

THE RETURN OF THE CUYAHOGA

Final Transcript

A co-production of Florentine Films/Hott Productions, Inc., America's River Communities, Inc. and WVIZ/PBS ideastream[®], who are solely responsible for its content.

Copyright 2008 ideastream[®]

DVD Chapter Titles in **BOLD CAPS**

OPENING

Narration:

June 22, 1969. A quiet night on the Cuyahoga River. Temperature in the low 80s, no rain, no wind to speak of. As usual, oil and debris accumulate at the base of the Norfolk and Western Railway bridge. And, as usual, a railroad car carries molten steel across the bridge, spewing sparks. The three essentials for fire: oxygen, material, and ignition.

MAIN TITLE

Elaine Marsh:

A river is more than a ditch with an aqueous solution that runs through it. A river is truly the heart of the land. And the quality of the river is a direct reflection on how people view the quality of their life.

Narration:

The Cuyahoga River is short and crooked – just one hundred miles long, it flows first south, then north as it winds toward Lake Erie. But in that brief distance, this river has moved through history, and changed it. For the story of the Cuyahoga is the story of America. On its wild banks, industry boomed and banged; it was a place where tycoons, and legends, were made. But unbridled business broke every law of nature: the wild river was tamed, then poisoned, and the environment destroyed. Then, in our time, people woke up to the danger, and tried to save the river and the world. Quite literally.

Paul Alsenas:

We can bring this river back. That is the basic premise This river, the water of the river sustains life. This is our home. This is where it all starts. So we cannot change the community until we start with this, the Cuyahoga River.

Narration:

When the United States was new, the Cuyahoga marked the place where white men said that civilization ended. But civilization had it in for the river.

EARLY CLEVELAND

David Beach:

In 1796 a band of surveyors led by General Moses Cleaveland came out and surveyed northeast Ohio. They started basically at the Lake Erie shore and worked their way south with their chains and drew straight lines. They just followed their compass and didn't really pay any attention to what was there on the landscape. And whether there were rivers or wetlands, it didn't really matter. They just marked off the land for sale in lots and townships.

Narration:

One of the towns they platted was Cleveland – a struggling settlement plunked on the banks of a useless river.

Dr. John J. Grabowski:

The mouth of the Cuyahoga River, where the river flowed into Lake Erie was full of swamps and malarial mosquitoes. The early settlers, the very few who came down here in the early 1800s, settled near the river. And at that time the mouth was blocked. It was very slow flowing. For awhile the river actually retarded the city.

Narration:

But our history is the story of people rearranging nature. In 1827, we changed the Cuyahoga for the first time, moving the mouth of the river by a half-mile, creating a straighter and deeper channel for ships and barges. At the same time, new canals connected Lake Erie to the Ohio River.

Dr. John J. Grabowski:

That changed everything. Cleveland was suddenly not a sleepy little imitation of a New England village but it was a mercantile center on a trade route that stretched from Europe to the Gulf of Mexico. It was a bustling city. And that's what brought people here to make their fortune.

THE SILICON VALLEY OF THE INDUSTRIAL ERA

Narration:

The fortunes to be made were of some size. In 1870, a young bookkeeper organized a new company on the banks of the Cuyahoga. He latched onto an interesting product, a liquid that had been sold as a cure-all by traveling quacks. The product was oil, and the man was John D. Rockefeller.

Archive narration:

Rockefeller. The architect of our business age. Cleveland was Mr. Rockefeller's first place of business, where he began his rise to fame and fortune.

Narration:

No businessmen on the Cuyahoga could match Rockefeller's long and astonishing success at Standard Oil; but companies everywhere mirrored his practice of putting waterways to work – whatever the consequences.

Frank Samsel:

Rivers were used for transportation and to dispose of waste. If you had something you wanted to get rid of, you threw it in the river, and that was a way of life.

Narration:

Any harm that might stem from this way of life was largely ignored. More important things were happening.

Archival narration:

Cleveland, the state's largest city flings its soaring towers into the blue Lake Erie sky.

Paul Alsenas:

Cleveland starting in the late 19th Century became the center of industrial activity. Was the Silicon Valley of industrial era.

Archival Narration:

This brawny, young metropolitan giant typifies America at its best.

Steve Litt:

Companies were founded here to refine oil, to make paint, to make steel, varnish, beer, all kinds of products.

Dr. John J. Grabowski:

By 1920 the value of industrial goods produced here dollars is two billion dollars. That industrial explosion that took place in cities like Cleveland, Chicago, Detroit, Buffalo, was a landmark in 19th and 20th century world history. One could argue that that no where in the world was industrial growth so concentrated, so rapid, so powerful as it was in cities like Cleveland at that time.

Narration:

But the Cuyahoga itself wasn't perfectly suited for its role as an industrial workhorse.

David Stradling:

It may function as an industrial artery, as they called it. But it also was really a river. It was so terribly crooked and narrow. It froze in the wintertime. It flooded periodically. There are aspects of the naturalness of this river that posed problems for the city's economy.

Narration:

And so, over time, people remodeled the river again. Companies lined the river banks with wooden and steel bulkheads, making the last four miles more like a bathtub than a river. In Cleveland, dozens of bridges spanned the river, while upstream, new dams held back its flow.

Archival narration:

And like a good sign in the heavens is the smoke from these mills. A sign of the forgings and castings and sheets and wire products to come.

Dr. John J. Grabowski:

Once upon a time smoke was a very positive indicator of the community's well being.

Dr. John J. Grabowski:

Smoke, steam, flames, symbolized power. The power of the industrial city to change itself, to change the world.

THE NEW IDEA OF POLLUTION

Narration:

But the fabulous success of modern times on the Cuyahoga brought some pretty severe growing pains. At first the idea of "pollution" was an unfamiliar one; but it was something we learned all over America, and people on the Cuyahoga learned it early.

Robert Fretz:

Well when I was a little boy I lived in Akron. I lived right next to one of the biggest tire makers in the world. And my father took the tires out of the mold and stacked them on a truck. And it was a dirty job. My father would come home from work at the end of the day he would have taken a shower at work and cleaned himself up, and come home and take a shower and go to bed and would get up in the morning his shadow would still be laying in the bed from all the lamp black and the chemicals and stuff that he used in working in the rubber industry. These chemicals were left in bags and on docks and just discarded. Most of this just ended up in the river.

Archival narration:

Cleveland is dependant on no single industry. It holds leadership in many.

Narration:

By 1950, industries along the river produced a multitude of products. And at the same time, a multitude of by-products that needed to be thrown away.

Frank Samsel:

The steel mills were running with pre WWII technology. They produced a tremendous amount of red dust. They didn't take the iron or dust out of the air. Then the sky was orange and of course, the river was orange. Because some of the stuff that they washed off, the river was an orange as orange paint.

Archival narration:

The city works with pigments, turning out vast quantities of paints, varnishes, and oils, products of the largest paint and varnish companies in the world.

Frank Samsel:

You could see by products that would come out of their paint mills. Some days it would be red, some days it'd be blue. Other days it'd be green, whatever.

Archival narration:

Research is the new frontier of American industry. In Cleveland, skilled engineers, technical workers, and chemists conduct countless experiments in their quest for knowledge, their search for new and improved methods and products.

Dr. John J. Grabowski:

When I when I graduated from high school back in the 1960s my plans were to go to college and become a chemist. I got a summer job at the laboratory working in a section called industrial coatings. And we tested the coatings that we'd spray them on panels of heavy metal and then we'd test them in various ways. One of the tests was to immerse them in Coca Cola. The other test was to immerse them in Cuyahoga River water. What they used to do was actually hang the panels in the river. They'd hang them on metal wires. One day the lab tech went down to the river to get the panels and they'd dropped to the bottom of the river. Something had eaten through the wire. The river water was a tough test for industrial coatings. You never knew what was going to float down that river.

Archival narration:

Rivers have always been considered handy dumping places. The Cuyahoga is no exception

THE RIVER BOILED LIKE A CAULDRON

Wayne Bratton:

Fifty years ago the river boiled like a cauldron. This was all very black, high petroleum content, anoxic, and just constantly bubbling like a stew on a stove.

Archival narration:

The waters of the Cuyahoga's industrial flats area move very slowly. It may take water from 8 to 30 days to move from the channel to the lake. By this time, the waters of the crooked river are legally dead.

Narration:

The city, like the river, had been left for dead. By the late 1960s, it had happened all over the country: white middle-class people had fled the inner cities. What they left behind was poverty, and rage. Race riots broke out: in 1966 and 1968, Cleveland burned.

Sylvia Hood Washington:

There is a sense of loss, there is a sense of frustration in the African American community. All the resources are leaving the city and they have no control of the city. And if they can't control it then in their opinion they're going to destroy it. And fire becomes this act of power in the African American community, but it's also something that's very frightening to everyone around the city of Cleveland, because it is out of control.

Narration:

In 1969, the Cuyahoga provided the perfect reflection of the ruined state of American cities.

THE CUYAHOGA RIVER FIRE OF 1969

Wayne Bratton:

This is the site of a fire of June 22nd 1969. It was really a quiet night on the Cuyahoga River. It was warm. Tramp oil, paper products collected at the base of a bridge. It created a dam. Now the blast furnaces transport liquid molten steel across this bridge. The molten steel spews sparks.

Frank Samsel:

The hot slag fell on the debris and it caught it on fire. Nobody noticed it. And there was a wooden trestle on the bridge. Well, it was going good. And the wooden trestle was tarred. It caught it on fire.

Wayne Bratton:

The fire boat responded, the landside apparatus, fire apparatus responded, they extinguished the fire and life went on.

Mark Winegardner:

I used to always wonder what the fire fighters thought when they came to the river. What exactly are we going to spray on? Maybe we should put more water in our water?

Joe Mosbrook:

I was working for NBC news, Cleveland bureau, and we heard on the police scanner that there was a fire along the river. And we checked with the fire department. They said it was a fairly minor thing. Railroad trestle was damaged somewhat. Nobody was hurt. Not a great deal of damage. It was a relatively minor story.

Sylvia Hood Washington:

Now this is the interesting part about the Cuyahoga River burning. It was not a unique incident. It was not the first time a river had burned.

Wayne Bratton:

This was not Cherries Jubilee or Bananas Foster you understand. But there were fires that were much more costly than this. As far as damage there was only about \$50,000 damage on this fire.

Jonathan H. Adler:

It's the fire that everyone talks about when it's ac, was actually one of the minor fires on the history of the Cuyahoga. In the nineteen teens there was a fire that killed several people.

Elaine Marsh:

The river burned fairly regularly in the 1920s and the 1930s. In fact, in the 1930s there was a fire that lasted two days.

Jonathan H. Adler:

There was a fire in 1952 that caused over a million dollars of damage.

Wayne Bratton:

And that's when a welder's spark ignited some petroleum product on the river, and we lost six tugs here and totally destroyed this facility. You can still see the charred pilings behind me here.

Jonathan H. Adler:

It wasn't just in Cleveland where we had industrial river fires. This occurred on the Rouge River in Michigan, the Chicago River, the Schuylkill River in Philadelphia, the Baltimore Harbor. All of these areas caught fire due to the collection of industrial waste and debris that at the time wasn't being cleaned up.

Sylvia Hood Washington:

All of the industrial cities were polluted. So there was nothing special about Cleveland

Narration: But something was special about Cleveland: its mayor.

MAYOR CARL STOKES

Mayor Carl Stokes:

I am proud, of my negro heritage, but I want it understood, that I am not running as a candidate of the negro community or of any other special group.

Narration:

Carl Stokes was not only the first elected African-American mayor in Cleveland; he was the first African-American mayor of any large American city. The grandson of a slave, Stokes promised to give the dispossessed of his city a powerful voice. But his job would not be easy.

Sylvia Hood Washington:

Carl Stokes comes into office in a city that is decaying. He's like a lot of mayors who, who actually came into power at that time. They're coming into declining cities, declining populations, populations that are becoming increasingly poor. There were environmental problems, garbage problems, polluted water, polluted air.

THE FIRE BURNS IN THE NATION'S IMAGINATION

Narration:

But by 1969, a river catching on fire was an event that could capture the imagination of America.

Jonathan H. Adler:

This was when Americans were awakening to the cost of industrial development. People were beginning to be concerned about the effects modernization was having on the environment.

David Stradling

The '69 fire happens at just the right moment to become the poster child of the environmental movement. It happens only ten months before Earth Day, celebrated around the country and here in Cleveland too.

Sylvia Hood Washington:

This is in the middle of this environmental watershed. Groups all around the country say our environmental situation in the United States is dismal. But what really brought it home for everyone was to see a river burning in a major city.

Mark Winegardner:

It was featured in Time Magazine in a new a couple months after it happened in a new section they had called "Environment." That issue of Time Magazine happened to be the largest selling issue in the entire magazine's history for two reasons. It was days after Ted Kennedy had his episode at Chappaquiddick, and two, it was a week after the moon walk. And inside that very well-read issue was this article about the Cuyahoga River. And the article itself talked about Cleveland's progressive anti-pollution laws, but the pictures told the story.

Jonathan H. Adler:

The image that everyone associated with the 1969 fire seared itself into the environmental consciousness. The problem is that that picture wasn't of the 1969 fire. It was of an earlier fire from a time when river fires were actually true infernos on the river surface. Those are the images we associate with the 1969 fire even though the 1969 fire wasn't much of a fire at all. Symbols are very important in politics. And the symbol of a burning river could be a catalyst for political action and involvement, in a way that the technical details of water pollution problems might not be.

THE MISTAKE BY THE LAKE

Sylvia Hood Washington:

When you have the rioting in Cleveland, the city has lost control. And so when you have the Cuyahoga River burning, again I think there's a sense of things gone awry, things gone bad, things out of control.

Narration:

A river on fire was not just a calamity. It seemed a reversal of the natural order. The waters of life had become the flames of destruction.

Mark Winegardner:

It goes exactly with Cleveland's own sense of itself as imploding and collapsing and exploding and bursting into flame. If your river catches on fire, can we be too far away from frogs falling from the sky? Anything can happen now. You know, what next?

Johnny Carson:

Rich Little.

Mark Winegardner:

The fire sort of sparked the Cleveland joke throughout all of America.

Johnny Carson (off camera):

Have you any idea how Governor Reagan plans to keep Russia from invading Poland?

Rich Little:

He's going to rename it Cleveland. Nobody wants to go there.

Sylvia Hood Washington:

After the fire Cleveland suddenly became the mistake by the lake. It was just a place where things had gone wrong and people hadn't controlled the environment, the social conditions. And I think that for a while there it was just very difficult for people to say I'm from Cleveland.

Mayor Carl Stokes:

The big hang-up in water pollution to this date has been money.

THE CLEAN UP BEGINS

Narration:

Carl Stokes linked environmental problems with social issues: dirty water and polluted air were part of the problem with America's dying industrial cities. The fire in 1969 fueled his argument; it burned in the nation's imagination, and ignited grass-roots action across the country. In Ohio, people began small-scale attempts to clean up the Cuyahoga.

Man:

So, there were areas of considerable accumulation of trash.

Interviewer: How much did you pull out?

Man:

Here is it. Do you want to measure it? How would you quantitate something like that? I don't know.

Narration:

In a fundraising stunt, an environmental activist went for a slightly-poisonous swim.

Swimmer:
Never again!

Interviewer:
Why?

Swimmer:
That water is really putrid. It's really bad.

Interviewer:
Cold?

Swimmer:
No just dirty. I got a taste of it. One taste was enough.

Mayor Carl Stokes:
We have the kind of air and water pollution problems in these cities, that are every bit as dangerous to the health and safety of our citizens, as any intercontinental ballistic missile that's so dramatically poised five thousand miles from our country.

Jonathan H. Adler:
Carl Stokes was one of the political leaders that went to Washington and said, we can't do this alone. We need help. One consequence of the Cuyahoga fire was greater political pressure for additional federal legislation. And one of the things that led to was the Clean Water Act of 1972 when the federal government really increased dramatically its role in helping to maintain water quality.

Narration:
The Clean Water Act was simple, yet wide-ranging: its ambitious goal was to make American rivers and lakes clean enough for people to swim and fish. The Act prohibited dumping hazardous substances into the navigable waters of the United States; a new unit, the Environmental Protection Agency, took charge of the cleanup. Not surprisingly, the Cuyahoga was among the first rivers to come under EPA scrutiny. Companies that had been dumping for a hundred years suddenly had to clean up their act. On the Cuyahoga, they formed the Cleveland Harbor Commission and set out to find cleanup equipment that actually worked.

Wayne Bratton:
The clean up and response industry was in its infancy. And there was a lot of design work going on and there was a lot of equipment coming into the market place. Some of it very experimental. Equipment manufacturers would send marketing people into our offices. I actually had people create an oil spill on my desk and then they'd have some kind of model of equipment or materials or chemicals or something that they would clean this all up on my desk. And I had to point out to them, that this is all very nice. But I never really had an oil spill on my desk. That was part of the adjustment their equipment had to make. It wasn't just clean oil on a clean body of water, it was bad oil on an oily body of water filled with small debris. There were absorbent type equipment. There were skimmers that looked like a flying saucer. There was a lot of things that may work in some conditions but they just didn't work here in our environment on the Cuyahoga River.

Frank Samsel:
Well, we saw these people out trying to pick up oil on the river. I said I don't know anything about oil spills. But I know this isn't gonna work. We ought to do something.

Narration:
Frank Samsel did do something: with his own money, he converted a 56-foot-long boat into a cleanup machine. He called it the Putzfrau – German for cleaning lady.

Wayne Bratton:

This is a very unique piece of equipment here. It's actually a vessel, self propelled, with a vacuum tank that can vacuum up heavy fuel oil off the surface of the water.

Frank Samsel:

The crane on the back is just a two-ton crane, which was sufficient. And we carried a chainsaw of course. We had seven men that really knew what they were doing. In about a sixteen hour day we would move a hundred yards of debris and about fifteen to twenty thousand gallons of oil. Now that's not bad. We did it in January, and we did it in July, and we did it in every month before and after. The way the river looked in the beginning I was sure that I would retire and there'd still be plenty of work to do.

Narration:

But after only six years, an astonishing condition existed on the Cuyahoga: companies had stopped dumping waste. There wasn't much more for the Putzfrau to clean up.

Frank Samsel:

Do I miss it? Yeah, I really do. It did its job really well. And we had the feeling of accomplishment when we were doing it. When we were picking up spills on the river it looked better when we were finished than when we started. And so it's like any job when you clean something up, you know. You have personal satisfaction. That I miss. That I miss.

WE HAVE MET THE ENEMY AND HE IS US

Narration:

The Clean Water Act required more than just clean-up: the government now conducted frequent testing and surveillance. They inspected the sites guilty of what is called point source pollution: that meant every place where pipes discharged waste products directly into the river.

Ten years after the celebrated fire, the job was at least partly completed.

Archivalnewscaster:

The 10th anniversary of what is possibly the most famous fire in Cleveland history. Roger Morse is standing by with a live action cam to fill us in.

Roger:

It's been 10 years since the famous fire on the river, and while you can't swim in it, you can certainly party by it and celebrate in the fact that it has been cleaned up quite a bit. You can see the Cleveland fire department putting on a show for the people here to show them what they can do to fight a fire. Hopefully, they won't have to do that anymore.

Narration:

Some factories cleaned up, others simply moved away; pollution in the ship channel slowly came under control. But a river's watershed is all the land that drains into it; even the smallest tributary upstream can affect the health of a river. And it soon became clear that industry was not the whole problem. There was another source of pollution spreading over the entire watershed. People. Ordinary people.

Robert Fretz:

I've been a watershed ranger for the city of Akron 34 years. I was hired in 1973 after the Clean Water Act was passed in '72. I spent a lot of time talking to people and standing in roadside ditches looking at discharges from homes. We found problems. People would have salt brine collect in their gas well, so they would let it out over the ground. People had built houses and not built a septic system.

Jonathan H. Adler:

Today in the environment we have met the enemy and it is us. All of us in little ways are contributing to the environmental problems that are most severe for cities like Cleveland and for the nation as a whole.

Roger Thoma:
Everybody has to be responsible for what they put on their lawns, their gardens, their farm fields.

Steve Litt:
Cars have been dripping antifreeze

Wayne Bratton:
People dropping motor oil down the storm sewer.

Frank Samsel:
Bacon grease down the sink.

Steve Litt:
Pet waste when you don't pick up after your dog.

Jim Weakley:
Solvents in the hand cleaners.

Steve Litt:
All of that gets into rivers and streams, that's non-point source pollution. That is the biggest problem in the Cuyahoga River today.

FISH SHOCKING

Narration:
In fact, that is the biggest problem with every American river today. When you can't pinpoint a single source of pollution, it is staggeringly difficult to control. Even the most pristine areas of America's rivers are threatened. Which is why the Ohio EPA routinely goes fishing in the Upper Cuyahoga River – with electricity.

Roger Thoma:
We are in the very farthest of the upper reaches of the Cuyahoga basin. We will be electro fishing in this part of the Cuyahoga River.

Aw, you let him get away!

We're gonna put an electric field in the Cuyahoga River here and that will make the fish swim to our boat and we will dip the fish up, identify each species, weigh some of them to find out what their average weight is and then return them to the river.

Roger Thoma:
It is the law in Ohio that rivers have to have certain levels of fish communities and certain levels of insect communities in them. So in that respect Ohio leads the nation and, and technically we lead the world. We, we get inquiries from Australia and France, Chile, all around the world there are people that want to know what we do and how we do it, and how they can do it.

Roger Thoma
Now I am gonna sort some fish out. We have several different species of suckers in here. The biggest threats to the upper Cuyahoga are things like nonpoint pollution. If there's a lot of development in the upper basin of the Cuyahoga River then that will impact on the fish community. It'll reduce the oxygen. It'll reduce the visibility of the water.

Another carp. The fish will then respond to that environmental change. He weighs four thousand seven hundred and fifty.

This area up here would be considered a habitat rich area. There's lots of structure here for fish to live in. Logs and rocks, trees, undercut banks.

Narration:

But in the lower river, the story is quite different.

Roger Thoma:

Today we are sampling in the Cuyahoga River along the bulkheads in the ship channel. Down here, where there should be more diversity, there's actually less.

Roger Thoma:

When we looked for fish in the upper Cuyahoga, there are almost twenty species and they were large individuals such as bass and pike and carp and catfish. And down here, on these steel walls there's just no habitat. There's no place for them to live.

Roger Thoma:

This is a this is a large mouth bass. And it's fairly tolerant of pollution. This one has probably just been in here for a short while. If you remember what we caught upstream, this is the biggest we got here. So it's just a dwarf compared to what we are catching in the upper river. This stream was modified for, for shipping traffic. And so it's all vertical bulkhead. It's 27 plus feet deep and there's just no place for fish. There's a lot of water. But there's no place for fish.

SHIPPING IS THE PRIORITY

Narration:

That's because fish are not the priority in the lower Cuyahoga -- ships are. Tankers, container vessels, barges -- some as long as three football fields -- move through Cleveland every day. The Cuyahoga is a federal navigable waterway, and by law a shipping lane must be kept open.

Jim Weakley

The Cuyahoga River is really what makes transportation of bulk materials possible in northeast Ohio. Into the Cuyahoga River in the Cleveland area we'll move as many as fourteen to fifteen million tons a year. Raw materials that make manufacturing and construction possible in Northeast Ohio: iron ore for steel production, salt, cement, construction stone. Just one of our thousand-foot ships, moves the same amount of cargo as seven trains or seven hundred rail cars, or two thousand and eight hundred trucks.

Paul Alsenas:

How can we make this river, this navigation channel work for both the steel mills and the environment? The answer might be to design and create an ecological bulkhead.

ECOLOGICAL BULKHEADS

Narration:

Ecological bulkheads are exactly what is currently being tested on the Cuyahoga. These keep the shipping channel open, but also include pockets of natural habitat for plants and fish. It's a solution that might work almost anywhere -- a way to restore life to deadened waterways all over urban America.

Roger Thoma:

If you go to just about any other part of the country where there are boats, it will pretty much be like this. It will be vertical walls made out of cement, steel, wood. If we can restore habitat here and show how it works and lead the way, we can then apply what we've learned in the Cuyahoga to these other areas and we could have some phenomenal restoration of important fisheries in America that have been destroyed by modifications that have been made to allow shipping.

Narration:

A bulkhead shapes a river; but the ultimate human tool for controlling water is a dam. There are 75,000 dams in America today – each one is a symbol of the conflict between man and nature. Nothing kindles more argument between environmentalists and businessman than a dam on a river. Perhaps because there is no natural compromise: a dam exists or it does not.

DAMS ON THE CUYAHOGA

Bill Zawiski:

Dams really don't do anything good for the stream. They take a running, free flowing river and they make it something that isn't a river and they make it something that isn't a lake. And both of those are failures from an ecological standpoint.

Narration:

The Gorge Dam, 35 miles south of Cleveland, has not generated electricity for the past 50 years. The Ohio EPA would like to tear it down; but a hydropower company would like to bring it back on line. This move to reharness the dam has caused a conflict between the spiritual value of nature, and the literal value of energy.

David Sinclair:

It was built to make hydroelectric power. We'd like to put it back to work at a time when we need all the renewable energy resources that we can find in this country.

Steve Tuckerman:

The dam causes harm to the river. The impoundment behind the dam disturbs habitat in the stream and as a result the fish community behind the dam is not meeting the goals of the Clean Water Act. The portion of the river downstream is sediment starved. And therefore, you get excess erosion downstream. And finally, there is the physical structure of the dam itself and that's a barrier to fish migration.

David Sinclair

There are those who wish to have the dam taken down. That is no small undertaking. It's about 10,000 cubic yards of solid concrete. It's over 53 feet high and 400 feet across. And it's holding back a large pool of water and a lot of sediment. The dam creates about 2 ½ megawatts of electricity, about 11,000 megawatt hours a year. And that's enough for something like 1100 to 2000 homes.

Steve Tuckerman:

we don't believe that the hydroelectric power is really worth the environmental degradation that the dam causes. Dams are really temporary structures in the environment. They have not been there all that long. And since they've been placed by man they can be taken out by man. Even what seems to be completely permanent is really a temporary structure in the big scheme of things.

COMBINED SEWER OVERFLOWS

Narration:

What *is* permanent in the scheme of things is the conflict between Man and Nature.

WKYC news reporter:

In Cleveland police had to block off this stretch of W. 150th because rainwater's pooled at least three feet deep under train trestle.

Narration:

And the most emblematic part of that conflict, perhaps, is the everlasting flow of human waste. Few structures are more indispensable to a city than its sewers, and nothing tests a sewer system like rain.

David Beach:

Every time you make a parking lot or a rooftop or a road, all that's creating more impervious surface. The rain washes off and carries all the pollutants that are there. The water hits those hard impervious surfaces and just washes off very quickly into storm drains.

Narration:

The storm drains in Northeast Ohio are part of an antiquated sewer system that, at times, mixes rainwater with industrial waste and human waste. To keep these sewers from backing up during heavy storms, the system uses combined sewer overflow pipes that dump the untreated waste directly into the river.

Frank Greenland:

The primary problem caused by combined sewer overflows is bacteria. Since there's waste water mixed with storm water, waste water controls bacteria that can be a public health hazard. The combined sewer overflow problem is not unique to Cleveland. Boston, New York, Chicago, Milwaukee, Seattle, Portland, Oregon, all of those communities near large bodies of water that urbanized quickly had have combined sewers.

Narration:

Cleveland is working on the problem. The city is building several storage tunnels to handle overflow, including one at Mill Creek.

Frank Greenland

We're 275 feet down in the bottom of the Mill Creek tunnel. Mill Creek flows into the Cuyahoga, it's one of the numerous tribs to the Cuyahoga, each of the tribs have at least one combined sewer overflow. What we're in is really a 20 foot diameter storage tunnel. This tunnel holds 75 million gallons of overflow when full. So what's gonna happen? The overflows into the tunnel. They're held in our tunnel instead of going to Mill Creek, and the stored flow in this tunnel goes to our southerly treatment plant for full treatment. So that's a significant upgrade in terms of pollutant removals from Mill Creek and protection of the Cuyahoga watershed.

Narration:

But the upstream cities of Cuyahoga Falls and Akron have a similar problem, and they don't have the hundreds of millions of dollars it would take to fix their systems.

John P. Debo Jr.:

The city of Akron, like many cities in America, was engineered in such a way that during rain events sewage enters the Cuyahoga River untreated. The system is reaches its capacity, sewage flows directly into the Cuyahoga River. And then for about three days the Cuyahoga River ceases to be a fairly clean flowing stream and becomes a kind of sewer that empties sewage out of the city of Akron and into the city of Cleveland.

Elaine Marsh:

Think about what that means. In the twenty first century we are currently allowing untreated human and industrial waste to regularly flow into our rivers. If I paddle the Cuyahoga River downstream of Akron up to 3 days after rain and I fall in, I could get sick because there is so much bacteria from these combined sewers. If it takes the city of Akron 30 years to clean up the river I will be dead. I will never be able to enjoy the benefits of that 30 years. And I sure hope we can get it clean before that.

THE PARMA STORY

Narration:

The challenge, here and everywhere, is that the natural world is becoming smaller. The seemingly endless human sprawl means that communities all around the globe are paving over watersheds and filling in wetlands. And it was just this type of development that sparked an environmental battle in Parma, a suburb of Cleveland just 10 miles from the mouth of the Cuyahoga.

Dave Lincheck:

Parma's very much a blue collar, working class community over the years. The character of Parma dates back into the 1960s and 70s, when it was one of the fastest growing suburbs in the country. A lot of Polish and other ethnic families moving out of Cleveland to the suburbs, my family included. I'm Polish. And you know the stereotype of pirogues in Parma, that's me, I love pirogues.

David Vasarhelyi:

Parma is the largest suburb in greater Cleveland. It's also the seventh largest city in the state of Ohio on its own. Has a population of about 88,000 people,

Narration:

Parma sprawled out quickly, without much thought for green space; but there was one tiny undeveloped pocket, 350 acres of woods. Through the woods flowed the small stream called West Creek.

Neal Hess:

West Creek is a tributary to the Cuyahoga River. It's about a fourteen square mile watershed. All the water that flows into West Creek eventually makes its way into the Cuyahoga River and then on down into Lake Erie.

Dave Lincheck:

The development is so dense in some of the areas around West Creek, it's just road after road after road in a tight grid. The 350 acres were pretty much landlocked. And there was a sign up front that said "No trespassing" and most people drove by it and never knew it was here.

Narration:

But developers knew it was here. In the 1990s they teamed up with Parma's mayor to produce a development plan. But this did not make everyone in Parma happy.

Dave Lincheck:

The West Creek Preservation committee got started in 1997. There were a number of projects that were threatening the remaining open space around west creek.

David Vasarhelyi:

There was gonna be a golf course here and four hundred thousand square feet of retail and a housing complex, all of which would have added a lot more pollution to West Creek.

Narration: The committee started quietly; a small number of volunteers held meetings.

Dave Lincheck:

We started going door to door to collect signatures to support what we were doing. I'm not the type to go door-to-door. I'm not the type to get active politically. Going door to door and collecting signatures was very difficult for me.

David Vasarhelyi:

my secret weapon was I had a daughter that had just been born three months earlier. And I carried her in a backpack with me as I went. People will not close a door on a small baby and somebody selling clean water. People had a concern for not just West Creek but the natural environment that was left here in Parma.

Dave Lincheck:

People would start, you know, giving us their own stories. Yeah, I used to play back there in the woods and now they cut that down. Kids used to go down the street and play by the creek and now they can't get to the creek anymore. They would say, we just have too much asphalt and too much pollution. People do desire to have some open space near the areas they live. They just like to have some green space available in the community.

Narration:

For two years the volunteers fought city hall -- and developers -- to stop the golf course. They lost one ballot initiative, but promptly came back with another. This time, they won. The 350 acres were preserved. But now what?

Dave Lincheck:

People had the idea, let's just preserve it and leave it alone. We don't want to open it up as a park, because we don't want people destroying what's there. But the reality is if we didn't bring people down to use it, we wouldn't have the popular support we wouldn't have the base of volunteers. So we put some trails in, bring people down to see what we're trying to preserve.

Neal Hess:

Our volunteers range from retired school teachers to engineers to construction workers. Average citizens who've joined together to do really great things.

Neal Hess:

This area is one of the properties we have protected. There's a shopping center upstream, and over the years their carts have fallen in the creek, been washed down, and it's really created kind of a dam of shopping carts. We've been removing carts, we've removed about 30 of them a month ago, we're removing several dozen more today, and we'll keep at it until the area is fully restored. But as you can see, there's a lot of carts here, and getting them out is quite a job.

Narration:

Over ten years the West Creek Preservation Committee successfully campaigned for stream-protection laws in Parma, and began to work with groups in nearby towns. They have raised \$13 million dollars -- both to restore the original land along the creek, and to add new property to the reservation.

Neal Hess:

We know that we can never completely restore West Creek to the way it was back in the 1800s. But we can make it a lot better and we can improve the water quality. We can we can make it so that people want the stream to be a part of their lives.

CITIZEN GROUPS AND PROTECTION OF THE RIVER

Steve Litt:

You now have in northeast Ohio dozens of organizations that are committed to bringing back the river, taking back the river.

Women leading school trip.

Scratch your noses and get your hair out of the way now. Then once you get your hands dirty you want to keep your gloves off your face, ok? Because your gloves will be dirty.

Steve Litt:

This is not a top-down idea that came from the region's political leadership. It really is a grass-roots movement. It's an incredibly inspiring thing to see people driving a political process and essentially telling elected officials, you're going to be voted in and out of office on this.

Narration:

Citizen groups throughout the watershed are trying to clean up the river and its tributaries. The West Creek Preservation Committee is working to reclaim the confluence -- the point where West Creek empties into the Cuyahoga River.

David Vasarhelyi:

Right now that confluence is about 10 acres of asphalt parking lot and a 100,000 square foot warehouse. We are going to purchase the site and restore the creek to its original banks.

Dave Lincheck:

We're going to remove the building. We're going to remove the parking lot.

David Vaserhelyi:

And create about 7 acres of flood plain wetlands that will be the last filtration point for water that leaves West Creek and enters the Cuyahoga River. This is the same water that flows into Lake Erie and goes into ultimately what we drink.

CONCLUSION

David Beach:

Our bodies are made mostly of water, over seventy percent. The molecule of water that's in me today might be in you tomorrow. Maybe that's a scary thought. Sometimes I even tell my wife that as much as I love you, I probably have a more intimate relationship with Lake Erie because Lake Erie's watering every cell of my body.

Roger Thoma:

In the remaining part of my lifetime I believe with a sincere effort and without hang-ups, we can have this river restored to the point where there'll be walleye running up from Lake Erie to spawn in it, there'll be northern pike living in here. People will be down here sport fishing for large mouth bass.

Alex Bevan:

Well there's a red moon rising
over Cuyahoga River
roaring into Cleveland through the lake
There's an old barge winding
cross the Cuyahoga River
rolling into Cleveland through the lake.

Mark Winegardner:

For Clevelanders there's always going to be that sense that, yeah, sure but a few years later it'll fall apart again. We've seen it before. But no matter what happens the river itself is a sort of metaphorical heart of Cleveland. Having it clean, having it be healthy, having it be in no threat of being a dead or dying river is always going to be something on which this city can build.

Alex Bevan:

'cause the Cuyahoga River
goes smoking through my dreams

Sylvia Hood Washington:

The return of the Cuyahoga River to me is one of the most positive responses to the environmental concerns that were expressed right before it burned. There was a real concern that we were going to lose our cities and lose our habitats.

Alex Bevan:

You know the lord can make you tumble
the lord can make you turn.

Sylvia Hood Washington:

To turn that around, to make mistakes but then to come back and have vitality. It means there is a there is an ability to come back from our mistakes. And there is hope for our communities.

Alex Bevan:
Cleveland even now
I can remember.

Narration:

The Cuyahoga has made a remarkable comeback, and along the way it has taught us an enduring lesson: we cannot change the world in piecemeal fashion. The citizens of Cleveland, Akron, and Parma have to work together, just as the nations of the world must unite to reduce the harm that human beings do to their planet. We are the only species that can savage the environment – but we're the only one who can save it as well. The Cuyahoga was the poster child for the environmental movement for good reason; it was a drastic and classic case of pollution, and the damage sparked a dramatic effort at repair. The Cuyahoga's no longer on fire, but it can still light the way.

Alex Bevan:
Burn on big river, burn on
Burn on big rive, burn on

the lord can make you tumble
the lord can make you turn
the lord can make you overflow
he just can't make you burn

burn on big river, burn on
burn on big river, burn on.