matter how difficult or troubling the circumstance, Ralph and George always had a joke about which to laugh, which frequently they did.

In that time, Ralph, Kay, and George helped form an intentional community that was part of George Lakey's Movement for a New Society, and George started working with the food coop movement. Then George got engulfed in the powerline fight that erupted across North Dakota and West Central Minnesota, and helped form GASP, the General Assembly to Stop the Powerline.

In 1978, GASP sponsored an international conference in Glenwood, Minnesota, dealing with energy and land use issues, and among the attendees was Lea Foushee, then Chairperson of the North Dakota Chapter of the Sierra Club, which was also fighting tenaciously against the powerline. Unfortunately, in the middle of that fight, national Sierra Club leadership, such as it was, decided that everybody associated with the Sierra Club had to stop everything they were doing, and all Sierra Club resources focused on fighting the Alaska Pipeline. That really turned out well, but the North Dakota resistance to the powerline wilted and died. So Lea never went back to North Dakota, stayed in Minnesota to help GASP, organized with the Black Hills Alliance, and in 1982, along with George and strong support from GASP members, founded the North American Water Office. NAWO got started with financial support from a series of Safe Energy concerts by A-List musicians, including a major contribution from Bonnie Raitt, and its first campaign was to Stop Acid Rain. You can read all about that significantly successful campaign on the NAWO website, but for our present purpose, we quickly burned through our modest financial resources and by 1985, NAWO was destitute and desperate. I went to visit Ralph.

Ralph and Kay lent us \$10,000 and we were back in business. But still, our analysis and demeanor as we continued challenging all aspects of electric utility management, again, with considerable success, left enough to be desired by philanthropic institutions to keep us a bit south of impoverishment line. Again and again, I went to visit Ralph. By 1987, as NAWO was gearing up for the fight over nuclear waste on Prairie Island, we asked Ralph to join the NAWO Board so he could help manage his investment, and by then, NAWO owed the Hilgendorf family about \$20k.

As the Prairie Island fight took shape, we were starting to smell some money despite our attitude and modus operandi, but still we couldn't taste it, and so I asked again. This time, Ralph told me, Kay said no. She put her foot down, he said, because at this rate, there would be nothing left for the children when the time came.

Nevertheless, we were hot on the trail, and that smell turned into actual money from multiple other sources. Before the nuclear waste fight climaxed at the end of the 1994 Minnesota legislative session, we had dragged the entire North American electric utility industry kicking and screaming into the modern era.

In exchange for high-level nuclear waste storage capacity on Prairie Island, Northern States Power Company (soon to become Xcel Energy) was required to invest enough into renewable energy technologies, particularly wind power, so that economies-of-scale shifted, and the phase-out of obsolete, dirty, wasteful central-station coal and nuclear power plants began in earnest and continues to this day. Maybe enough and in time, maybe not. But at least maybe we're not dead in the water.

In that time, NAWO was able to pay back most of the \$20k it had borrowed from the Hilgendorf family, without interest, of course, but NAWO still got to keep Ralph, who served on the Water Office Board until his passing. He brought us stability. He taught us patience. He showed us the meaning of wisdom, and how to act as an elder. His soft-spoken, generous and positive demeanor was vital in enabling NAWO to find, apply, and maintain strategic leverage as we poked, prodded, cajoled, and sometimes whipped societal institutions into behaving more responsibly and with less abuse and destruction. We are honored to have shared him with so many for so long.

And now, after Ralph and Kay have walked on, the Hilgendorf family again enables the North American Water Office to continue its work with a most generous \$10,000 gift. Thank you Kris Hilgendorf and Tim Cusick, Cherry Flowers and Tim Page, Betsy Hilgendorf and Rich Della Porta, Dhaivyd Hilgendorf and Diana Weddigen, and Larry Wichem.



War Resisters Ralph and Kay Hilgendorf on the Lake Street Bridge

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