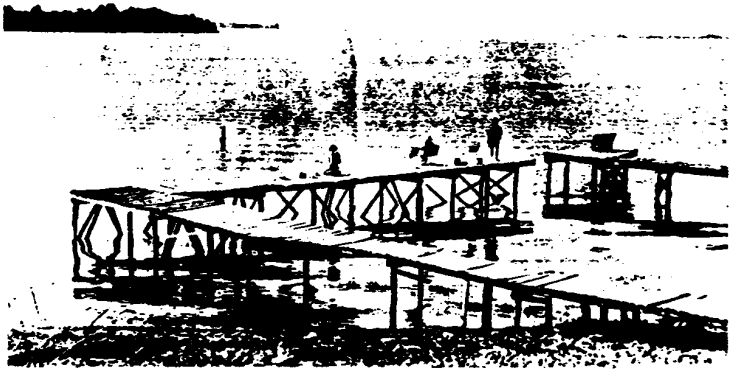




WEISS LAKE CATCH — Thad Hunt of Ringgold, Ga., Stoop Williams of Cedar Bluff and Doug Lunsford of Chattanooga, Tenn., examine a catch of fish from Weiss Lake. In the picture at right above, others fish off the dock in the Pruett's Fish Camp area of Weiss Lake.

ANNISTON, ALA.
STAR
D 24,000

APR 2 1978

MONS 000866

Fishermen return to Weiss but 'scare' memories linger

By DENNIS LOVE
Star Staff Writer

CENTRE — A drive down Cherokee County Road 22 to sprawling Weiss Lake near Centre offers nothing particularly revealing other than what appears to be a typical midweek scene in fishing country.

A conglomeration of marinas, bait shops and convenience stores dot the shoreline; a few roadside fishermen drop their lines, shooting an every-now-and-then glance at a boat rig clattering down the highway behind a car — in short, a seemingly ample amount of activity for a weekday.

But looks can be deceiving. Just ask H.W. "Rosie" Smith.

Smith, 63, whose pink complexion probably gives him his nickname, estimates his combination convenience store and bait and tackle shop has lost $28,000 to $30,000 since September, 1976. It was then the "scare" — as people around Weiss Lake call it — began.

THE ALARM sounded when the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) discovered levels of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) in Weiss fish to be higher than standards allowed by the federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA). According to EPA, PCBs are chemically related to DDT, and have been known to cause cancer in rats during laboratory testing.

Investigating environmentalists traced the PCBs to a General Electric (GE) plant on the Coosa River near Rome, Ga., upstream from Weiss Lake. Georgia officials say the PCBs, a lubricant used by the plant in insulating its products, was being dumped into the Coosa from which Weiss Lake feeds.

A court order prohibited GE from dumping PCBs into the Coosa about a year ago, but the aftereffects of the affair linger. Commercial fishing from the Coosa below Rome remains banned in Georgia, and while no mandatory restraints have been placed on Alabama fishermen, many Weiss Lake merchants like Smith say the "bad publicity" has damaged their businesses severely.



W.H. 'Rosie' Smith and Charles Dodd

...both live and fish at Weiss Lake

SO SEVERELY, in fact, Smith and several other Cherokee countians last year filed a gigantic class-action lawsuit against GE in federal court, seeking $1 billion in damages. Also named as a defendant was Monsanto Corp., which manufactured and sold the PCBs to GE.

In March, 1977, the State of Alabama became a party to the suit and asked for an additional $1 million in damages from GE and Monsanto, plus $100,000 in punitive damages.

The suit — not yet in the courtroom — is closely allied with a similar action filed in Georgia by residents there, which asks for another $500 million from the defendants. That suit also has not reached the trial stage.

"THE SCARE nearly killed us last year," says Smith, fumbling in a shirt pocket for another of his ever-constant Camels. "Lots of Georgia people and black people haven't come back, and they used to be in here like flies, just all over the place.

"It'll be two years ago next month that I bought this place, and we had a wonderful first year, lots of business. Then in September (1976), when the scare came, it nose-dived and it just has not come back," he says, punctuating the last phrase with a rat-a-tat-tat rap on a counter top.

"The fish are fine here," he went on. "I'm still eating them and so are plenty of other people — there's no more wrong with them than there was six, eight years ago."

Both Alabama and Georgia officials have conducted tests along the Coosa to determine exactly what PCB levels are contained in affected fish. Jim Williford, director of the Alabama Water Improvement Commission's enforcement division, says his crew will begin more tests in Weiss Lake this month.

WILLIFORD SAID tests last fall showed PCB levels in game fish from the lake — such as bass, crappie and blue gill — were generally the same as or less than the FDA limit of five parts per million. Bottom-feeding commercial fish — such as catfish, buffalo and carp — generally showed PCB levels to be the same as or greater than FDA limits.

"We really haven't noticed much change from that," Williford said last week. "We felt like all along any change would be gradual, given the nature of the PCBs." He said winter rains and the subsequent movement of water may result in different readings this spring from sample fish. Should significant changes in PCB levels be detected, additional testing would be ordered to verify the findings, Williford said.

Despite EPA warnings about PCB-infected fish — especially catfish — Alabama officials, such as State Health Officer Dr. Ira Myers, have maintained there is not sufficient evidence to warrant fishing bans like those imposed on Georgia's side of the Coosa.

"THERE IS a remote possibility our ban may be lifted after testing this spring, but I'll be personally surprised if that happens," says David Crankshaw, a spokesman for the Georgia Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. "It (PCB) is a very persistent compound, and it stays around for a long time. And I don't think any contamination stops when it reaches the Alabama state line."

Meanwhile, as health officials debate the degree of danger, if any, involved with the PCB affair, the Alabama lawsuit against GE and Monsanto inches its way toward court.

GE attorneys have challenged the class-action status of the suit, and presently are sifting through plaintiffs' tax returns. U.S. District Judge James H. Hancock has stayed all court proceedings until attorneys are ready to argue the merits of the class action, according to court officials in Birmingham. "The entire case could take years," a court clerk close to the proceedings said last week.

"WE JUST WANT our people to come back," says Smith. "That's the best damn crappie lake in the nation out there, with good fish on it. I really don't think any court would award the kind of money we're asking, but I do think we deserve some compensation — a lot of merchants are starving to death out here."

Not all Weiss Lake businesses report flagging sales. John Horton, who owns a store down the road from Smith, says he "couldn't be happier with business so far this spring. I really haven't heard anybody talking about it (PCBs)."

Similarly inclined is Stump Williams of Cedar Bluff, who operates Cherokee Campsites, a marina and camping site on Weiss. Williams, like Horton, is not a party to the suit. "The scare — I wouldn't want to say anything about it," Williams says. "Business has started off good this year, and we're hoping it'll stay that way. GE corrected their end of it — that satisfies me well enough."

And, apparently, it will take more than a PCB "scare" to discourage many ardent fishermen and women.

Mrs. Gladys Akins and her husband, P.N., of Bowdon, Ga., were fishing on the lake last week and said they weren't worried about the controversy.

"People over where we live were concerned last year, but this year we haven't heard anything about it," says Mrs. Akins. "We like this lake here because it's clean. They dumped some stuff in it, but it's clean. Besides they can find cancer in just about anything these days."