

Working the Wind

BILL STOVALL LOOKS LIKE the kind of guy you'd expect to see blazing through town on a Harley chopper. His head wrap bears a grisly skull-and-crossbones design, and a tangled thicket of white hair bursts from its fringes. Opaque sunshades, lambchop sideburns, and a walrus mustache frame a full, reddened face. His forearms are a splotchy brown mosaic, pummeled by years of exposure to the sun.

In fact, Bill's motorcycle sits in the garage at his home in Gatesville, just west of Waco, Texas. "I ain't rode it in a year and a half!" he tells me with a low, rumbling laugh. Bill is a long-haul trucker, one of hundreds now delivering turbine components to wind farms across America. He works for Lone Star Transportation, a company based out of Fort Worth whose trucks feature telescoping trailers for transporting blades, low-riders that allow giant tower segments to slip under highway overpasses, and multi-axle decks that can carry nacelles, each weighing a hundred thousand pounds or more.

Bill and I meet at a railroad yard in Reynolds, a small town in northwest Indiana. This is the depot where blades, tower segments, and other turbine components are being held until they're needed at the construction site for the Meadow Lake Wind Farm, a 200-megawatt power plant that may eventually be expanded to five times that size. Bill's trailer is loaded with a Vestas V82 blade, 130 feet long, that stretches his truck-trailer combo to 168 feet—well over twice as long as a conventional semi-trailer. He pulls to the edge of the access road, steps down from the cab of his bright-red Peterbilt truck, and walks to the spot where a heavy steel rod, the "kingpin," holds the trailer in place. Turning a crank, he lowers two steel legs so that he can yank the kingpin and "dolly down" the trailer, leaving it standing over-

night while he drives off to get a decent night's sleep at a nearby motel. Tomorrow morning before seven o'clock, he will come back to pick up the blade and deliver it to the Meadow Lake Wind Farm, twenty miles away in a flat stretch of farm country just north of Lafayette.

Now in his late fifties, Bill has been a long-haul trucker for years. He used to deliver fresh meats and produce, but for the past few years he has worked in the wind industry. The hours are long, and the time away from home is endless. It's late July, and he tells me it's been sixteen weeks since he's had a single day at home with his wife. Before that, he was on the road for nine weeks. "So I've actually been gone twenty-five weeks with one day at home," he says. And last year was worse. "I drove from May to December and never got home." His wife visited him twice on the road. "That didn't hurt," he says with a smile that vanishes as quickly as it appears. His kids are grown, but he has five grandkids and one great-grandchild; rarely does he see them.

What keeps Bill going, along with the wages, is pride. When he was delivering meats and produce, he saw himself as performing an important, if little-recognized, service. "You go into the stores now and everyone wants fresh lettuce and eggs and fresh meat, and there's a whole lotta old boys out on the road that go to a lot of trouble on a regular basis to make sure that stuff is there every day." There's dignity, not bitterness, in his tone.

Wind energy brings Bill equal pride. "When I go by these wind farms, I think, 'I did my part of that. I can see that.'" He's boned up on the basics of how turbines work, the power they produce, the fossil fuels they displace. "I found out [one turbine] puts out electricity for a thousand homes, pays for itself in five years, and lasts fifty—not a bad deal!" His reasoning is plain: "We don't buy the air. Somebody might start chargin' for it, but for now, it sounds better 'n coal."

The next morning, I set out from my motel at 6:30. My goal is to catch the nine-vehicle convoy that Bill will be joining: three trucks carrying one blade each, plus six escort vehicles—one in front of each blade truck, one behind. Blades travel in matched sets from factory to wind farm, their weights carefully measured to make sure that every turbine has a well-balanced rotor.

The fog is so dense I can barely see fifty feet ahead of me as I make my way south on I-65. Eventually I spot blinking orange roof lights on a green Ford pickup truck in the right-hand lane. Ahead of it, I make out the contours of a giant white blade. Moving into the left-hand lane, I edge by one trio of trucks—escort, blade, escort. Then I pass a second trio, then a third. The caravan is cruising at a surprisingly swift clip given the poor visibility: about fifty miles per hour, just slightly slower than the general traffic.

Bill calls the forward escort for his blade truck his “front door” and the rear one his “back door.” The back door has the tougher job: its driver has to steer the rig’s rear axle remotely from a few dozen feet behind the truck, using a handheld electronic device that looks like a simplified TV control, all the while keeping his own vehicle on the road. It makes texting while driving seem easy.

The advantage of having a double-escort becomes obvious when we pull off I-65 and negotiate a tight left turn onto an overpass heading east on State Road 18. Before the blade truck enters the turn, the front-door driver hops out of his minivan and uproots the stop sign at the end of the exit ramp. Otherwise the blade’s tip would level it on its wide swing around the ninety-degree turn. The back-door driver then navigates the turn, keeping the blade truck’s rear axle heading straight while the cab veers off to the left. Once the last blade has made its way around the turn, the trailing escort replants the stop sign.

A few miles down the road, the three blade trucks followed by their rear escorts peel off the pavement to the right, edging slowly onto a semicircular dirt path that allows them to make another ninety-degree left-hand turn. Completing the arc, the trucks head off into a fogbound sea of shoulder-high green corn. The front escorts, unneeded at this stage, stand idle in a grassy holding area while the trucks unload their wares at the foot of a nearby turbine tower.

A friend who has dug into National Archives photos from the Cold War tells me these wide-swinging turnoffs remind him of the aerial surveillance shots that tipped off U.S. intelligence to Cuba’s installation of missiles in the early 1960s.¹ There were no giant wind turbines then, so what else would Fidel Castro have been moving around the countryside?