

The Comeback of the Crooked River April 2008

It is exquisite irony that the 1969 Cuyahoga River fire that kick-started the U.S. environmental movement was far from being the first fire on that waterway, and for that matter, wasn't even especially notable. By prior standards, it was minor. In fact, the flames had been put out by the time reporters arrived, so the picture that became synonymous with environmental abuse doesn't even depict that fire. It was a file photo from a Cuyahoga blaze in 1952.

The Cuyahoga's Checkered Past

The Cuyahoga River is located in northeast Ohio. It begins its 100-mile journey in Geauga County, and then flows south to Cuyahoga Falls where it turns sharply north until it empties into Lake Erie. The river drains 813 square miles of land in portions of six counties.

Native Americans settled along the aptly named 100-mile "Crooked River" around 200 B.C. Europeans arrived in the late 1600s, and by the late 1700s, the river was considered the western edge of civilization.

The end of the War of 1812 also spelled the end for Native Americans, who were displaced by western settlers and the new industrial frontier. The beautiful Cuyahoga, which had provided life and livelihood to so many for more than a thousand years, evolved into an industrial hub with uncontrolled and unregulated dumping of raw sewage and industrial offal from ship building, oil refineries, tire manufacturing, grain mills and steel mills. Incredibly, the resulting river muck was a source of pride to the community. A dirty river was a sign of prosperity.

A Hundred Years of Flames

Although the 1969 fire got national press, it was barely a blip locally. That's because the Cuyahoga had been catching fire for a hundred years, the first time recorded in 1868. The two "big ones" occurred in 1936, when a spark from a blowtorch ignited floating debris and oil, and the second in 1952 (pictured above), when flames spread to a shipyard, killing seven and causing \$1.5 million in damage. By contrast, the 1969 fire, probably sparked by a passing train, was extinguished in 20 minutes and caused just \$50,000 in damage to a couple of railroad bridges.

Environmental consciousness was finally awakening, and when Time magazine ran a scathing article about the fire a month later, the Cuyahoga instantly became the poster child for a century of environmental abuse throughout the land. Within a year, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency had been created, and by 1972, the groundbreaking federal Clean Water Act had been passed and Ohio EPA established.



Ohio EPA employee Steve Tuckerman navigates along the river with the Florentine Films crew in 2003.



Fire on the Cuyahoga...in 1952
Source Credit: United Press International

A Story Worth Telling

Enter Florentine Films. The company has been making documentary films since 1978, and knew that the Cuyahoga story needed to be told. Producer Lawrence Hott first contacted Steve Tuckerman in Ohio EPA's Northeast District Office in 2003 to learn more, and to find out how the river had fared in the years since the infamous 1969 fire.

So Steve, along with Division of Surface Water co-worker Bill Zawiski and former employee Roger Thoma, let the film crew join them at a "fish shocking" in the Upper Cuyahoga in Geauga County's Russell Park. Fish shocking, or electrofishing, is a method of sorting and inspecting fish populations by applying a pulsed DC current to the water, which temporarily immobilizes the fish, who float to the surface to be netted. Unfortunately, the film's funding ran dry shortly afterward, and the project was shelved.

Hott didn't forget about it, though, and decided to finish the project with the remaining funds from Cleveland's PBS affiliate WVIZ. The scene this time was the Lower Cuyahoga's navigation channel in Cleveland, where they used fish shocking

again to compare the results from the relatively unimpacted Upper Cuyahoga to “the environmental insults from our use of the river at the end of the Cuyahoga’s journey,” said Tuckerman. Zawiski and Thoma again lent their expertise, with Ohio EPA Division of Surface Water employee Marc Smith and intern Rachel Secrest offering their assistance, too. [Click here to see a short clip of the shoot](#), filmed by Mike Settles, Ohio EPA’s media coordinator for northeast Ohio.



Electrofishing on the Cuyahoga River.

The one-hour program, *The Return of the Cuyahoga*, completed production in 2007, and in celebration of Earth Day will premiere on PBS stations across the nation on Friday, April 18, 2008. In Cleveland, it will air at 9 p.m. Eastern April 22 on WVIZ. [Check your local PBS listings to see when it is being aired in your community.](#) More information about the film, including repeat broadcast dates and times, can be found [on WVIZ’s Web site.](#)

The River Today

Tuckerman, who has been with Ohio EPA for 29 years, has been privileged to not only observe the Cuyahoga’s progress, but also to contribute to it. “When I started working at Ohio EPA, there were no fish in the Cuyahoga from Akron to the mouth, about 40 miles away. I never dreamed how far the river would come as a result of everyone’s efforts. Northern pike, walleye, smallmouth bass and hogsuckers are all found there now,” he said.

Just as the Cuyahoga River was a gauge for U.S. environmental health nearly 40 years ago, it serves the same role today. As the Cuyahoga goes, so goes the rest of the country. Vast, almost unimaginable improvements have been made since 1969, but it is not time to rest. Ohio EPA continues to monitor and guide water quality improvement efforts across the state while providing the support needed to build businesses and encourage smart growth of our communities.



Today, the city of Cleveland and numerous industries coexist with the Cuyahoga and take pride in the river's designation as an [American Heritage River](#).