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Gone Fishing

A slightly fictionalized account of one man's quest for an edible fish
by Tim Haas

It's always cooler up there in Wisconsin. The fish are always biting, and the scenery is soothing. So, instead of disco-ing down one Friday night, I went to bed early, got up a couple of hours before dawn, watered the plants, packed the Nash, and escaped my trials and tribulations. The only important decisions I faced were where to go and what to fish for once I got there.

It had been a few years since I made the trek to the pristine lakes and rivers of Wisconsin and their ravenous fin-flailing inhabitants. I followed Highway 32 along Lake Michigan past the twin rounded superstacks of the Port Washington Power Plant. With the edge of light just beginning to separate the lake and the sky, I noticed the absence of fishing boats in the harbor. Out pulling in whitefish and perch for sale to the world-famous Smith Brothers Fish Shanty located near here, no doubt.

Continuing north to the city of Sheboygan, I grabbed Highway 23 west and made a rendezvous with my old favorite fishing spot, the Mullet River, at Plymouth, Wisconsin, the Cheese Festival city.

Unpacked my rod, reel, tackle box, and bait, not forgetting my old Milwaukee Braves cap with trout flies feathering at jaunty angles, I stumbled down the banks of the Mullet where my eyes were confronted by an official-looking sign. It read: WARNING—Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources water quality sampling has identified PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) in fish in this area. Based on this information, the Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services recommends that the public not eat fish caught in the following waters until further notice:

Sheboygan River—From the Sheboygan Marsh Dam to the Coast Guard Station in Sheboygan.

Mullet River—From the lower mill pond dam, Plymouth, to the junction with the Sheboygan River.

Onion River—From the Waldo mill pond dam to the junction with the Sheboygan River in Sheboygan Falls.

(Signed) Arthony S. Earl

(Continued on page 9)

Secretary Department of Natural Resources
April 21, 1978

My favorite fishing spot was filled with inedibles!

But then I saw an old man leaning back against the DNR posting on the opposite shore and pulling in a big lunker. It was Ol' Gus. He'd been fishing these parts since the days of Cal Coolidge.

"Hey, Gus, you old trout-snagger, how's it going?" I said. "Looks like you got yourself quite a catch there."

Ol' Gus made a weak joke.
"Sonny," he said, "you
wouldn't want to touch these
fish with a ten-foot fork."

"That's right, whippersnapper," Gus replied. "But it sure would be nice if you could eat the dern things."

"You mean you don't . . ."

"That's right, sonny," he said. "You wouldn't want to touch these fish with a ten-foot fork."

After laughing at his weak joke, he continued. "Yep, since the PSBs took over I just catch'em, then let'em go. You don't know this about me, of course, but I know a bit about chemicals as well as fishing.

"PCBs are substances that have been widely used in industry from about the time I started fishing here in the early 1930s until now," he said. "Because of their electrical stability, they're used in transformers and capacitors; they serve as hydraulic and heat transfer fluids, as plasticizers and solvents in adhesives, and as sealants.

"Although PCBs are chemically inert, they dissolve inorganic solvents and adhere to smooth metal surfaces and to glass, preventing corrosion. PCBs are used to coat electric wires. Mixed with asphalt, they form a protective coating for lumber, metal, and concrete. They are found in paints, varnishes, natural and synthetic rubber, and floor tile, where they serve as an anti-oxidant. And they are added to printing ink and to brake linings. They are also one of the components in some carbonless reproducing paper. As you can see, PCBs are practically everywhere."

"Wow," I exclaimed. "You sure know your—ha, ha—PCBs."

"I should."

are suffering a higher-than-normal incidence of cancer, especially in the stomach and liver.

"Why it always takes a massive tragedy to prompt government and scientists of the world to address potential health hazards is still a mystery to the people who end up being the unwitting victims. I've always felt that we should use our scientific knowledge to improve our quality of life. Testing for potential dangerous effects on human and other life would seem to be logical. Yet after all the problems which have come to light recently with PCBs, PBBs, DDT . . . I could go on and on.

"Thousands of chemicals are introduced each year with either inadequate testing done or with some testing results suppressed in the name of confidentiality and competitive advantage. I fear we may have even more surprises of this nature in the future."

"That sounds terrible," I said. "But you're talking about big accidents. Is the problem here in Wisconsin really all that bad?"

Gus replied, "It's bad enough so that the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources issued a new, more inclusive warning this year, against eating PCB-contaminated fish. You'll notice that the 1978 fishing licence advices consumers of the big trout, carp, and salmon from Lake Michigan and Green Bay to limit their consumption of these fish to one-half pound per week. The same is true for catfish, carp, and white bass from the Mississippi River and Lake Pepin, all fish in the lower Fox River, bullheads and catfish in Green Bay, and now all fish right here on 129 miles of the Mullet, Onion, and Sheboygan Rivers.

"One-half pound of fish is not a very big meal. And—if you're less than six years old or a pregnant or nursing woman—it's recommended that you not eat the fish at all.

"Determining levels that can be considered safe isn't always easy or even possible," he added. "In Japan, severe cases of poisoning appear to have been induced by consumption of less than 700 milligrams of PCBs, and one person who developed symptoms had ingested only 500 mg of PCBs over a period of 50 days. The Food and Drug Administration has set a level of 5 parts per million for fish that can be sold in interstate commerce.

"Here in Wisconsin, the Department of Natural Resources has sampled only a small number of fish in upstream areas, concentrating its efforts on known problem areas such as Lake Michigan. So we may only have uncovered the tip of the iceberg of the PCB problem. For a long time, it was thought that fish in the Sheboygan River must be safe because Sheboygan Harbor showed levels of PCBs in the neighborhood of 7 ppm—significant, but not alarming. Then extremely high PCB concentrations of up to 750 ppm were discovered in the Sheboygan River basin. Improper disposal of PCB-containing equipment, or illegal dumping upstream, probably caused the problem. Whatever the reason, it must have been going on for a long time to reach these levels.

"Incidentally, neither the Wisconsin DNR nor the Wisconsin Department of Health issued any directives to area gynecologists to alert their patients in the area to have their breast milk tested for PCB contamination. Since the PCBs that an expectant mother consumes build up in the fatty tissue of her breast, the first few meals her infant receives could contain high concentrations of PCBs. Not a very good start in life, I'd say.

"I've been slowly poisoning myself all these years without even knowing it," he said. "And I'm just talking about PCBs.

"Fish in the Castle Rock Flowage of the Wisconsin River have shown mercury levels exceeding the .5 ppm tolerance levels set by the FDA. Canada allows mercury levels of only .2 ppm in its inland waterways.

"The Wisconsin DNR, after testing 459 miles of streams in Southeastern Wisconsin, revealed that only 8.5 miles flow consistently clean. And that's just the streams," he said. "Lakes and groundwater are also polluted.

"Every time it rains, millions of gallons of raw human and industrial wastes bypass Milwaukee's sewage treatment system and flow directly into Lake Michigan.

"Groundwater in Door County, the most popular vacation spot in Wisconsin, is dangerously polluted. Groundwater contamination is suspected in many other counties as well. Our trout depend on groundwater that charges our lakes and streams.

"Also we have a phosphate problem all over Wisconsin. The phosphates contribute to excessive

(Continued on page 12)

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algae growth. The premature aging and death of lower Lake Michigan and Lake Erie in Ohio are the most glaring examples of this condition.

"As you can see, we have some kind of mess here."

After digesting this information, I ventured, "Well, surely something should and must be done. But what?"

Gus replied, "First of all we should be aware of the problems and put pressure on the DNR to make sure that all PCB-containing materials end up in landfills specially designed to contain toxic wastes. Industries in Wisconsin should be held accountable for their PCB inventories so that we can eliminate illegal dumping. Also, sewage treatment plants should be upgraded to meet strict federal clean water standards, and industrial polluters should be ordered to pretreat their toxic wastes so that municipal sewage treatment plants can handle the other wastes effectively.

"All this is expensive. But what's the value of clean water to drink, fish in, and play in? How much revenue do resort owners and the state stand to lose when articles about the contamination of Wisconsin waters appear in major newspapers around the country? If I were a steady vacationer-fisherman and heard about all the pollution problems here, I might consider spending next summer in Canada or Oregon. Tourism is Wisconsin's largest industry."

I stood a while, watching Ol' Gus's worm drown. Finally, we traded goodbyes and I jumped in my car, heading back to Port Washington. My hunger pangs and I arrived at the Fish Shanty overlooking Lake Michigan. I sat down and asked if they had any Lake Michigan whitefish.

The waitress looked aghast and said, somewhat indignantly, "Of course not, sir. We serve only fish from clean waters. All our whitefish comes from Lake Superior. Haven't you heard about the PCB problem in Lake Michigan?"

I had heard enough. My appetite was gone. I excused myself and jumped into my car, wondering if I could stop at Burger King and still have time to make it to Butch McGuire's bar.

Magic Mountain Hits Peak In Energy Conservation

The glittering Christmas tree that used to light up the Sky Tower at Magic Mountain is gone.

The 384-foot "tree of lights," a landmark for residents, park visitors, freeway travelers and pilots, no longer brightens the Valencia sky because of the park's conservation program.

Not all of the lights are off. Some still remain for overall park lighting. In addition, Magic Mountain is required by the Federal Aviation Administration to maintain a warning beacon for aircraft.

But by turning off 2,400 bulbs and saving 3,000 watts, the park operators are saving energy . . . and money, about $30,000 a year.

In fact, Fritz von Coelln, manager of general services at Magic Mountain, estimates that the total energy savings now amount to about 165,000 kilowatt-hours a month, enough electricity to supply about 300 homes.

The challenge of cutting back on electricity use started when Les Mitchell, Southern California Edison's area energy services representative, met with von Coelln to determine how the park could contribute to the cause of energy conservation.

The first step was to establish an energy conservation/management team to go on reconnaissance throughout the park looking for possible savings.

Air conditioning was one of the first areas of energy use to be surveyed. Units had been running 24 hours a day, 12 months a year, although the park was open only on weekends from mid-September to late May. Today, the air conditioning is turned off four days a week, six months a year.

Also, thermostat settings were changed, from 65 degrees to 75 degrees year round.

Throughout the park, restaurants, landscaping, amusement rides, and building lights were either removed or lowered in wattage. This change involved approximately 20,000 bulbs with a watt load reduction of more than 200,000 watts.

For example, 400 light bulbs on the Great American Revolution loop ride were changed re-

(Continued on page 13)

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