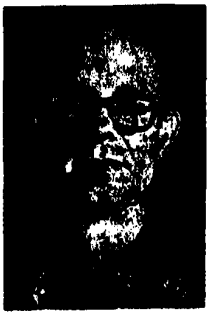
Fishermen aren't too happy about PCBs

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By LORRAINE VENTURA
and RONNY FRISHMAN
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Ted Thelsmeyer



Rufus Johnson



Roy Japp

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is part of a three-day series by Times intern Lorraine Ventura. This summer she spent many hours talking with local, state and federal officials about PCBs, a suspected carcinogen. The articles include a detailed description of the chemical, test results taken on area lake trout and PCBs' potential as a health hazard.

"Well, I'll tell you the truth, right now you're scaring the hell out of me," Rufus Johnson told a Times reporter recently. The topic was PCBs.

"I love fishing," said Johnson as he sat smoking a cigar in his 29 Argyle St. home. He fishes three times a week, has been fishing on Seneca Lake for nine years and started fishing 15 years ago. His favorite Seneca Lake fish is blue gill, a bottom feeding fish, and he said he could eat fish three times a day, every day.

"I don't do a lot of fishing right now," joked the Dept of Transportation employe, "but when I retire..."

Although the veteran fishermen can tell you a lot about fishing and Seneca Lake, he had never heard of PCBs.

"I think this is a bad thing," Johnson said after being told by the reporter that PCBs have been measured in small amounts in Seneca Lake trout and was told they accumulate in fish and humans.

"A lot of people don't know anything about PCBs. It's going to scare a lot of people in this area once they find out," he said, despite being reassured that federal and state agencies don't feel the amounts present in Seneca Lake fish are a health hazard.

"I think this lake, as far as I'm concerned, is one of the best lakes in the area. I love this lake. To me, Seneca Lake has some of the best fishing in the world," said Johnson.

"What bothers me right now is what it's going to be like 20 years from now. We're messing ourselves up in this country every day."

Johnson's initial reaction to PCBs: "I don't want to fish like I used to—right now — just from what (the reporter) is telling me. No one wants to bring anything home that may be harmful to themselves or their family.

"There's got to be some way we can straighten this thing out. They can go to the moon, I don't see why they can't do something about this and keep good fishing in the Finger Lakes area."

John E. (Ted) Thiesmeyer, an English professor-administrator at Hobart and William Smith Colleges and an "ardent fisherman," was more familiar with PCBs — and not at all happy to hear they're found in Seneca Lake fish.

"What can I say except that I'm shocked and horrified," he exclaimed. ". . . It's frightening and it suggests that there's a source (of the chemical) in the watershed."

Thiesmeyer, who goes out angling about 30-40 times a year, does most of his fishing for trout, but he fishes *for bass and perch when they're in* season as well. He said he generally filets the fish for eating — supposedly the safest way to prepare fish — but often broils and bakes trout without skinning, which could transmit the chemical more easily.

Referring to the affect of the chemical's presence in Seneca Lake fish, Thiesmeyer noted: "I'd want to know a little bit more about the study and the levels found, but I think if we (he and his family) found out it was at dangerous levels, that would definitely cut down on our fishing for trout.

"And that would be a shame," he added, "because that's one of the advantages of living here."

Thiesmeyer may not be alone in his reaction to the PCB findings, but Roy Japp, owner of Roy's Marina on W. Lake Rd., doesn't regard it as a problem worth worrying about.

"Of course everybody believes what they read,'I he agreed "but if there were any real danger the Dept. of Environmental Conservation (DEC) would take steps to protect the people in the Finger Lakes as *they did in the Great Lakes.*"

He referred to a water study conducted last year by the DEC that showed the lakes are clearing up. "And the lack of weeds has proven this," he added.

Japp noted that use of chemicals and pollutants is highly restricted in farms and vineyards, and he re-emphasized that if the PCBs proved a real hazard, "they wouldn't keep re-stocking fish.

"If it were (dangerous), people in my line would have heard about it a long time ago," he said.

Japp is afraid, however, that the "power of the press" could scare people away from the lakes, and even hurt the fishing and recreation business. But generally, he believes, "you're going to have people fishing and eating the fish as long as there are fish around."

He made one final point: "If it were legal to sell Seneca Lake trout, you'd be able to sell every last one." TOMORROW: Fish preparation can decrease PCB level.

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