

MISTER BUFFALO RIVER



Stanley Spisiak on the bank of the Buffalo River, 1965
SPISIAK FAMILY COLLECTION

THE ENVIRONMENTAL ADVOCACY OF STAN SPISIAK

by John Zach

Before Air Force One touched down at Greater Buffalo International Airport on August 19, 1966, hundreds of people had already assembled in front of City Hall at Niagara Square. As a motorcade made its way to downtown Buffalo, a sizable gathering numbering in the thousands was expecting President Lyndon B. Johnson to promote the vision he adopted as president, urging the country “to build a great society, a place where the meaning of a man’s life matches the marvels of man’s labor.”

Conservation, saving and preserving our environment, was a centerpiece of LBJ’s Great Society.

Meanwhile, Stanley “Stan” P. Spisiak, a somewhat obscure East Side jewelry store owner, was ready to begin the role he would play during the president’s visit. In fact, a meeting between the jeweler and the chief executive had already been arranged by none other than the president’s wife, “Lady Bird” Johnson. Decades had passed since Spisiak began his crusade against water pollution. Well known to many Buffalonians, he proudly wore the monikers *Mister Conservation* and *Mister Buffalo River*. That said, he was not without critics, adversaries and antagonists – even some who allegedly threatened his life. Now he would be surrounded by the people of influence he had spent nearly 40 years trying to win over. What he managed to accomplish that summer day in 1966 was nothing short of heroic. Getting there was a culmination of rare courage and determination.



Emily and Stan Spisiak,
wedding portrait, May 2, 1936
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Born in 1916, Spisiak's youth was marked by all-too-frequent circumstances of hopelessness that took aim at crippling his spirit. One of 16 children, most of whom were born and had died in Europe, he became an orphan at the age of 16 when his mother died barely a month after he lost two brothers. As the Great Depression was tightening its grip on America, when other teens his age were enrolled in schools or looking for adventure, he had no permanent home and little money. He became a hardened veteran of the streets, canvassing neighborhoods to sell light bulbs, walking to save streetcar fare, always on the lookout for cardboard to stuff into his shoes to act as a cushion. When he finally landed a full-time job at a downtown clothier, it meant a paycheck he could rely on at eight dollars a week. He existed on 10 cents lunches and often made his own tomato soup from catsup and hot water. He lost weight because of poor nutrition, but never lost his drive to press onward. In 1933, he did a stint with the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), during which his latent interest in conservation evolved into a leadership position that placed him in charge of 125 recruits assigned to Letchworth State Park. The CCC was a government-sponsored work relief program that gave millions of young, unmarried men jobs on environmental projects during the Depression. Spisiak believed that the CCC probably saved his life.

The job that set fire to Spisiak's imagination and inspired his strong conviction to open his own business came when he was recommended for a position at the Buffalo Museum of Science. His assignment to the mineralogy department, cataloging the museum's collection, led to a lifelong interest in minerals that glistened – gems. Due to budget

cuts, the job at the museum was short-lived. This latest hurdle did not deter him from marrying Emily Szynski in May 1936, however, two weeks after his position was eliminated. Following a one-day honeymoon in Niagara Falls, the couple returned home with a plan.

With \$75 in hand, he set about house-to-house canvassing, buying gold, silver, other precious metals and stones – items people were eager to sell in exchange for money to buy food and pay bills. Spisiak opened his East Buffalo jewelry store on Clinton Street, in the city's Kaisertown neighborhood, in 1939. While he realized that the road to prosperity would be formidable and not without challenges, the Nazi invasion of Poland dominated the headlines on the day he chose to go

into business. A new store that sold flashy baubles was hardly newsworthy as World War II was breaking out. The setback was another in a litany of personal hurdles that Spisiak managed to overcome. During this unstable period, Emily gave birth to their only child, Jon Stanley. After two years, Spisiak's Jewelry moved to a new, more visible location at 1865 Clinton Street, less than 2 blocks away from its original spot. Here it successfully remained in operation for nearly 40 years. But ultimate success and satisfaction for Stanley Peter Spisiak would lie not as a purveyor of jewelry, but with an avocation directly associated with his days with the CCC and his interest in conservation.

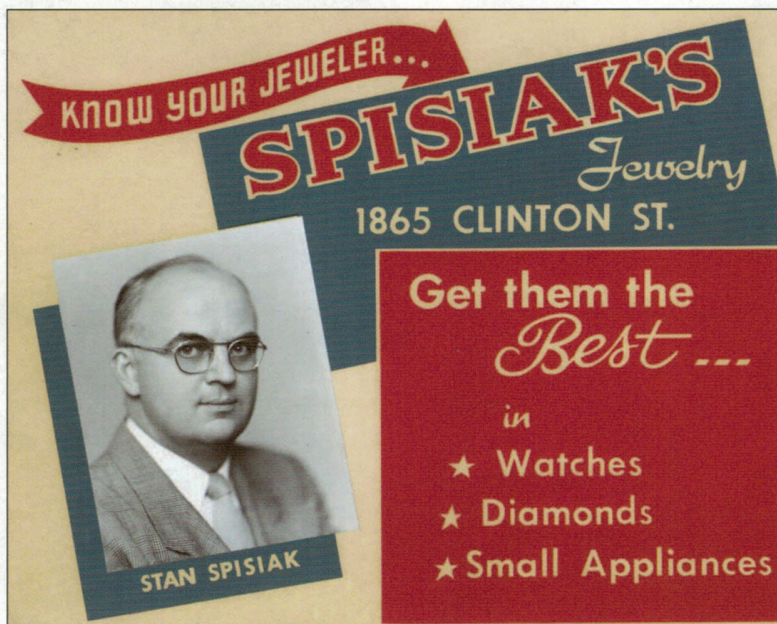
The Environmental Cost of Modernization

Spisiak often claimed, "I'm a conservationist at heart – a jeweler by necessity." He soon became a voice to be reckoned with on matters regarding the environment. At first, he spoke to the state government on behalf of area rod and gun clubs, protesting increases in the cost of fishing and hunting licenses.

In the 1940s, he organized a fox hunt in Western New York to help eradicate the spread of rabies. He also began to notice the loss of fish in area waterways due to discharges from industries and municipalities. While raw sewage discharges into waterways such as the Buffalo River contributed to pollution, the real culprits – heavy industry executives – took cover, out of sight, in their corporate offices under the banner of creating jobs and forging new and modern technology

to develop products needed in America and around the world. Spisiak, whether he realized it or not, had become the area's de facto defender of the environment.

It wasn't long before Stan became an unlikely household name in Buffalo. He was rarely seen in public without a suit, his trademark hat, adorned with an artificial trout fly lure made with colorful feathers, a bow tie and always-shined shoes. Unconcerned about getting his shoes muddied, his suit soiled or hands dirtied, Spisiak sometimes spent hours along the shores of the deteriorating Buffalo River, watching and bringing attention to the oil and sludge residue that was building to unspeakable levels. He often took risks, spending nights along the industry-lined banks of the river all the while



Promotional ad for Spisiak's Jewelry, 1950s

SPISIAK FAMILY COLLECTION



Stanley Spisiak, 1960s, with a copy of the oil-soaked *Courier-Express* at the Buffalo River
PAUL J. PASQUARELLO PHOTOGRAPH, *COURIER-EXPRESS*

capturing grainy video of toxic waste being dumped into the vulnerable waterway. The *Courier-Express* and *Buffalo Evening News* started reporting regularly on his battles for wildlife and forest preservation.

Until the early 1950s, little was being reported by local media on the growing environmental problem that could no longer be ignored. Like most people of the era, Buffalonians were distracted by the futuristic products manufactured by industries that were located along their meandering waterway. Those industries produced the iconic blue color that became

the trademark for denim jeans, dyes that brought color to newspapers and magazines and steel that was used to make automobiles and home appliances. Spisiak began delivering riveting indictments against such industries, along with municipalities that were polluting the Buffalo River and Lake Erie. They were dumping toxic materials that were killing fish and wildlife in staggering numbers. Despite Spisiak's cry that the public's health was also at stake, few people listened.

*I'm a conservationist at heart –
a jeweler by necessity.*

Stan harbored an exceptional and unyielding hatred for Socony-Vacuum, the oil refinery that would eventually become Exxon-Mobil. He once told an associate that, "before there was a big market for gasoline, [the oil refiner] would dump it in the [Buffalo] river as a by-product of refining oil." He was collecting evidence that in the next two decades would have polluters running for cover.

In 1953, Spisiak attended a hearing at the Buffalo Museum of Science purported to be about water pollution. He was startled to see 250 people in the auditorium. He later noted that 247 of them represented, were affiliated with or were employed by the industries that were the alleged sources of the Buffalo River pollution. Admittedly overwhelmed by the prospect of debating his antagonists, he waited until all speakers had delivered what he described as, "their propaganda," and told the



Spisiak bumper sticker calling attention to water pollution

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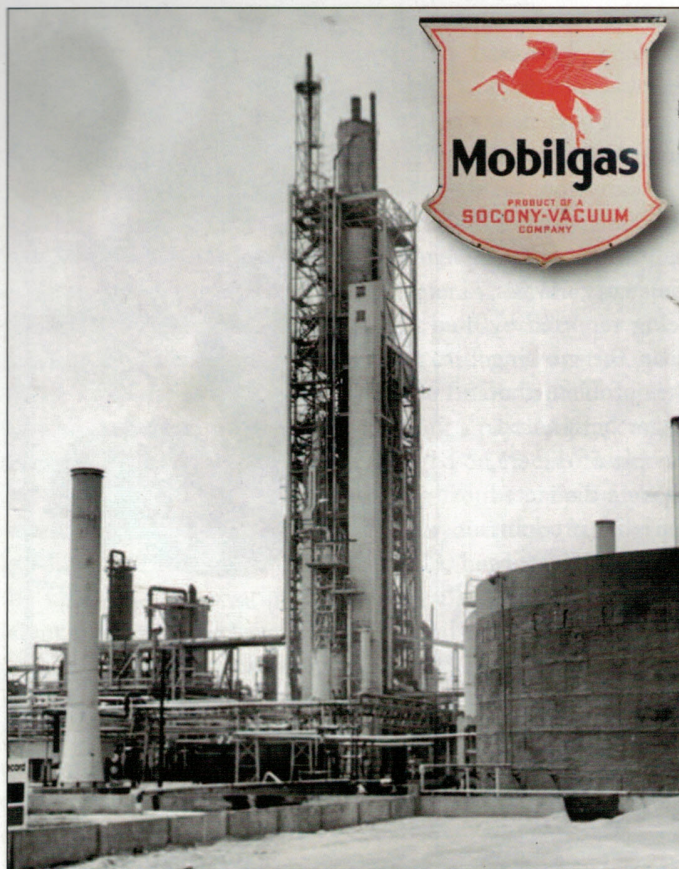
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Infamous Buffalo River polluter, Socony-Vacuum (Mobil Oil) refinery tower in the Seneca-Elk Street District. The tower was eventually dismantled (1980s). It routinely spewed black smoke over the East Side, 7-days a week.

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PHOTO – SPISIAK FAMILY COLLECTION

meeting's chairman that further study was needed and that the law provided for further hearings. He was granted a stay and the board agreed to conduct its next meeting during the evening, giving more people an opportunity to attend and be heard. Spisiak said he was aware that many of the speakers at the morning session he attended, "knew they were lying." He noted one speaker looked at him directly and declared, "The people should be grateful to the industries in the Buffalo River area, particularly for the fact that there are no diseases that could live in that water because of the fact that the unselective [*sic*] types of antibiotic material discharged had a preferable and desirable effect upon the diseases and germs that would otherwise be present." Spisiak was stunned by the preposterous statement, at first thinking it might have been a hideous wisecrack. But the speaker, he said, was serious. In one sense, the speaker was right – nothing could possibly live in the filthy, polluted Buffalo River – not even disease.

Environmental Allies

By the 1960s, the East Side jeweler-turned-environmentalist finally found a political ally in the form of the newly elected U.S. Senator from New York, Robert F. Kennedy, who expressed a willingness to listen to his messages about water



Stanley Spisiak (center), Sen. Robert Kennedy (top) and Rep. Richard (Max) McCarthy touring the polluted Buffalo River, 1965
SPISIAK FAMILY COLLECTION

pollution. Once Spisiak was satisfied that Kennedy was sincere, the freshman senator guided him through the maze of Beltway political protocol. Kennedy assigned a member of his office staff, Mary Jo Kopechne, to assist Spisiak in getting a hearing before the House Subcommittee on Natural Resources and Power. It was before that subcommittee, on July 22, 1966, that the *Buffalonian* declared, "In my opinion, there is no longer any doubt about man's capability of destroying this world.... Still more important is whether he can save it, save it from a slower but more certain end toward which he is already drifting at an ever-increasing rate – this mainly through the depletion and destruction of the world's limited supply of potable water."

Less than a month after Spisiak delivered his eye-opening remarks to the House subcommittee, the President of the United States was in Buffalo to witness the scourge of the Buffalo River water pollution for himself. How the chief executive got here is testimony to Spisiak's charm and power of persuasion. While attending a ceremony in Washington to receive a national honor as a water pollution fighter, Stan was seated next to the first lady, "Lady Bird" Johnson, where he had her undivided attention. Mrs. Johnson was said to have been so impressed with his concerns for the environment that she convinced her husband to consider a visit to Buffalo.

Following his Niagara Square appearance, President Johnson was off to the waterfront to board the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter *Ojibwa*, accompanied by his wife, Governor



Spisiak directing the attention of the president and first lady to the pollution in Buffalo Harbor, 1966. SPIIAK FAMILY COLLECTION

Nelson Rockefeller, local members of Congress and Buffalo Mayor Frank Sedita. While the group toured the harbor, dead fish were noticed floating by, dramatizing the points about which the Buffalo environmentalist had been so passionate. That's when Spisiak placed before the president and first lady a bucket of black, pasty sludge scooped earlier from the Buffalo River.

As outlined in the November 4, 1974, issue of *Sports Illustrated*, Spisiak handed a long-handled spoon to the president. "LBJ stirred the (muck in the) bucket. Everyone got a whiff."

Spisiak: They're dumping 175,000 cubic yards of this slop right out in the lake every year from the Buffalo River. They're dumping 4.5 million cubic yards every year from 15 (Lake Erie) ports.

LBJ: Who's they?

Spisiak: The U.S. Corps of Engineers.

LBJ: Why, those bastards!

Lady Bird: Oh, Lyndon, we mustn't let this continue.

LBJ: Don't worry, I'll take care of it.

Testifying before a congressional subcommittee that summer about the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' dumping of toxic material, Spisiak convinced the president to act. In the fall of 1966, LBJ issued an executive order, "decreeing that henceforth spoil [dredged sludge] was no longer to be dumped in the open lake, but to be placed in diked impoundments."

Life is all about finding people who
are your kind of crazy.

~ Cathie Bew



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Stanley Spisiak (left center) showing a bucket of oily contamination from the Buffalo River to President Johnson during his 1966 tour of the Buffalo Harbor SPIIAK FAMILY COLLECTION



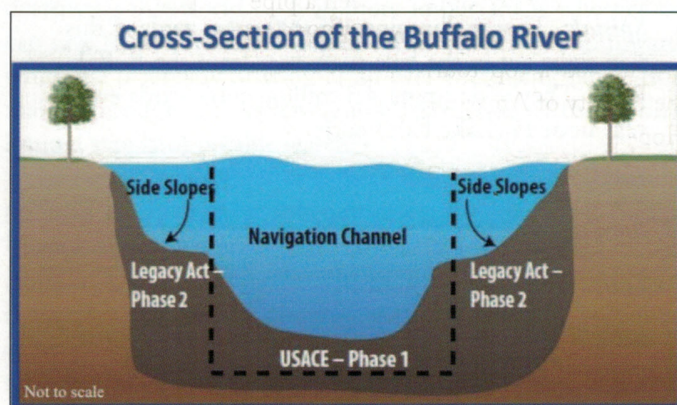
A 2005 Environmental Protection Agency map of the Buffalo River Area of Concern, showing the stretch of the river and City Ship Canal that would be dredged for removal of toxic waste. The South Park lift bridge is marked with an asterisk.
NEW YORK STATE DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION (NYSDEC)

In a few short years, the Buffalo jeweler had made significant strides in his water pollution battles. Optimistic as he was about progress, however, worse things were yet to come. Wednesday, January 24, 1968, was a bitterly cold day in Buffalo. At 9:53 a.m., the Buffalo Fire Department responded to an alarm at the South Park Avenue Lift Bridge. The first firefighters to arrive on the scene found it was not the bridge that was on fire, but an oil slick on the river that was burning. Flames reached as high as 30 feet, destroying much of the bridge's understructure – a maze of electrical and hydraulic lines that forced its closing until damage was assessed and repairs could be made. Sparks from a welder's torch were said to have ignited the oil slick, estimated to be several inches thick on the river's surface. It was the low point in the river's history, but sadly not the first time that firefighters had responded to such an event. The *Courier-Express* reported on January 26, 1968, that another fire had occurred on the river near South Ogden Street the previous September.

In my opinion, there is no longer any doubt about man's capability of destroying this world... Still more important is whether he can save it...

Progress in Fits and Starts

Since Stan's conservation campaign in the 1960s, the Buffalo River cleanup has progressed in fits and starts. Officially declared "dead" in 1969 – meaning the river could no longer support any biological life – it wasn't until 1987 that it was listed as a Great Lakes Area of Concern (AOC) by the



Over 1 million yards of contaminated soil were removed through dredging in two phases from 2011 through 2013. Considered a win by most, in 2020, the New York State Department of Health still recommends not eating any carp and severely limiting consumption of all other fish caught in the Buffalo River and Harbor because of possible PCB contamination.

NEW YORK STATE DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION (NYSDEC)

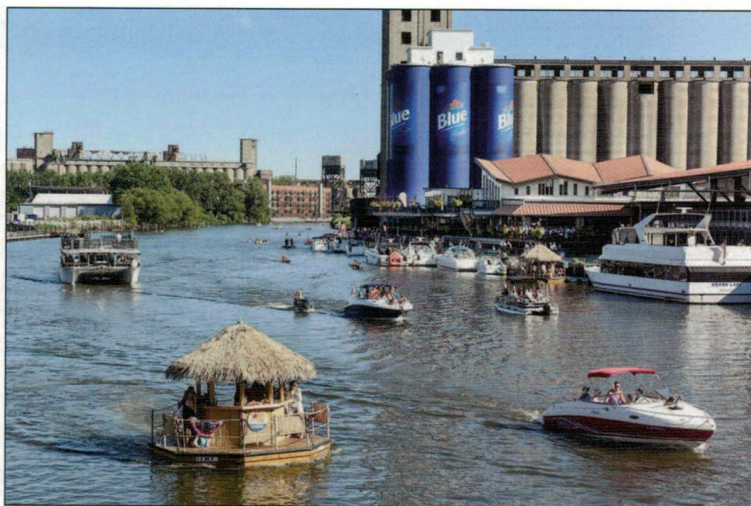
Environmental Protection Agency. Two years later, Buffalo Niagara Waterkeeper was founded. Their mission was to cultivate partnerships with government agencies, various industries and concerned citizens and focus on cleaning up the river.

After decades of testing and planning, dredging of a 6.1-mile section of the river and the adjacent 1.4-mile City Ship Canal began in 2011 and was completed in 2013. Buffalo Niagara Waterkeeper reports that after 15 years and \$100 million spent, over 1 million cubic yards of contamination have been removed from the river. The contaminated sludge has been placed in the Army Corps of Engineers Confined Disposal Facility, located in the Outer Buffalo Harbor adjacent to the south entrance channel.

Despite these Herculean efforts, in 2013, sightseers at Canalside, an ambitious rehabilitation and revitalization area of the city's waterfront, were horrified to see human effluent, condoms, tampons and other debris on the surface of the Buffalo River. From there, the raw sewage floated into the inner harbor and to the Erie Basin. A headline in *The Buffalo News* declared "Heavy Rains Turn Lake Erie Into a Toilet." The event prompted the Buffalo Sewer Authority to institute a \$15 million immediate remediation effort – the "floatables" control project – to essentially prevent solid materials from being discharged into the Buffalo River. It is still a work in progress. Although it was listed as the fifth most unhealthy and stressed waterway in New York State in 2018, the Buffalo River is on track to be de-listed as a federal area of concern by 2021.

Today, Buffalo's waterfront is a seemingly glistening attraction – the go-to destination for millennials, families and visitors to Western New York. Canalside would have been a pipe dream during Spisiak's time. In 2016, it was named a top tourist attraction by the Society of American Travel Writers. Hopefully, Stan Spisiak would be pleased. He might even give serious thought to visiting one of the newest attractions in downtown Buffalo, well within walking distance of the clean and vibrant waterfront he once envisioned. 📺

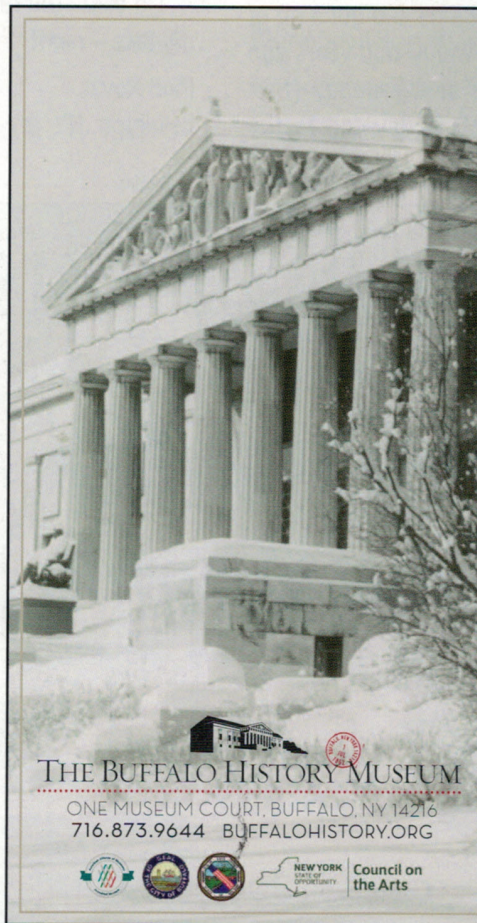
John Zach is a well-respected and often recognized name in Buffalo radio journalism and widely acknowledged as the Dean of Buffalo Radio at the time of his semi-retirement in 2017. His recently published book, *The Day the Buffalo River Burned*, expands on the story of Mr. Conversation, Stanley Spisiak.



While concerns remain, today's Canalside is a far cry from the toxic waterway Stan Spisiak made his passion decades ago.

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