

Introduction

Biodiesel has buzz. In the commercial fuel sector it has buzz as a lubricity additive to petroleum diesel. In the clean air crowd it has buzz for its reduced emissions. In agricultural circles it is talked about as a new cash crop. Academia is excited because biodiesel is a frontier, full of unknowns. There is plenty of groundbreaking research still to be done on how to make fuel from soy or algae or flies that feed on hog waste. Biodiesel has buzz with the peaceniks because there is “No War Required” to obtain it. It has traction with those on the right side of the political spectrum because it can be “Made in America.”

And where biodiesel has the greatest buzz of all is with the early-adopters, who are running around on 100 percent biodiesel, or B100, as it is known. This small community of consumers is narrow and intense and creates tremendous word-of-mouth interest in the fuel. I have inhabited the B100 world for the past three years, making

my own fuel, designing and building biodiesel reactors, experimenting with different feedstocks, catalysts and reactants and contributing to the rapidly growing grassroots movement that is biodiesel.

This is the story of Piedmont Biofuels, a small biodiesel co-op that has risen from the classroom to the backyard to commercial production. Our story is inexorably tied to the stories of others and to the fledgling biodiesel industry in the United States.

All around the edges of this book, and at its heart, are entries from my weblog, known simply as Energy Blog. It began as an innocent attempt to communicate with my night school students at our local community college and accidentally became a chronicle of the biodiesel movement.

I need to tip my hat to my fellow denizens of the lower blogosphere (those of us with fewer than a thousand discrete readers per night) because Energy Blog never really fit the mold. While others were introducing emoticons and spinning off deeply personal reflections backed by whatever music was playing at the time, I was publishing essays on BTUs.

But blogs are not books. People read blog entries when they are at work — usually when they are supposed to be doing something else. People read books on airplanes and in bed — usually on their own time. With this difference in mind I have organized this as a book supported by relevant blog entries along the way. Where necessary I have modified the original blog entries. The

book is part journalism, part storytelling and part speculation on an industry that is not yet fully birthed.

Thomas Paine was the penman of the American Revolution. Ann Landers was a popular advice columnist when I was growing up. My guess is that I am somewhere between the two.