**Adding Fuel to the Fire**

By JAMES MCGINNIS

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Melissa Vanore found it hard to imagine two days of gas riots at Five Points in Levittown.

But then it was also hard to imagine paying $56 to fill up her Dodge pickup Thursday morning.

Gas was only 86 cents a gallon (or $2.45 with inflation) in the summer of 1979 when the nation’s first gas riot happened here in Lower Bucks County.

It started as a peaceful protest by independent truckers against diesel prices, and ended with more than 200 reported arrests and 100 in the hospital. Levittown made history, but could it happen again?

With changes to their industry, truckers said they’ll remain on the road even as diesel prices hit a new record, surpassing the cost of regular gas. Government regulators offer myriad theories as to why prices are up. But no one can say for certain how high the ever-increasing costs to fill up a tank might go.

And economists and historians would only speculate about how Americans would handle it.

“In six to 12 months, if that price doesn’t come down, I think you’ll see a reaction,” predicted James Higgins, the acting dean of finance at Holy Family University.

“The price has to go down. People will not accept $4 a gallon. I won’t speculate on how people will react. But there’s irrationality to the public and that often forces people to vent their anger at the most readily available source.”

LEVITTOWN OVERHEATS

On the afternoon of June 24, 1979, a line of 60 local truckers rolled their rigs into the Five Points intersection in Levittown. The attempt at blocking traffic was met not with outrage but applause.

Weeks into a national energy crisis, thousands of spectators gathered to cheer on the protest of long lines, gas stockpiling and what was then considered a high price for gasoline.

As night fell, the mood once described as “paradelike” turned to public disorder.

One trucker pulled his rig into the center of the intersection, hopped on the hood and started dancing. Cops grabbed him and threw him into a patrol car. Other drivers resisted. Bottles were thrown at police. Shots were fired into the air.

The next night, the violence continued. A trucker from Bensalem drove his rig into a line of cops, injuring several of them. Officers dispatched from throughout the region drew their guns on other truckers approaching the intersection. Protesters lit cars on fire. One police chief called it a “combat zone.”

TRUCKERS RIDE IT OUT

Twenty-nine years later, Sam Farruggio, the president of a local trucking company, started his day with a check on the region’s diesel stockpiles and the cost. The more expensive the diesel, the higher the surcharge for his customers. But it wasn’t always that simple.

“Before deregulation, we couldn’t adjust our prices [to make up for rising diesel costs],” said Farruggio “We simply had to take the hit.”

President Jimmy Carter signed the Motor Carrier Act of 1980, deregulating the independent trucker industry 13 months after the riots in Levittown.

“We work very diligently now to pass off that cost to the consumer and to let them know that our hands are tied here,” Farruggio said.

The owner of Farruggio’s Express in Bristol said he’s convinced that diesel prices have soared because “it doesn’t create as big a political issue.”

“If it was the other way around, and you were paying $5 [a gallon] to fill up the tank on your car, then all of America would be in an uproar,” he added. “There’d be too much heat on the politicians.

“All we can do as truckers is to explain to people that the cost of everything is going to go up as long as we’re paying $5 a gallon to ship it.”

AMERICANS’ GAS PSYCHE

“Americans want everything cheap. We expect it to be cheap … and we expect our immigrant population to work like crazy,” notes Dennis Kennedy, a professor of management and accounting at Penn State University, when talking about the price of gas.

Kennedy said he’s writing a paper on where the next oil pipelines should go. He believes Americans are seriously short-sighted in their perceptions about oil.

“So much of this is about our relationship to other countries, those that favor us and those who would benefit to see us suffer economically. None of that is being considered,” he said.

Our refusal to consider the “big picture” could be our downfall, Kennedy added. “If there’s going to be another oil crisis, then the fault will lay with these politicians in Washington who demagogue the issue and blame the oil companies.”

Higgins would focus less on politicians and more on market speculators.

“When I think about those tankers sitting out there in the Gulf of Mexico waiting on the right price and the right market to sell oil, it just infuriates me,” he said. “It’s not so different from those scenes in the 1970s when some oil companies were stockpiling fuel.”

At the Shell gas station on New Falls Road, where the riots happened almost three decades ago, gas was $3.99 a gallon Thursday and diesel $4.99 a gallon.

Vanore wasn’t ready to get violent with anyone, though. She was angry only with herself … for not buying a more fuel-efficient vehicle than her Dodge pickup.

<http://www.neardeathexperiments.com/smf/index.php?topic=3074.0>

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