The Columbus Dispatch
SUNDAY, OCTOBER 5, 1986
EDITED BY TOM RINDERLE/461-5111

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Stirring up Still waters

By David Lore
Dispatch Science Reporter

The way to enjoy life, says Dublin's Jay Lehr, is to wolf it down in little, conservative bites. "People have been sold a very wrong notion, from childhood on, of hitching your wagon to a star," warns the executive director of the National Water Well Association.

"You can't hitch your wagon to a star, and when you try, you generally fail. Most people who try and hitch their wagon to the stars fail, become depressed and give up and never shoot for anything very high again. I learned long ago, if you set small goals and you achieve them, you're exhilarated and go on to try for more."

Sane, sober advice, from a 50-year-old hydrogeologist who has spent his entire life wondering about subterranean flows.

We should note, however, that this cautious advice comes from the adviser of the Ohio State University sky diving club, a guy who has jumped out of an airplane at least once every month for the last nine years. This is the same person who, every October, goes to Hawaii to swim, bike and run his way through the 140-mile Ironman Triathlon.

In other words, despite his restrained philosophy, Jay Lehr doesn't seem to have the appetite of a nibbler.

"I remember the first time I met Jay. He showed up at the division on a motorcycle with a Goldwater sticker on the back of it," said Al Walker, retired chief geologist at the Ohio Division of Water. "He was a fireball back then and he still is."

THIRTY-TWO years ago, as a geological engineering student at Princeton University, Lehr became fascinated — his word — with ground water. As an undergraduate, he worked summers for the U.S. Geological Survey. In 1962, at the University of Arizona, he received the first U.S. doctoral degree in hydrogeology. Two years later, he came to Ohio State University, largely because OSU agreed to let him be an assistant coach on the lacrosse team.

"It was my downfall," he laughs. "It annoyed some of the geology faculty, and they'd monitor what time I left the geology building to go to the lacrosse field. I've never been sure whether, at the end of three years, I was fired or left voluntarily."

Lehr abandoned the academic life and talked the National Water Well Association into hiring him as its executive director. His career at NWWA has been dedicated to stirring up still waters.

His political forays, for example, tend to be about as subtle as a drill bit. After wooing candidate Richard Celeste in 1982, Lehr in recent years has sharply criticized Gov. Celeste for ignoring state ground water protection programs. He was so upset with Celeste that, he said, he once toyed with the idea of getting behind Celeste's re-election opponent, former Gov. James A. Rhodes. Rhodes.

"Celeste's record was godawful," he said. "Celeste, the liberal, comes in talking water and does an absolutely horrible job. So I wanted to gamble and go befriend Mr. Rhodes and sell him on the idea of becoming an environmentalist, which I know sounds funny.

"But my plan was that he could make friends and win a lot of votes without spending a lot of money by coming out for a strong environmental program in the Environmental Protection Program and the Department of Natural Resources. My thinking was that he could let the people running those agencies do what they think is needed."

Somewhat mollified in recent months by modest improvements by the Celeste administration, Lehr has redirected his ire at environmental activists and the media. These "nay-sayers," he wrote in a series of editorials this year in the *Water Well Journal*, are spreading needless alarm about industrial chemicals, nuclear power, cancer and corporate polluters.

"WE MUST therefore consider that to environmental agitators, environmentalism is a means to an end," he wrote. "Their primary interest may not be preserving health and the quality of life but rather changing the political and economic system by reducing corporate influence and substituting great government control for free enterprise to redistribute the country's wealth."

The series upset many environmentalists, including many of the 12,000 members of the Water Well Association. One member berated him for an "almost hysterical" attack on environmental groups, while another warned that "the anti-environmentalist tone of your editorial compromises NWWA's political and economic impartiality."

"He hasn't got the majority behind him by any means," Walker said. "A lot of professional environmentalists would rather die than agree with Jay Lehr."

Lehr is a maverick, but a respected one; even his opponents acknowledge that he was instrumental in alerting the country to ground water pollution in the 1960s and early 1970s.

"In the early years, we were totally responsible for the ground water section of the Safe Drinking Water Act of 1974, the Resource Conservation Act of 1976, the Surface and Mining Reclamation Act and the amendments to the Clean Water Act in 1975. So we started it all; we were the only voice talking ground water from 1965 to 1975, and now we're one of many," Lehr said.

SINCE 1975, ground water has been recognized as an endangered natural resource of immense proportions. The $1.6 billion U.S. Superfund program was largely designed to prevent further chemical contamination of underground drinking water supplies and most states — Ohio among them — are organizing their own ground water programs.

Lehr acknowledges the need for environmental activism. The war against pollution can be won over the next 30 years, he said, but only if the public demands action.

But he also feels that the movement and the media today are painting an unnecessarily gloomy picture of the state of the environment.

"You can't make people move continuously in the same direction if you feed them nothing but despair," he explained. "They've got to feel they're achieving something.

"Ten to 15 years ago, we were the lone voice crying that we've got to protect our ground water. Now we are the voice for reason and for sensible activity. We are pointing out that a lot of good work is being done, that the technology for ground water pollution control has improved dramatically, and that the future looks very bright. We're trying to calm the waters because we feel . . . if you're constantly in a crisis mentality, you do not make the most educated scientific decisions. . . .

"We are beginning to dramatically change our ways. We're building our septic tanks better. We're salting our highways more intelligently. We're building pretty good new landfills. Industrial lagoons are being properly lined with clay and plastic liners. Mines are being properly closed, and agricultural chemicals are being controlled more than they were. Every single activity initiated today is being done better than it was five years ago."

Lehr, for example, said it's absurd to claim — as was claimed by a hydrogeologist in a recent Ohio Environmental Council report — that Ohio is in danger of contaminating half of its ground water resources by the turn of the century.

Yet he said he agrees with the council that Ohio lags behind the rest of the nation in establishing an effective ground water protection program.

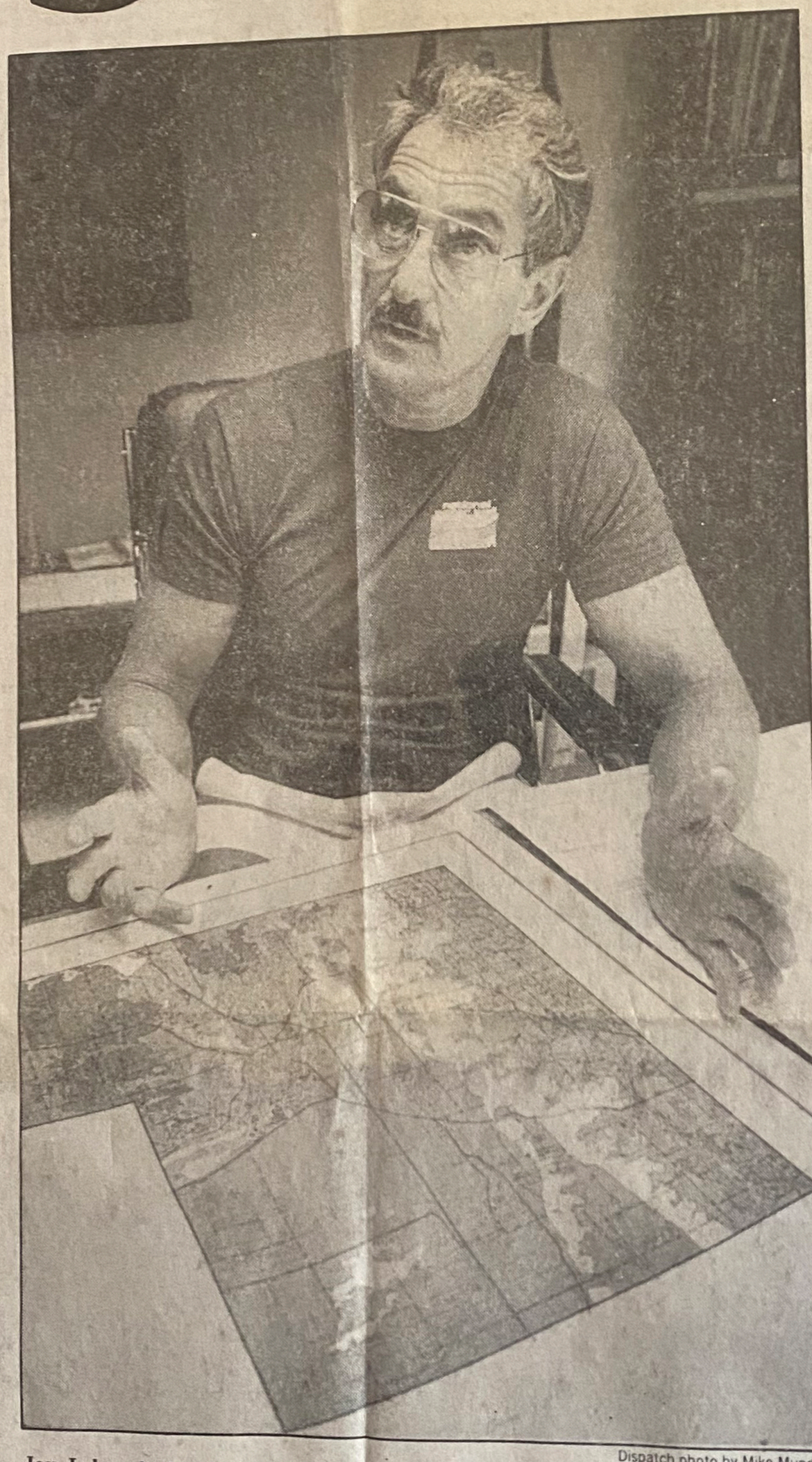
"I think I originated that idea," he said. "Twenty years ago, I would consider us to have been among the top six or eight states, but today we're clearly in the bottom six or eight because we've done nothing in 20 years, and other states woke up and started to do things."

LEHR SAID he's more interested in programs for the scientific management and use of ground water reserves than in lobbying for more laws or chasing cancer and chemical scares.

"When everybody jumps on my bandwagon, I tend to get off and go build another wagon," he said. "It's more fun that way."

Actually, Lehr would be bored with one bandwagon; he'd rather be the wagon master of a whole train. While training for next month's Iron Man competition, Lehr has found time to write a book on management and map out a campaign to pump physical fitness after 50.

"The average guy I know, and certainly most people my age, burned out long ago because when they couldn't achieve great things right away, they gave up," he said. "Well, I never give up because I have so little disappointment in life. And I have so little disappointment because I don't set my goals too high. So over the long haul, I've achieved a great deal in every aspect of my life."



Jay Lehr of the National Water Well Association

Dispatch photo by Mike Munden