

TIME

Friday, Aug. 01, 1969

America's Sewage System and the Price of Optimism

ALMOST every great city has a river. The poetic notion is that flowing water brings commerce, delights the eye, and cools the summer heat. But there is a more prosaic reason for the close affinity of cities and rivers. They serve as convenient, free sewers.

The Potomac reaches the nation's capital as a pleasant stream, and leaves it stinking from the 240 million gallons of wastes that are flushed into it daily. Among other horrors, while Omaha's meat packers fill the Missouri River with animal grease balls as big as oranges, St. Louis takes its drinking water from the muddy lower Missouri because the Mississippi is far filthier. Scores of U.S. rivers are severely polluted—the swift Chattahoochee, majestic Hudson and quiet Milwaukee, plus the Buffalo, Merrimack, Monongahela, Niagara, Delaware, Rouge, Escambia and Havasupi. Among the worst of them all is the 80-mile-long Cuyahoga, which splits Cleveland as it reaches the shores of Lake Erie.

No Visible Life. Some river! Chocolate-brown, oily, bubbling with subsurface gases, it oozes rather than flows. "Anyone who falls into the Cuyahoga does not drown," Cleveland's citizens joke grimly. "He decays." The Federal Water Pollution Control Administration dryly notes: "The lower Cuyahoga has no visible life, not even low forms such as leeches and sludge worms that usually thrive on wastes." It is also—literally—a fire hazard. A few weeks ago, the oil-slicked river burst into flames and burned with such intensity that two railroad bridges spanning it were nearly destroyed. "What a terrible reflection on our city," said Cleveland Mayor Carl Stokes sadly.

Cleveland's great industries have lately made efforts to dump fewer noxious effluents into the Cuyahoga. If their record is still not good, the city's has been far worse. Whenever it rains hard, the archaic sanitary storm system floods the sewer mains, sending untreated household wastes into the river. Sometimes the old mains break, as recently happened on the Big Creek interceptor line. Each day for the past month, 25 million gallons of raw sewage have cascaded from a ruptured pipe, spilling a gray-green torrent into the

Cuyahoga and thence into Lake Erie.

Some lake! Industrial wastes from Detroit's auto companies, Toledo's steel mills and the paper plants of Erie, Pa., have helped turn Lake Erie into a gigantic cesspool. Of 62 beaches along its U.S. shores, only three are rated completely safe for swimming. Even wading is unpleasant; as many as 30,000 sludge worms carpet each square yard of lake bottom.

Each day, Detroit, Cleveland and 120 other municipalities fill Erie with 1.5 billion gallons of inadequately treated wastes, including nitrates and phosphates. These chemicals act as fertilizer for growths of algae that suck oxygen from the lower depths and rise to the surface as odoriferous green scum. Commercial and game fish—blue pike, whitefish, sturgeon, northern pike—have nearly vanished, yielding the waters to trash fish that need less oxygen. Weeds proliferate, turning water frontage into swamp. In short, Lake Erie is in danger of dying by suffocation.

Scrub the Water. What can be done? The Federal Government has outlined a \$1.1 billion program for upgrading the sewage treatment plants of Lake

Erie's littoral U.S. cities. Washington has asked industry to spend another \$285 million on waste-treatment equipment. But schedules are being met by only 15 of the 102 target cities and 32 of the 100 major industrial polluters. The trouble is that pollution rarely gets a high priority until profits are affected or people are killed.

Cleveland, however, shook off its apathy last year. Much of the credit goes to Ben Stefanski, a 30-year-old lawyer-turned-urbanist, whom Mayor Stokes had just appointed to be Cleveland's director of public utilities. Making up in enthusiasm what he lacked in experience, Stefanski persuaded Stokes to start a massive effort to scrub the Cuyahoga, and hence aid Lake Erie. The proposed price tag: \$100 million in bonds, to improve existing facilities and build 25 miles of trunk-line sewers plus a modern sewage treatment plant.

Like Apple Pie. "We have some of the lowest sewer tax rates in the country," says Stefanski. "I figured we'd double the rates to amortize our bonds." To persuade the people to pay, Stefanski enlisted newspaper support, lined up citizen groups and got 33 suburban governments to endorse the plan. "It became like apple pie and motherhood," he recalls. "No one could be against clean water." Last fall Clevelanders approved the bond issue by a vote of 2 to 1, giving it more "yes" votes than any other proposal on the ballot. In five years, Cleveland should have the best sewage system in the U.S., one capable of handling even industrial wastes.

The accomplishment, huge as it is, only fixes the price of optimism. Unfortunately, water pollution knows no political boundaries. The Cuyahoga can be cleaned up in Cleveland, but as long as other cities keep

dumping wastes upriver, it will remain exactly what it is today—an open sewer filling Lake Erie with scummy wavelets, sullen reminders that even a great lake can die.

 **Click to Print**

Find this article at:

<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,901182,00.html>

Copyright © 2013 Time Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part without permission is prohibited.

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Add TIME Headlines to your Site](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Customer Service](#)