



# The Cuyahoga River Fire

by Nicky Barna, as told to Peter Jedick

June 22, 1969

After an oil slick caught fire on the Cuyahoga River between the Lorain-Carnegie and Innerbelt bridges in 1969, the whole country laughed at Cleveland, then passed the Clean Water Act. Lt. Nicky Barna, 80, who retired from the Cleveland Fire Department in 1983, recalls fighting the fire.

I was working on Rescue Squad One the day of the Cuyahoga River fire. We ran out of Fire Station 28, which is on the east end of the Lorain-Carnegie Bridge — that's where the Fire Museum is now. We went down the hill with Engine 28, which also ran out of our station.

I don't remember it as that big of a fire, just an oil slick on the east side of the river. The only reason it was a problem was that it was under a railroad trestle. But we got there quick and put it out before it did much damage.

One thing that sticks out in my mind is that it was hot enough to pick up a big sheet of tin metal lying on the bank and toss it up in the air.

I always thought the whole thing was highly exaggerated by the newspapers. Cleveland was a laughingstock back then. The story went national and it just gave them more fodder to knock us. It was just an oil slick, but they made it sound like the whole river was on fire.

The river was filthy. Later on I worked on the fireboat, and companies along the river would call us to break up the big oil slicks filled with lumber and railroad ties.

I was the pilot, and we'd work three or four hours breaking up the slicks. We would hit them with our two big deck guns. But if the wind or current was against us, it was a waste of time.

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They would just re-form a few hours later. The river was so dirty it wouldn't even freeze in the winter.

*Jedick, a free-lance writer and lieutenant with the Cleveland Fire Department, was working on the Norfolk and Western Railroad on June 23, 1969. His foreman told him they'd have to repair a trestle "because the river caught on fire and damaged it." Jedick thought he was kidding.*

**The Line:** Nothing says notorious like commemorative beach party. The Burning River Festival, held on Whiskey Island Aug. 12, shows the river fire remains a cornerstone of our peculiar self-image.

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### **Myth-Busters**

**The famous photo often identified as the 1969 river fire is of a much larger 1952 river blaze.**

The notorious June 1969 fire on the Cuyahoga River was not as terrible as its legend. By the time newspaper photographers reached the scene, firefighters had already extinguished the blaze. When *Time* described the fire to a national audience that August, it ran an archival photo of a much worse fire on the Cuyahoga from 1952. Since then, that photo has been often misidentified as the 1969 blaze.

“Compared to the 1952 inferno, the 1969 fire was nothing special, a freak accident that merited little local concern, but sparked national attention because of increased environmental consciousness throughout the country,” wrote Jonathan Adler, an environmental law professor at Case, in his 2002 paper “Fables of the Cuyahoga.”

The fire made it seem that Cleveland had abandoned its river, but it actually happened just as the city was trying to improve the Cuyahoga, with little federal or state help. City leaders had formed a task force to fight oil pollution in the river in early 1969, and in Nov 1968, city voters had approved a \$100 million bond issue for river and lake cleanup.