

JAN 1976

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THE LAKE

"LAKE MICHIGAN WILL BE A SHINING EXAMPLE."

There's a chance that even the Lake Michigan beaches around Gary, Hammond, and Whiting, Indiana, will be swimmable by the year 2001.

The beaches in this basin of economic power have been closed for more than thirty-five years because of the quaint idea that dirt in the air and water mean food on the table. But the environmental crusaders of the 1970s have shaken apart a lot of those cozy canards we live by, calling for a new era in which the needs of "the good life" are balanced against the demands of the environment.

The fight to save Lake Michigan was helped by that and by something even more basic to human nature: the almost mystical attraction to water — flowing, rushing, splashing, pounding, or trickling. News that Lake Michigan was in danger of a premature death from pollution shook the people who live on its shores. Suddenly they remembered their childhoods, or maybe just a few years back, to when they could fish, swim, or boat in waters that had become filthy and disgusting.

"It's terrible. We live on a lake and can't use it," said Mrs. Robert Dedrick of Deerfield, back in the summer of 1970. Her anguish was an example of what people felt then.

Mrs. Dedrick was sitting on the sand at the Park Avenue Beach in Highland Park, one of a dozen beaches along the North Shore that were ordered closed in 1969 by the Lake County Department of Health. The lake's shore waters were contaminated with sewage from the North Shore Sanitary District from Highland Park to the Illinois-Wisconsin state line, a distance of about twenty-five miles. The beach had been a major part of the Dedrick family's summer recreation and entertainment.

But, last summer, all North Shore beaches were opened for swimming for the first time since 1969, because the water is getting cleaner.

People can relate to water. And, if there is one great legacy of the environmental crusade, it is the belief that people make a difference, that an aroused citizenry can get

what it wants if it is vocal and persistent enough.

The cynical reply to concern about water pollution in the late 1960s was, "People talk about pollution, but they don't do anything about it." But Lake Michigan in the year 2001 will be a shining example of the fact that as long as people keep talking about pollution, something will be done about it.

By then, environmentalists expect to be leading in planning the uses of natural resources. The time has come, they say, to stop counterpunching, to stop attacking decisions already made. Great Lakes environmentalists say they intend to take a commanding role in deciding how life in the year 2001 will be lived, based on how people want to live. The emphasis will be on open spaces, cleaner air and water, and lifestyles that offer choices.

In twenty-five years, the conflict between jobs and environmental protection will be a thing of the past. Many Americans will be employed in preserving the environment, or in taking advantage of it. Heavy manufacturing is expected to decline in a recycling society. Industry will become more service oriented. Population in the United States will be leveling off, and the emphasis on quality of life will deepen and broaden.

The costs of doing this are going to be fairly high. The National Commission on Water Quality estimates that every American will pay \$44 each year for the next eight years for cleaner waters, or \$97 to \$135 billion by 1983. But, while that total sounds like a lot, says a commission staff member, it's one-twelfth of what Americans spend on cars, one-sixth of our petroleum expenditures, and one-fourth of advertising costs.

And Americans are willing to pay the price, according to the National Wildlife Federation. "The American people recognize the importance of cleaning our polluted waters now and avoiding costly delays," says Thomas Kimball, executive vice president of the federation, the nation's largest conservation education organization. Kimball cites a 1975 public opinion poll showing that 60 percent of the American people are willing to pay higher prices to protect the environment, while 90 percent believe that a delay in pollution control will lead to higher cleanup costs in the long run.

Too often, says Robert Harris of the Environmental Defense Fund, pollution control costs are overestimated while the

benefits of a cleaner environment are underestimated. In fact, one view is that — while the dollar value of cleaner water will be equal to half the costs of achieving clean waterways, up to 1988 — after 1988, cleanup costs will drop while the financial rewards of cleaner water, such as its uses for recreation, will keep growing.

Recreation will be important in the energy-starved society envisioned by some forecasters. In the past, Illinoisans could drive to Wisconsin or Michigan for hunting, boating, or fishing. But energy shortages will force Illinoisans to look for entertainment in their back yard. We can expect that, by 2001, the shores of Lake Michigan will be zoned to protect it from development that might rob people of the chance to use the lake for recreation.

"The trends in Lake Michigan are toward better water," says James McDonald, the US Environmental Protection Agency's chief of enforcement. "In 1967, nobody talked about recycling steel mill wastes. That was a pipe dream. But here we are, in 1975, and giant industries are committed to it."

Even the Indiana Harbor canal in East Chicago, Indiana, long the champion of polluted Lake Michigan tributaries, is getting cleaner. Gone are the carpets of thick, black oil and grease that floated on the canal waters in 1967. Their absence is a sign of the improvements that will grow until the waters in Gary are swimmable in 2001.

But that doesn't mean all forms of water pollution are going to vanish. As the gross forms of water pollution disappear, more subtle forms, that were masked by the filth of the 1960s and before, are beginning to show up. Industrial poisons and chemicals are appearing in Lake Michigan drinking water in minute amounts. Scientists fear that some of these chemicals, if swallowed over a period of twenty or thirty years, might cause cancer. One industrial poison, PCB — short for polychlorinated biphenyls — has tainted Lake Michigan salmon and lake trout, making them unfit for human consumption.

Chances are that the problems of Lake Michigan water pollution won't be vanquished in the year 2001. They will just be different than they are in 1975.

— Casey Bukro

MONS 032900