



## The Age of Limits



The sun sets over the Blue Mountains and an automobile scrapyards near La Grande, Ore., in October 2008. Brett Tracy, a 30-year-old Davisite, stayed in the town of 12,500 while bicycling from Chicago to San Francisco. Earlier this month, Tracy started another stage in his mission to document the waning years of the Industrial Age.

BRETT TRACY/COURTESY PHOTO

### Davisite embarks on bike trip to document nation's industry, a crumbling way of life

By Jonathan Edwards  
ENTERPRISE STAFF WRITER

They're not supposed to be here. But they are, trespassing on Union Pacific land, following the railroad tracks to someplace Brett Tracy calls "the Brownlands."

For people not sneaking under the Covell Boulevard overpass, it's the old Hunt-Wesson cannery site.

Beyond the phalanx of oleander bushes separating the 100-acre property from zooming Range Rovers and Toyota Priuses, the tumbleweed, beer cans and sparrows rule. Each day, their takeover grows.

Brett has been watching, filming and photographing the oozing assault — rust climbing the 60-foot water tower; plants creeping and cracking through concrete; and infant ecosystems burgeoning in water-filled tire tracks.

The 30-year-old, lifelong Davisite spent five January afternoons hauling scattered bricks, concrete, railroad ties and firewood to create a woodpile, seats, stairs and a spiral fire pit. For help, he used a blue, rusty wheelbarrow tagged with "Logic."

"Everything was brought in and built with human hands."

Now, on a Saturday night, he's invited a band of friends to eat and drink beer under the water tower, a bon voyage party to kick off his 2,400-mile bike ride to Houston.

The Brownlands are only the beginning, a microcosmic glimpse at the world 300 years from now.

Brett's trip — no, his project, job and mission — is documenting the onset of what he calls the "contraction phase of the industrial adventure."

#### Cross-country crumbling

In the world Brett sees, you're hunting jackrabbits through tumbleweed, broken concrete and shattered glass. You'll make spears from rusty rebar once used to prop up skyscrapers and drink rainwater collected from abandoned pools. And to protect your people, you'll climb water towers and refinery spires to spot intruders coming from the dark, empty tracts of suburban ghost towns.

Earth's population, 6.5 billion strong centuries ago, steadies around 1 billion after a gradual, yet massive, winnowing of the human species.

"Die-off," he says while drinking tea last month at Mishka's Cafe in downtown Davis. "There's no gentle way to put it. There's far too many people by a lot."

The decline will be slow, almost unnoticeable at first, and will continue for 200 to 300 years as the world's cheap storehouse of energy — oil, natural gas and coal — ebbs and then peters out.

In fact, it's already begun. And Brett's getting ready. He set out earlier this month for Houston on the third stage of his multi-year, bicycle-mounted research project, "The Illuminated Thread."

Equal parts bike tour, blog, film, photography exhibit, salvage ethnography and experiment in self-sufficiency, "Illuminated" started after Brett was "trained in the language of images" as an undergrad at UC Davis and as a master of fine arts candidate at the University of Chicago.

Instead of capitalizing on two years' worth of art-scene networking, he rode some 5,000 miles from Chicago to Portland to San Francisco with fellow grad student Joe Miller in fall 2008.

Brett rides a late 1980s aluminum Univega

he's turned into a "light, fast touring rig." He's overhauled the bike for speed, sacrificing carrying capacity and strength. At 135 pounds and packing light, he can do this.

Brett carries 60 to 70 pounds of gear. Filming windmills, oil refineries, derelict gas stations and massive cattle ranches, he carries a laptop, hard drive, high-definition camcorder and a pair of binaural microphones.

While riding, he stores all of it in waterproof bags. When he pulls up to an abandoned refinery or settles into a local coffee shop, this toolkit allows him to shoot film, write, edit images and sound, and post content online, all after a hard 80 miles of riding.

His computer and film equipment contradict his general rule to avoid high technology. Instead of GPS, Brett opts for paper maps to sharpen his navigational instincts. He shuns bike gizmos, instead gauging his speed and distance on how the wind feels on his face, his sense of time and how his body feels.

He's honing his "post-industrial skill-set" by defecating outdoors, Dumpster diving, navigating by the stars, working with the weather and seasons, maintaining his bike and squatting on society's margins.

"The use of high-technology shortcuts, effectively magic, means neglecting the innate human skills they're meant to augment or replace," he writes. "The rule is: If I can't figure out how it works by looking at it, it doesn't belong on the ride."

For the necessities, Brett and Joe raised \$3,000 mostly in small donations — \$20 here, \$30 there — from people they met on the road. But help also came in the form of hot meals, beer, brake pads and even chocolate flan.

The help propelled Brett and Joe some 5,000 miles over 60 days in fall 2008.

They lunched in the shadow of working,

500-foot-tall nuclear smokestacks, ate sandwiches under towering windmills, and met the prom king and queen of Custer, S.D., atop a convertible at the town Dairy Queen.

In Rock Rapids, Iowa, Brett showered with crickets in a city pool bathroom next to a petting zoo. Joe did not.

There was DeWitt, Iowa: "The crossroads of opportunity."

Then Presho, S.D.: "It's all here with a smile."

And Spencer, S.D.: "The little town that will not die."

A billboard offered a human fetus swaddled in the American flag and a quote attributed to Pope John Paul II: "A Nation that kills its own Children is a Nation without Hope."

They stole Cliff Bars by the box from chain supermarkets — never mom-and-pop stores. They learned to case stores as soon as they walked in: Where are the cameras? Which employees are going to be trouble? What's the level of security?

He has a couple of books on how to shoplift. Rite Aid floor-plans carried over state to state. They had special clothes "that would just swallow food bars."

But Joe got too "ballsy" and got busted stealing \$57 worth of food from a "Walmart-style" grocery store in Idaho. Management booted him but didn't call the cops.

Stealing food is different than stealing luxury trinkets for profit, Brett says. "You're feeding yourself. The police are not going to be called."

Eats included granola bars, yogurt with fruit, lots of Mexican food (cheap and filling), gas station burritos and trail mix. Weight was always a big concern and getting protein was

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## Joe's a likeable blue-collar guy in a coat and tie

Finally got my first campaign mailer from Joe Krovoza, the friendliest candidate ever to run for Davis City Council. I had heard of Joe sending mailers to other folks in other parts of town, and I was starting to take it personally.

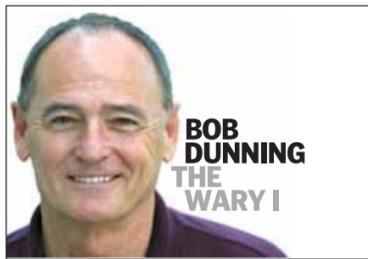
Turns out everyone likes Joe. I would say friend and foe alike have nothing but good things to say about him, but I've yet to find a foe.

Joe's a blue-collar guy wearing a coat and tie. In fact, that's exactly his outfit, a blue shirt with a gold tie. Mandatory colors for a UC Davis employee.

The double-sided, one-page mailer has but two pictures of Joe. The first is the obligatory family photo captioned simply "Joe and Family." We can presume Joe is the boy and we'll just have to guess at the names of the three girls.

All family members are smiling — perhaps even laughing — as if the very thought of watching dad spend Tuesday nights arguing with Sue Greenwald tickles their fancy in a special way.

The second picture is a giant —



bigger-than-life-size — photo of the candidate himself, complete with his trademark toothy grin that makes you think he knows something you don't but he's not telling you because he doesn't want to ruin the surprise.

In the family photo, which appears to be staged at a Santa Barbara mission, Joe's hair is a bit mussed and his tie needs work, but in the solo photo on the flip side, not a hair is out of place and the tie is absent altogether.

Joe does have a lapel pin on his coat, but it's impossible to tell if it's an American flag or simply says "Go Ags."

Turns out Joe was inviting me and the

Red-Headed Girl of My Dreams — the only voters in this humble household — to a "Campaign Launch Party" on February 19, which is great stuff but for the fact the mailer didn't arrive until February 17, and, socialite that I am, two days is simply not enough warning. Otherwise I'd be there, soaking up the "Family Fun Dessert and drinks!"

Holy exclamation points, I think "drinks" needs a capital "d," or perhaps "Fun" and "Dessert" don't. But maybe Joe has decided to save money on a proofreader in order to keep campaign costs down. Then again, he's not running for school board, so who cares?

Joe is just so gosh-darn friendly that none of the political operatives in town knows quite what to do with him. Is he pro-growth, no-growth or slow-growth? You can't tell from the brochure, even if having two kids does exceed the city of Davis target of 1.6 children per couple.

The town's "Progressives," who for years have regressively opposed anything that smacked of change, are flummoxed by this likable newcomer

in the blue shirt and the gold tie.

They like the fact he refuses to take money from developers, firefighters and elephant trainers, but they're concerned about an endorsement list that includes such voices of moderation as Lois Wolk, Mariko Yamada, Helen Thomson, Jim Provenza and Steve Souza.

They're clearly uncertain if his knee will jerk their way on the important issues of the day.

Generally, a newcomer to city politics has to pay his dues by losing an election or two before finally earning a seat on the council, especially if he or she hasn't first held office in the council's farm league, the Davis school board.

Krovoza, however, has broken that mold. He's a serious candidate right out of the gate. In fact, if I were a betting man, I'd say he's in the top two in this field heading into the final week of February.

I hope his "Launch Party" went well. Had it been a "Lunch Party," I'd have been there for sure.

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