



THE YEAR OF THE RIVER

Cuyahoga River fire galvanized clean water and the environment as a public issue

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Environmentalists observing 2009 as "The Year of the River" are celebrating the remarkable return to health of the Cuyahoga River over the last four decades.

But before there was a Cuyahoga comeback, the Cuyahoga was a catalyst.

When the oily, murky and sluggish waterway caught fire in June 1969, it not only caught the attention of a previously indifferent industrial nation -- it also ignited an already smoldering ecological movement.

That movement toward environmental responsibility included the first Earth Day and passage of the federal Clean Water Act of 1972, still the most influential water improvement measure on the books.

"The fire did contribute a huge amount to the new environmental movement and it put the issue in front of everyone else, too," said Jonathan Adler, environmental historian and law professor at Case Western Reserve University. "Water pollution became a tangible, vivid thing -- like it had never been on a national level.

"There was a sense of crisis at that point. It was: Oh, my God -- rivers are catching on fire.' "

Of course, raging rivers of fire weren't unheard of in Cleveland.

In fact, the Cuyahoga had burned at least nine times since the late 1860s.

The river was increasingly filled with flammable liquids as it drained Cleveland industrial byproducts into an equally polluted Lake Erie.

Oil slicks on the river surface burned much worse in the past. Among them: A 1912 fire had killed five dock workers when the blaze spread to the shipyards and a 1952 fire caused an estimated \$1.5 million in damage.

But while some of those earlier disasters had commanded banner headlines in *The Plain Dealer* and the now-defunct *Cleveland Press*, they didn't appear to dent the broader consciousness of an American public focused on economic progress.

"In both Cleveland papers, the news was the damaged trestles, not the burning river," write history professor David Stradling of the University of Cincinnati and brother-journalist Richard Stradling.

The duo's paper, "Perceptions of a Burning River," was published in the July 2008 *Environmental History* magazine.

"Remember, a lot of people saw a filthy river as a sign of progress, not a problem at all," Adler said.

But Cleveland Mayor Carl Stokes didn't see progress — he saw trouble on the river in a city that had so far been unable to get much help from the state of Ohio.

The day after the 1969 fire, on June 23, Stokes announced that he was filing a formal complaint with the state, claiming that a clean river was beyond the city's control.

"We have no jurisdiction over what's dumped in there," he told *The Plain Dealer* that day. The state's response? A dirty river was the fault of a failing city sewer system.

The city's rejoinder: We can't fully upgrade our sewers unless the state kicks in more money to help us.

But state help never came — although the governor's office did threaten to put a stop to all construction in Cleveland unless the city cleaned up its wastewater even more.

So while the city was already making plans to upgrade its sewer systems with the \$100 million bond issue approved by voters in November 1968, it would have to wait a few years more for any significant help from a larger government entity.

That help, eventually, would come in the form of the federal Clean Water Act in 1972 — supported by U.S. Rep. Louis Stokes, the mayor's brother — which demanded that all waterways should eventually become "fishable and swimmable."

But even that didn't happen until after the fire on the Cuyahoga gained a much larger cultural currency.

Nation's eyes already on environment The timing was just right for that to happen.

The Cuyahoga River fire gained that notoriety because it came right in the midst of the 1960s — the decade of change.

Even ahead of the civil rights movement, the sexual revolution and the space race, came Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring," a landmark book that chronicled the effect of pesticides on bird populations, published in September 1962.

Then, in January 1969, the world watched for 11 days as more than 200,000 gallons of crude oil gushed up from a blown-out well off the coast of Santa Barbara, Calif. The spill killed 3,600 birds, nearly a dozen seals and dolphins and countless fish and other sea creatures.

It was an environmental disaster that President Richard Nixon said "touched the conscience of the American people" as he called for a better way to use resources while protecting our natural surroundings.

So only six months later, on June 22, when a flotilla of oily debris near Republic Steel caught a spark from an overhead rail car and briefly burned as it floated down the Cuyahoga in the summer of '69, America was primed to react.

Even if it meant reacting to the wrong photo.

No fire historians have been able to produce a photo of the Cuyahoga fire. There likely aren't any.

The fire, which broke out at midday on a slow-news day Sunday, was put out in a half-hour after causing less than \$100,000 in damage.

Neither of Cleveland's daily papers produced any images of the 1969 fire, instead publishing the next day photos of the effect of the fire. The Plain Dealer showed crews hosing down the smoldering timbers of the railroad bridge; the Press showed rails on the bridge above the river, bent by the heat from the blaze.

But two months later, when Time magazine ran a brief essay mentioning the Cuyahoga River fire, its editors instead published a Plain Dealer photo from the 1952 fire showing a towering blaze and firefighters dousing the conflagration as it engulfed a tugboat.

In today's internet vernacular, you might say that the fiery (if misleading) photo "went viral," showing up on news broadcasts nationwide and likely worldwide, the historians say.

"I will never forget a photograph of flames, fire, shooting right out of the water in downtown Cleveland," former EPA Administrator Carol Browner said in a later interview, apparently referring to that 1952 image. "It was the summer of 1969 and the Cuyahoga River was burning."

Indeed, the fire had begun to take on "mythic status, and errors of fact became unimportant to the story's obvious meaning," the Stradlings wrote.

National Geographic followed in December 1970, more than a year later, publishing a cover story, “Our Ecological Crisis.” The feature included a graphic showing a six-mile segment of the river that “receives the wastes of steel mills, chemical and meat-rendering plants and other industries.”

Mythical details aside, the fact that the Cuyahoga River had caught fire at all had quickly become a well-known and oft-repeated truth — among not only ardent environmentalists, but also a previously ignorant public.

“I mean a river lighting on fire was almost biblical,” Sierra Club President Adam Werbach said in a CNN interview in 1997. “And it energized American action because people understood that that should not be happening.”