

Opposition Research

The pen isn't the only communications tool that's mightier than the sword. There's also the video camera, which in the right hands can produce some very special effects — for instance, making a mountain of trash disappear.

Nine years after John and Terri Moore arrived in Center Point, Indiana, the couple finally moved out of town and into their more rural dream house. The house sits on 25 acres, a quarter of which is covered by a lake. Deer, raccoons, and coyotes are among the wildlife that roam the Moores' property. There's a great blue heron that calls the lake home, and for a while each year it's joined by migrating Canada geese. The house is modest, but it's the place where the couple wanted to raise their two children.

"We used to drive by, and we'd say, 'We'll live there one day,'" Terri says. "We wanted to raise our children with the sounds of nature and small-town values you can't get in the city."

Towns don't get much smaller than Center Point, whose population of 293 is slightly higher than the 1990 census. It's an out-of-the-way stretch of farmland an hour west of Indianapolis, not far from the Illinois line. The drive to Center Point from the Hoosier State capital is almost entirely a cruise-control jaunt along I-70.

This sort of out-of-the-way, rural living may have held great appeal for Terri and John Moore, but eighteen months after relocating to their new home, the dream turned nightmarish. The reason: a proposal surfaced to build a landfill directly behind their home. There was already a small, privately owned town dump just 1,700 feet from their property, and another, they feared, not only would jeopardize their tranquility but also might compromise the environment. So the couple launched a battle to keep the second facility from opening.

Then things really turned ominous. In the midst of their anti-dump fight, the owner of the existing landfill called to offer the Moores a financial contribution — his way, he said, of supporting their effort. And by the way, he added, it's likely that a few semi-trailers will soon begin haul-

ing trash into his facility, and those numbers may grow over time. Terri Moore hung up the phone with a sense that something horrible was about to happen.

Ordinarily, only cars and pickups and a few small trucks traveled the narrow dirt road that leads to the 90 acres on which the landfill sat. Terri Moore told townspeople of her conversation and the impending arrival of the big rigs, but no one believed her. On the following Monday, however, the skepticism quickly evaporated: The first of the semis rolled in, and over the subsequent weeks and months the number pushed up toward fifty a day.

The tiny town of Center Point had become a magnet for drivers hauling 40-foot loads of trash, many of the vehicles adorned with license plates from Northeastern and Mid-Atlantic states, primarily New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. And if the residents thought the situation couldn't get worse, they soon learned otherwise: Two other companies were looking at adjoining land for another dump, and a trio of firms had optioned a square mile for — what else? — yet more landfill space.

Terry and John Moore loved the idea of out-of-the-way, rural living, but eighteen months after relocating to their new home, the dream turned nightmarish.

ON THE WEBSITE

To learn more about the Center for Public Integrity's "citizen muckraking" project (from which this issue is adapted) — including a state-by-state rundown of campaign-finance and open-records laws — go to www.publicintegrity.org/citizenmuckraking.

In Indiana, it turned out, there was gold in the garbage.

GARBAGE OUT, GARBAGE IN

If the idea of hauling truckloads of trash from the Eastern Seaboard to the nation’s heartland seems odd, consider the economics: In 1989, when the Center Point trash caravan was moving into high gear, the cost of dumping a ton of garbage in Indiana was \$10, while in the New York/New Jersey area it was \$100-\$150. It was therefore a lot cheaper for Easterners to haul the waste out of state, particularly if the trailer could be filled with something else for the return trip. In fact, the joke was that it would be cheaper to FedEx garbage to western Indiana than to dump it on the East Coast.

But the residents of Center Point weren’t laughing. And neither were they giving in to the invasion without a fight.

For Terri and John Moore, the battle would be waged on two fronts. On one front was the proposed new facility, which would sit just a hundred feet from the couple’s property and, they feared, would contaminate their lake. On the other was the invasion of the semis with their unwanted imports, including asbestos and medical waste.

“We rode a huge roller coaster,” Terri says. “We always had one or the other looming over our head.”

The goal in the first fight was to demonstrate that the area was geologically unsound — that disposing of waste on this site might wreak environmental havoc. Terri and the citizens’ group she helped organize pinned their hopes on a state law that decreed that a landfill couldn’t be positioned over an abandoned mine. There were indeed defunct coal mines in the area, but proving that one may once have operated beneath this turf proved difficult.

Terri Moore likens the hunt for such evidence to piecing together a big puzzle.

The campaign was built on a search for quantifiable facts and data, and group members would regularly convene in someone’s living room to report their findings. Reporters were invited to the meetings from the outset, so the group developed a rapport with the news media and generated valuable press coverage for its cause.

The search for maps was a major component of the effort; the cartographic documents examined at governmental offices showed no evidence of abandoned mines. But then the trail unexpectedly led to a church secretary whose late husband had been a geologist. He had apparently kept books from the previous century filled with local maps.

The books had been sent to the local courthouse, but no one there could find them. Moore tracked them down to another Indiana town and then traveled an hour and a half to view them. The volumes included original cloth maps and certified copies of other maps showing the precise locations of mines — including one beneath the proposed landfill. But Moore didn’t

stop there. She researched other sites in every direction and was able to show where the state had repaired mineshafts that had caved in. It was the proof she needed. She had hit the mother lode.

THE CAMCORDER BRIGADE

But while Terri Moore had one battle under control, the war raged on. There were, of course, those tractor-trailers to contend with.

On the very Monday that the trucks first arrived, Moore grabbed her 35mm camera and went off to shoot some film. She realized immediately that without documentation, outsiders probably wouldn’t believe what was happening in her town. So she enlisted the help of three or four neighbors, who within a week were outfitted with pads, pencils, binoculars, and tape recorders. From their lawn chairs beside the road, the “Dump

The tiny town of Center Point had become a magnet for drivers hauling forty-foot loads of trash, many of the vehicles with license plates from Northeastern and Mid-Atlantic states.

The Center for Public Integrity was established in 1989 to create a mechanism through which important national issues can be investigated and analyzed by talented, responsible journalists, without the traditional time and space limitations. Published Center studies then become resources for journalists, academics, other researchers, and the public.

A membership in the Center, which includes a subscription to *The Public i*, is \$35 a year.

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Lights, Camera, Reaction

THE VIDEOCAMERA — A CUTTING-EDGE INVESTIGATIVE TOOL

Print used to be the only game in town for citizen muckrakers, whose efforts invariably ended with a report, newsletter, or study. But activists such as Terri Moore prove that other media can be equally effective investigative tools. Sometimes, in fact, they're far more so.

Video can be a particularly compelling medium, although most individuals or organizations setting out on an investigative project don't even consider the possibility of using it to augment their reporting. As a result, the chance to release their findings in an alternative format is lost from the get-go.

One not-for-profit organization that teaches groups how to use video is the Benton Foundation, based in Washington, D.C. Consider the ideas of executive director Larry Kirkman on why activists ought to start paying closer attention to the possibilities that video offers:

"Citizen activists are using video to help reframe social problems, attract mass-media coverage, and mobilize grassroots support. Video is a powerful tool for activists to make their own case, outside the restrictive formats and prejudices of television, and to address the audiences they need to reach.

"Videos offer visual evidence, for example, of a corporation's toxic dumping or a landlord's neglect of rental housing. Videos give a voice to experience that is denied on the evening news, offering the testimony and the storytelling that verifies urgent messages of need, visualizing problems, and inspiring confidence in the solutions activists propose.

"With the introduction of video on the Internet, activists will have the opportunity to add the power of visual representation to Web sites, and to fulfill the promise of interactive public-service multimedia knowledge centers. We could see in our communities a flow of visual communications that encourages new forms of interaction and enlarges political debate."

The Benton Foundation has produced a series of guides to

help organizations make better use of video. One is *Producing Change: How Nonprofit Organizations Use Video and Television To Create Social Change*, which chronicles innovative uses of video by activists and nonprofits. The foundation has also produced the handbook *Making Video*, which offers instructions on producing video. Included with the report is a videotape that illustrates the text.

Details are available from the Benton Foundation, 1634 Eye Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006; (202) 638-5770. A text version of *Producing Change* is available at no cost on the foundation's Web site: www.benton.org/Library.

If you need only some rudimentary tips about shooting Terri Moore-type video, here are a few from David Weiner at the Benton Foundation:

— Look and listen where you shoot. You may have to rely on the camera's built-in microphone; keep in mind how the video is going to sound as well as how it will look. Is the microphone close enough? Is it pointed in the right direction? Are things happening off-camera that need to be heard?

— The thing you are recording is not the only thing you *should* be recording. Staying on a single shot of a speaker, a factory puffing smoke, or a person at work will make your video virtually unwatchable. Concentrate on the main element, but think about shooting all the things that will help tell the story.

— Vary the shot, but do so wisely. It's important to shoot your subject in close, medium, and wide shots. But don't zoom in and out constantly. Frame a shot and stay there; then, at an appropriate time, change the shot, stay there, and repeat.

— Either plan to edit or don't overshoot. Because most videos are shot in a ratio of 1 to 1, people generally have to sit through a lot of mediocre material to get to the best moments. If you're not going to edit, then be careful with the amount of material you actually record.

Patrol," as they came to be known, dutifully recorded what they witnessed.

The activists also gave immediate attention to attracting the news media. They invited reporters to their meetings and, before adjourning, a definite time was set for the next session. That tactic gave journalists ample advance notice, and the group subsequently reminded them of the meetings by telephone.

In addition, members of Moore's group tried to participate in events that were likely to receive media coverage, including the "cracker-barrel" meetings — a Hoosier tradition — in which voters

discuss local issues with their state legislators. Within weeks of the invasion of the semis, Terri Moore also had some of her photographs enlarged for a three-minute presentation to a committee of the Indiana legislature. She was uncomfortable speaking in public, but she was determined to describe the invasion underway in her community. The room was packed, there was a full agenda, and no one knew the woman from Center Point who was first to take the floor. "The entire room went from bustling to silence when I was speaking," Moore recalls. "I thought: I know I did it."

Moore's testimony brought attention to her cause, and on its heels she and her cohorts stepped up their campaign. Moore soon shelled out a thousand dollars for a camcorder, and about seventy-five residents volunteered to record the comings and goings of the trucks, documenting everything from time and date to license-plate numbers, trucking-company names, and tractor-trailer serial numbers. A local dealer donated a small trailer for the sleuths to work from. For ten hours a day, six days a week, the citizens of Center Point maintained an fourteen-month vigil. They missed only two

days, when the trailer's furnace failed and the sub-zero winter temperatures posed a health hazard.

The proliferation of low-priced camcorders has made the use of video an increasingly popular — and effective — technique for citizen muckrakers. Some have used it for advocacy building, while others have documented everything from dolphin slaughter on tuna-fishing boats to deplorable living conditions in public housing. For Moore, video was a tool of empowerment that gave her cause wide-eyed attention.

Moore felt strongly that a voluminous tape archive was essential, because it would provide the only record of culpability in the event of an environmental mishap. It was also in keeping with the group's strategy of documenting every fact and being able to substantiate each claim. If they told reporters that 50 trucks a day were rolling down their roads, they had supporting evidence. Because they were so credible, reporters looked to them for information. In addition, the home video was made to order for television; segments of the tape were featured on local and national newscasts.

In addition to the video surveillance, Moore followed a paper trail that led her to a startling revelation: Among those affiliated with the landfill was a New Jersey trash baron whom authorities had connected to the Genovese-Gigante crime family. Moore's research effort was aided by local reporters, who conducted invaluable searches for her on Nexis, the on-line news library, and made other

documents available. In return, news organizations received well-documented evidence that was useful to their stories. In fact, Moore always had documents certified to ensure that reporters would not doubt their authenticity.

Center Point residents were also helped in their efforts by some unlikely confidential sources: truck drivers and landfill employees they befriended. For example, the sleuths quickly realized that the trucks bringing in trash were in many instances "backhauling" — that is, picking up loads for the

return trip. The trucks that carried garbage west, it turned out, were carrying slaughtered carcasses and other food products east. One driver even stopped to show the Center Point spies his trailer: The wooden floor was covered with an inch of pine-oil disinfectant, but it was nonetheless overrun with maggots. He admitted that on previous trips the food he delivered was swarming with flies.

The backhauling issue provided a weapon for the Center Point residents. A legislative remedy to outlaw the dumping wasn't feasible, because the courts had ruled that shipments of garbage constituted interstate commerce, and the U.S. Constitution limits the power of states to interfere with such commerce. But in late 1992, Indiana state legislators passed a law declaring that anyone truck-

ing in garbage had to wait two weeks before backhauling other goods from the state. And a more enforceable law required anyone trucking in garbage to show that it originated at a licensed waste-transfer station. The legislation stopped the inflow of illegal shipments, which brought a small measure of peace to the besieged community.

The landfill was later sold, and the ongoing bad publicity eventually forced the new owners to stop accepting long-haul waste. Then, in early 1994, the traffic slowed, and one day it just stopped. "Everyone held their breath and said, 'Is it really over?' We weren't quite sure," Moore says.

Apparently, it is over. The former dump is now a grassy hill beset by erosion; the owner must monitor the land for thirty years. The closest landfill is a twenty-minute drive away. Copies of all the Center Point group's records were handed over to the state in the hope they'll be archived — ammunition for future generations if the same issue should ever arise again. And the townspeople who waged this effort have developed close friendships with one another.

As for Terri and John Moore, they still live in their dream house. Terri recounts the tale almost nonchalantly, but then catches herself. "I look back and think, I can't believe I did that," she says.

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