Durham celebrates 50th anniversary of saying ‘no’ to Big Oil

In the early 1970s, Nancy Sandberg, Dudley Dudley and Phyllis Bennet banded together to lead the opposition against Aristotle Onassis’ plans for a refinery on the seacoast.

Cassandra Chabot, Staff Writer

Going up against the richest man in the world, Aristotle Onassis, the governor, and the sway of New Hampshire’s most popular newspaper, The Union Leader, is no small feat. The muscle behind the message stemmed from the unexpected voices of three women: Dudley Dudley, Phyllis Bennett and Nancy Sandberg. Now, it has been nearly 50 years since Onassis’s proposal to create an oil refinery was refuted by Durham and Rye residents.

“It was a short battle,” said Sandberg, a 77-year-old Durham resident. “But it was terrifically intense, and extremely frightening to me. I was a 27 [year-old] young mom at the time. And to be thrust into this role was not something I wanted. I was just with a group of citizens who said, ‘Nancy, you’ve got to be our leader’, and you just kind of follow hard and grit your teeth and do the best you can.”

These women stemmed from all walks of life; Dudley, a freshman State Representative, Bennett, publisher of Publick Occurrences, a burgeoning weekly paper, and Sandberg, leader of Save Our Shores, a group formed in direct opposition to Onassis’ plans with a focus on providing information about the environmental impacts.

Onassis was a Greek and Argentine businessman, working to amass what eventually would become the largest, privately owned shipping fleet to date. On Nov. 27 of 1973, the Governor of New Hampshire, Meldrim Thomson Jr., announced that Onassis would be putting up a $600-million refinery off the coast. At the time, it would be the world’s largest refinery, pumping up to 400,000 gallons of oil. Thomson was largely a conservative and often solicited oil refineries to the state during his career. After scouring the area for available land and buying acreage from unknowing, willing residents, the Isles of Shoals, a collection of islands located just off the coast of New Hampshire and Maine, was Onassis’s top pick for the largest structure. It was there, he hoped to build a tanker terminal that would transit the oil through underwater pipes into neighboring towns and cities.

But at what cost? Onassis claimed the refinery would offer $80 million a year in economic growth, employ 3,000 individuals and reduce the prices of oil in the region. Considering the time period, Onassis’s proposal was attractive amidst inflated prices across the nation. Though economic prosperity was supposedly ensured, maintaining the conditions of the seacoast ecosystem could not be promised. Quickly, there became a divide in the state, and neither side was keen on giving up.
“It just happened that it fell to three women,” said Sandberg, who led the anti-refinery campaign from 1973 to 1974. She believes the news and media enjoyed the story because of the “David versus Goliath” theme. But to Sandberg, their focus was primarily on spreading information about the oil refinery; they didn’t have the time to dedicate attention to the frenzy that seemed to follow their names in the papers. Since the town couldn’t defend the women’s beliefs out of fear that Onassis’s team would use Durham’s public stance against them at the statehouse, it was solely up to Sandberg and her two peers to garner support.

Sandberg explained that getting the message out there was the most vital part in the success; illustrating what the world’s largest oil refinery would be like isn’t the easiest thing to do, she said. In fact, she herself had to learn what it all really meant, but there were several professors at the University of New Hampshire who were willing to take on the task.

“We were using mimeograph machines to make little newsletters, and then they had to be distributed to mailboxes and neighborhood coffee [shops],” she said, noting that if a refinery were to be proposed today, communication would be much easier.

Fortunately for the opposition, home rule is a procedure that grants municipalities the ability to govern themselves, respectively. A rezoning due to the oil refinery would call for a town vote. The bill's components were then refreshed in the statehouse to ensure it was applicable to Durham’s situation. And it was ruled as so, becoming the town’s saving grace. For Onassis to drill at his ideal location, he would need referendum approval from Durham.

The answer would be a resounding no. On March 6, 1974, the Durham community joined one another in the Oyster River High School to vote on Onassis’s proposal. The outcome: 1,254 to 144.

Bennet passed away in July of 2015. Both Dudley and Sandberg reside in the area and are still active members of the community.