

Book review from the Dec. 4, 2008 edition of the Copper River Record, Glennallen, Alaska (Website <http://www.copperriverrecord.com>)

Palin sans Party: A Review of *Sarah Takes on Big Oil*, a new book from PNA Publishing

By Mary Odden
Editor and publisher
Copper River Record

During the recent election campaign, some Alaskans I know found themselves in the very weird position of defending an antediluvian Sarah Palin who got washed away by national politics in August. That Sarah Palin, our Governor, had thrown her energetic weight against a cartel of corrupt politicians and oil company monopoly.

Importantly, from 2006 -2008, she was visibly joined in her efforts by people of various political affiliations – and the bond that transcended those affiliations was an interest in accountability to the people of Alaska.

Those who followed Alaskan politics since the Fall of Frank, especially in those seminal years, know that when we moved from the acronym ELF to the acronym PPT, and then a transfigured PPT under the acronym ACES, we radically changed how we pump the economic lifeblood of oil money through Alaska.

They know that “the Magnificent 7” were oil and gas and natural resource experts in the Murkowski administration who quit in 2006 because the secret terms of that governor’s deal were unfavorable to Alaskans and contrary to the state’s constitution. The most visible of those people, DNR Commissioner Tom Irwin and Deputy Commissioner Marty Rutherford, returned to government service under Palin in 2007.

The story of Alaskan oil and gas politics and legislation 2006-2008 is wonderfully complicated.

The nation’s (and the world’s) polarized conceptions of Sarah Palin, post national election, are horrifically simple.

As a partial remedy, to refresh the memories of those of us who lived here through those years and perhaps crack open the “you betcha” image of Palin for her haters and lovers elsewhere, I recommend *Sarah Takes on Big Oil*. The book is subtitled “The compelling story of Governor Sarah Palin’s battle with Alaska’s ‘Big 3’ oil companies, as told by the state’s top oil and gas editors.”

The book is the first hard-cover from Petroleum Newspapers of Alaska Publishing, and its authors are Kay Cashman, publisher and executive editor of the periodical *Petroleum News*, and Kristen Nelson, *PN*'s editor-in-chief.

Petroleum News is a well-respected and independently owned print and online newspaper, based in Anchorage, that reports directly on oil and gas issues around the state, and on Canadian and lower-48 issues affecting the industry in Alaska.

The scope of *Sarah Takes on Big Oil* reaches from Frank Murkowski's negotiations with North Slope oil producers over the terms of a fiscal contract for the construction of a gas pipeline, through the election of Palin and the overturning of Murkowski's PPT, to the work which produced AGIA (the Alaska Gasline Inducement Act) and the selection of TC Alaska to develop and build a gas pipeline.

The book tells its "compelling story" in a running narrative punctuated by actual news stories from *PN* and other sources. If you followed politics in these recent years you will remember the stories: Lori Backes revealing the members of the "Corrupt Bastards Club," the publicity blows to AGIA from gas producers, the expectation that MidAmerican would become Alaska's pick to build the gas line, nuanced views from TC's Tony Palmer and ConocoPhillips' Joe Marushak, among many others.

The news stories and frequent photos, boxed explanations of oil and gas terminology all give a very journalistic flavor to the book, and serve as important sidebars to the central narrative.

The disadvantages are that the "compelling story" is quite fractured by the jumping back and forth in time. As in a news story, the authors are eager to bring readers forward to the present time – and do so on nearly every page. So it is that after telling us about the 2006 campaign – at the apex of Palin's deepest disagreement with Republican chairman Randy Ruedrich – the authors fast forward to Ruedrich proffering his 2008 McCain-Palin sign for Palin's autograph. This might be a kind of epiphany for Palin party worship, but it is jarring for a reader trying to understand the events of 2006.

In a news story, you always repeat the pertinent facts and identities, deliberately assuming you have a brand new reader picking up today's paper. But all that repetition is distracting in a book-length narrative. Marty Rutherford is an Alaskan hero, but every time her name comes up in *STOBO*, the book us again who she is and what she's done. Part of this repetition is due to the use of the news stories, but another part is the repetition in the book narrative itself.

Also, relying on the news stories to support the narrative leaves out important detail for anyone unfamiliar with the events. Senator Gene Therriault's part in bringing the crucial outside Econ One study to bear on the petroleum tax is not told; the role of the Alaska Natural Gas Development Authority and its spur line project is not well explained.

For those reasons, I think I'd have preferred that the authors had omitted the news stories (keep those explanatory side bars!) and integrated all the pertinent information and quotes into the narrative itself, allowing the story to move forward in its own time.

Probably, some different choices would have been made if the book had not tried to get to the stands on the tides of Sarah-mania preceding the election. As it was, this first edition of the book rushed into our hands on October 12, leaving its index behind, online at www.sarahtakesonbigoil.com.

There are multiple errors that would have been eliminated in a longer production process, the most profound being the inclusion of the same news story twice (pp. 54 and 102 in this edition). I'm even inclined to question the title of the book, and its attendant skewing towards celebration of the "smart, attractive, and fearless" personality of Sarah.

After all, the actual makeup of this book reveals that the story of turning away from the undue influence of big oil, and towards accountability, has a big cast of characters.

Given that credit for the accomplishments should be spread around, and eventual outcomes (since this is life and not a novel) are uncertain, I'd have preferred a more discreet and un-sexy title, too, one that doesn't remind me of "Tammy in Love."

But all those disclaimers aside, this book is an important resource for anyone who wants to understand the recent history of Alaska's energy policies, or of Sarah Palin.

Contemplate Palin's mutually-expressed friendship with Democratic gubernatorial candidate Eric Croft in 2006. Enjoy the irony that nearly made Palin Murkowski's running mate in 2002. Understand the federal regulatory support for AGIA and its nearly unanimous passage through the Alaska legislature, and why lower tariffs along an Alaskan gas line mean higher revenues to the state.

These are the underpinnings of 2009's Alaska, with two competing mega-pipeline projects looking at the cost of steel, the supply and markets for natural gas, and a recycled set of legislative leaders who have histories we may find important.

Sarah Takes on Big Oil takes transitory news stories and threads them into an important tool for understanding oil and gas production and politics. It can undoubtedly shed light on our chief executive, and has a lasting value beyond being a pre-election "Sarah" book.

Just make sure and download that index, too.

Note from PNA Publishing, a division of Petroleum Newspapers of Alaska LLC: The index was published after the book, and can be found at www.sarahtakesonbigoil.com