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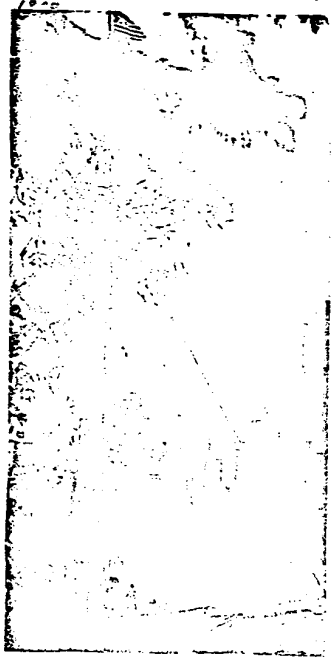

The sloop Clearwater rides on the not-so-clear waters of the Hudson off Fort Crailo, Rensselaer, with the Albany skyline in the background. (Staff photos by Skip Dickstein)

P is for Pete's; C is Clearwater; B is the Blues

By R. VICTOR STEWART

RENSSELAER— Folk singer and river crusader Pete Seeger isn't happy about having to change his tune.

Standing on the banks of the Hudson River in front of historic Fort Crailo Tuesday afternoon, he told briefly how just a few months ago he was watching the dirty river get cleaner and singing songs about how much fun it was to have such a resource in the backyard.

"I was saying, 'Hey, come on down, catch some fish, the river is really getting cleaner.'

"Then this thing about the PCBs (poly-chlorinated biphenyls) broke and that made me very sad," the tall, lean and bearded folk singer said.

Seeger and his household, the Hudson River sloop Clearwater, sailed into the Port of Albany Monday as part of a protest against PCBs, a chemical being dumped in the river and believed to be poisonous to humans.

It was in the early 1960s that Seeger was inspired to organize a committee to build a sloop and make the boat a symbol of days when the river was clean.

Seeger wrote a song called "Sailing Up My Dirty Stream" which outlined how pollution "starts high in mountains of the north" and was compounded downriver by the wastes from paper mills and "one million toilet chains."

Not long ago, the singer noticed that the river was getting cleaner and penned another song, "Sailin' Up, Sailin' Down," which preached a brighter picture.

His latest song is another sad tune advising listeners to "Throw away that shad net, junk that hook and line. There'll be no more Hudson fishing, not for a long long time."

Seeger's verses are poetic references to what he said is the fact that the PCBs not only have the tendency to stay in flesh but also continue to the river bottom and stay there, infecting young fish as well as adult fish.

Seeger said experiments show that monkeys fed fish with PCBs did not reproduce and that waterfowl as well as several land animals could be found with traces of PCBs in their livers.

Seeger said he and other environmentalists are determined to find a way to eliminate PCBs from the environment, as well as stop current dumping.

Seeger said the dangerous properties of PCBs were discovered in Sweden nine years ago and that Japan banned their use seven years ago when there was mass PCB poisoning.

PCBs are used as insulators for electrical components such as capacitors because they are extremely fireresistant.

Seeger insisted there are other materials available which would be less harmful and would probably do the same job.

In addition to Tuesday's riverside protest Seeger spent Monday visiting with some of the workers at General Electric's Fort Edward plant where the PCBs are allegedly being dumped in the river.

Seeger said, "I learned a lot from those workers. I found out that they hadn't been told anything about what they were working with. And no safety precautions were taken at all. The workers were eating their noon meal without washing their hands and dipping their hands into the liquids without wearing gloves."

He said he agreed with the workers who argued that 1,000 jobs would be lost if the plant was shut down. He added that he also agreed it would be unfair to shut one plant using PCBs without shutting the other 63 across the country.

"I think we reached some agreement with those workers. And they were suspicious of us at first," Seeger said.

Asked if he thought the banning of eating fish was actually a more severe step than needed, he replied that eating one fish probably wouldn't kill anyone, but the scientific data isn't that good.

He said he planned to destroy a freezer of Hudson River fish when he gets home.

Asked about his hopes for a clean river now that the experts say the PCBs can't be cleaned up, he replied: "Where there's life, there's always hope. But we're in for a long, long fight."



Pete Seeger sees the PCB blues for a group of curiosity-minded followers on the bank of the Hudson, whose pollution by PCB he laments. A few months ago he had some the praises of the river's cleanup.