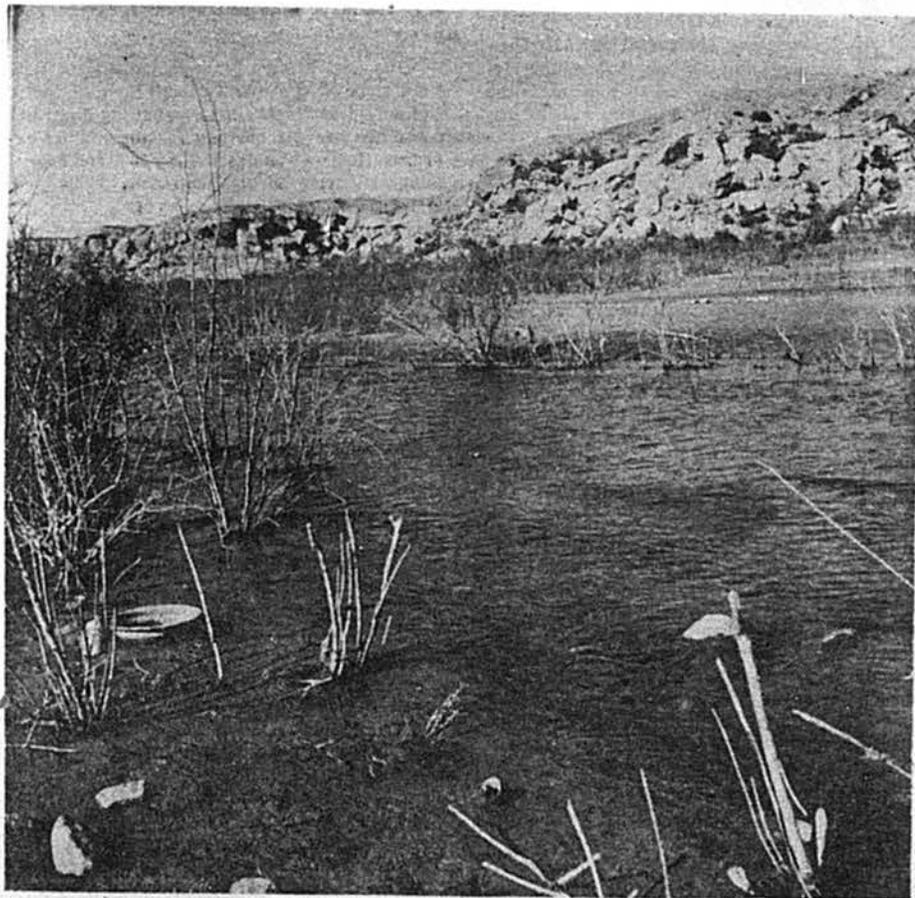


Lake Mead: A Story Of Pollution And Neglect

By Bill Vincent



Vegas Wash, flowing like a fair-sized creek, brings nutrients for algae growth in Lake Mead.

There is a cancer in Lake Mead. A foul, green-brown growth which is eating its way through Las Vegas Wash toward the deep, blue waters of Boulder Basin, the very heart of one of the finest bodies of water in the country.

From the air you can see its dark shape, spreading eastward like a cloud of doom. From the ground, in the heat of summer, you can smell its stench along the shore.

It is destroying hundreds of acres of bass spawning grounds, and threatening the existence of a fine marina.

This summer it all but ruined the best swimming hole for kids on Lake Mead. The National Park Service discouraged the use of Vegas Wash beach by not including it on their list of bathing beaches. And no lifeguards were posted there.

By fall it had spread to the north end of Saddle Island, less than two miles from the pumping station providing Henderson and Boulder City with their drinking water, and where the Southern Nevada Water Diversion Project will pick up its supply for Las Vegas and the metropolitan area.

By the time this installation is completed, unless steps have been taken to refine the water flowing into Lake Mead from Vegas Wash, the great, gray, green, greasy growth will very likely have pushed into Boulder Basin and moved along Saddle Island where the big pumps will suck it up. But don't panic, there is no cause for alarm here. The diversion project apparently will have a treatment plant providing sedimentation, chlorination, filtration and possibly softening. The water you get will be tasteless, clear and pure.

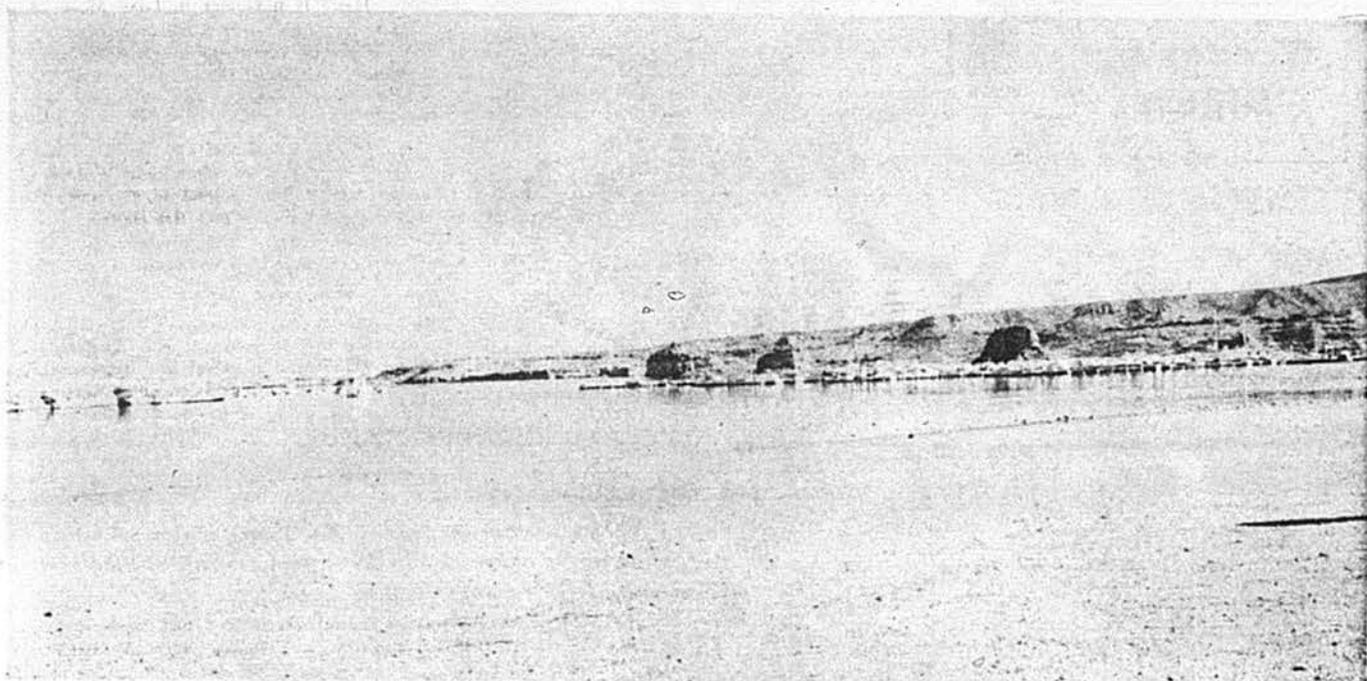
And if it weren't for the esthetics involved, these refinements could be skipped. All that would be needed is maybe another shot of chlorine. The water might be a little murky, turbid is the technical term, and smell like a high jumper's socks, but it would be safe for babies. For the growth we are talking about is algae, a simple aquatic plant which jungle survival experts inform us is a rich source of protein, if you can get it past your nose and keep it on your stomach.

The algae doesn't come down the wash with the drainage from lawn waterings and the effluent from the sewage plants. It grows in the lake, fed by the phosphate in the only partially treated sewage, or effluent if you prefer.

Except for the phosphate, which provides the nutrient needed by algae growth, there isn't much wrong with the water going down Vegas Wash. In January, a report from the Federal Water Pollution Control Administration said there was "no deleterious effect on water use due to bacterial pollution discharged through Las Vegas Wash. Coliform levels throughout Las Vegas Bay and in Boulder Beach area were well below the levels of concern for direct contact water activities."

In other words you could safely swim or water skii. You just might not want to. Park rangers said a number of families left Vegas Wash after one whiff of the algae rotting in the sun at the high water mark.

However, the report continues "Although chlorination at the Clark County sewage treatment plant and the Las Vegas city sewage treatment is generally effective, the determina-



A fine swimming beach and marina, despite what some state officials say, is threatened by aquatic growth.

tion of excessive densities of coliform in several samples from the effluents of both plants and the isolation of Salmonella in the Las Vegas city effluent . . . indicates that operation of chlorination facilities should be improved to provide greater disinfection efficiencies." For those who don't know, Salmonella is the main cause in food poisonings, and coliform, a bacillus excreted by all warm blooded animals, is used as an index to the presence of organisms which cause typhoid fever, dysentery and a number of other water-borne ailments often referred to under the rough heading of the Crud.

'Anything That Stinks So Bad Can't Be Good'

But if there is little cause to worry about our health, there seems to be considerable reason to worry about our future. The Pollution Control Administration report said "The growth of algae in Las Vegas Bay is presently producing an objectionable aesthetic condition and, if allowed to continue unabated, will eventually destroy the recreational use of the area."

One of the first public agencies to express concern was the Nevada Fish and Game Commission. Chairman Wayne Kirch said "The water now going down Vegas Wash is not the quality we want in Lake Mead.

"We went on record opposing this discharge, into Lake Mead, and we are going to keep on protesting. It should be diverted into a dry lake bed."

Kirch said "The algae is ruining the spawning conditions bass require and is hurting the boat harbor. I don't care what they say about water quality. Anything that smells that bad can't be good."

Understandably, similar feelings were expressed by Bob Gripentog, operator of the Vegas Wash Marina. "It was a lot worse this year. We are really concerned," he said.

Not so concerned is Gov. Paul Laxalt, according to a UPI story out of Carson City October 1. The wire service reported that "The Governor also disputed the claim there was a 'distinct unpleasant odor' in the area. He said the odors should be attributed to the order of the Interior Secretary Stewart Udall which denied water to Lake Mead to fill upstream Lake Powell."

The UPI then quoted direct from a letter Laxalt sent to Sen. Howard Cannon. "The lowering of Lake Mead, I have been told, exposed and dried portions of the lake bed leaving deposits on the beach after water recession. This was not associated with algae in the lake but with mud and other organic materials."

Not only is mud not organic, but the governor and his advisors must have been asleep for three years, for it was that long ago when level of Lake Mead was dropped by letting back Colorado River water to start filling Lake Powell. There was loud complaint at the time, but no one said anything about a rank odor. In fact, the stench started just a year ago and became really objectionable only this summer.

In his letter to Cannon, Laxalt also quoted some of the same passages we used from the Federal Water Pollution Control Administration, and he added that "Our technicians advise us that great progress is being made locally on these problems. "The problems are well on their way to solution."

But has anything been done? The Fish and Game Commission thinks there has been little if any progress. Bob Gripentog believes conditions are getting worse. And boaters, fishermen, and bathers could hardly be more unhappy.

In the next article we will discuss the technical problems and take a look at what the local entities have and have not done to solve them.