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NIGHTMARE ON ENO ROAD: ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM KILLS

THE DICKSON COUNTY (TENNESSEE) LANDFILL AND THE HARRY HOLT FAMILY

By Robert D. Bullard, Ph.D.

CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

Dickson, Tennessee is a town of 12,244 located about 35 miles west of Nashville. Dickson County was 4.5 percent black in 2000. Dickson's mostly African American Eno Road community has been used as the dumping ground for garbage and toxic wastes dating back more than six decades. The black neighborhood was first used as the site of the Dickson "city dump" and subsequent city and county Class I sanitary landfills, Class III and IV construction and demolition landfills, balefills, and processing centers.

The Dickson County Landfill consists of 74 acres off Eno Road, 1.5 miles southwest of Dickson. The landfill contains four parts, the City of Dickson Landfill, the County Landfill Expansion, and the balefill; which are all now closed. For years, drums of toxic industrial waste solvents were dumped at the landfill which later contaminated the groundwater. Dickson County operates a recycling center, garbage transfer station and a C&D landfill at the Eno Road site—where 20-25 heavy-duty diesel trucks enter the sites each day—leaving behind noxious fumes, dangerous particulates, household garbage, recyclables and demolition debris from around Middle Tennessee. The garbage transfer station alone handles approximately 35,000 tons annually.

Dickson County covers more than 490 square miles—an equivalent of 313,600 acres. However, the only cluster of solid waste facilities in the county is located just 54-feet from a 150-acre farm owned by the Harry Holt family, African American landowners that have lived in the Eno Road community for five generations—turning this family's American dream into a hellish nightmare. After slavery, dozens of black families acquired hundreds of acres of land—not part of the empty "40 acres and a mule" government promise—and lived a quiet and peaceful existence in Dickson's historically black Eno Road community. That is, until their wells were poisoned by the county landfill. The black family has been especially harmed by the toxic assaults of the city and county landfills and by government inaction.

- **Harry Holt** – Prostate cancer, bone cancer, Type 1 diabetes, hypertension, kidney failure (died on January 9, 2007)
- **Beatrice Holt** – Rheumatoid arthritis, diabetes, cervical polyps
- **Sheila Holt-Orsted** – Breast cancer, diabetes, arthritis, gastrointestinal disorder
- **Bonita Holt** – Arthritis, colon polyps, hypertension, gastrointestinal disorder
- **Demetrius Holt** – Diabetes, gastrointestinal disorder
- **Patrick Holt** – Immune disorder, arthritis

For more than a decade, the Harry Holt family has experienced a “toxic nightmare” of not knowing what health problems their family and future generations may face. A chronology of events surrounding this family’s ordeal is detailed below:

- 1964 Scovil-Schrader automotive company opened in Dickson in 1964—the same year the U.S. Congress passed the sweeping Civil Rights Act that outlawed racial discrimination.
- 1968 According to government records, Scovill-Shrader and several other local industries buried drums of industrial waste solvents at the Dickson “open dump” landfill site in 1968—the same year Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in Memphis.
- 1972 The unlined landfill was granted a permit by the Tennessee Department of Health and Environment (TDEH).
- 1977 City of Dickson Landfill taken over by Dickson County and a 45-acres expansion approved by the state.
- 7/18/88 The Dickson County Landfill received numerous unsatisfactory operational notices from July 18, 1988 to April 12, 1999
- 1988 The Dickson County Landfill accepted 275 to 300 cubic yards of solid waste from the CSX White Bluff derailment cleanup.
- 11/18/88 Government test results completed on the Harry Holt and Lavenia Holt wells showed TCE contamination. The Harry Holt homestead is just 54 feet from the landfill property line.
- 12/2/88 The TDHE approved the Dickson County Landfill permit.
- 12/18/88 The Tennessee Department of Health and Environment sent letters to Harry Holt and Lavenia Holt informing the family of the test results and the finding of trichloroethene in their wells. The letter states: ***“Your water is of good quality for the parameters tested. It is felt that the low levels of methylene or trichloroethene may be due to either lab or sampling error.”***
- 1/28/90 Government tests found 26 ppb (parts per billion) TCE in the Harry Holt well—five times above the established Maximum Contaminant Level (MCL) of 5ppb set by the federal EPA. The MCL is the maximum concentration of a chemical that is allowed in public drinking water systems.
- 8/17/90 Government tests found 3.9 ppb TCE in the Harry Holt well.
- 8/23/91 Government test showed 3.7 ppb TCE in the Harry Holt well.
- 12/3/91 The federal Environmental Protection Agency sent the Harry Holt family a letter informing him of the three tests performed on his well and deemed it safe. The letter states: **“Use of your well water should not result in any adverse health effects.”** The letter further states: “It should be mentioned, that trichloroethylene (TCE) was detected at 26 ug/1 in the first sample. **Because this detection exceeded EPA’s Maximum Contaminant Level (MCL) of 5 ug/1, the well water was resampled.** TCE was detected at 3.7 ug/1 in the second sample, however, it was noted this sample contained air bubbles. EPA took then took a third sample with results nearly identical to the second (3.9 ug/1).

- 12/17/91 A letter from the Tennessee Department of Conservation expressed some concern about the level of TCE contamination found in the Holt's well. Tennessee Department of Health and Environment officials agreed that Mr. Holt's well should continue to be sampled. However, this was not done. The letter states: **"Our program is concerned that the sampling twice with one considerably above MCL and one slightly below MCL in a karst area such as Dickson is in no way an assurance that Mr. Holt's well water will stay below MCL's. There is a considerably seasonal variation for contaminants in karst environments and 3.9 ppb TCE in only slightly under the MCL of 5 ppb."** The Holt family was allowed to continue drinking contaminated well water.
- 1/6/92 A letter from the Tennessee Department of Health and Environment continued to express concern about the level of contamination found in the Holt well. The letter states: "Mr. Holt's well was sampled as a result of the Preremedial Site Investigation and Ranking package on the Dickson County landfill for NPL consideration. Mr. Carr told me the field investigation was complete and that he was not in a position to sample Mr. Holt's well again even though it had sporadically shown TCE contamination above MCL's. **He agreed that Mr. Holt's well should continue to be sampled. There may be some chance of the site going NPL, but that will be at least 1-2 years away. Mr. Carr suggested I contact Nathan Sykes at (404) 347-2913 to determine why it was not felt that further monitoring or an alternate water supply was necessary."**
- 3/13/92 A letter from the TDEC sides with EPA on the Holt family well water being "safe." The letter states: "Since EPA has already completed a site investigation, has identified the pollutants involved, and has, in part, determined the extent of the leaching, I would suggest that they, EPA, continue with their chosen course of action, rather than create the added confusion of various agencies making their own agendas. **I would suggest that, if Mr. Holt is concerned about possible health risks in using his well water between now and June (when EPA's priority decision is made), that he should rely on bottled or city water for cooking and drinking purposes until he is convinced that his well water is safe."**
- 8/15/95 EPA removes Dickson County Landfill from the CERCLIS list as part of the EPA Brownfields initiative.
- 1996 Sampling of wells within a **one-mile radius**, according to the TDEC Division of Solid Waste Management. TCE exceeds standards on Sullivan Springs. Harry Holt's well not tested even though his property line is **54 feet** from landfill.
- 1997 TCE was detected in water from a production well (DK-21) operated by the City of Dickson and located northeast of the landfill. The Harry Holt property lies between the leaky landfill and DK-21.
- 2/24/97 The TDEC Division of Water Supply reports that the city of Dickson tested the city lake and DK-21 and trichloroethylene or TCE was detected at 1.3 parts per billion. The maximum contaminant level (MCL) is 5 parts per billion.
- 4/7/97 TDEC Division of Water Supply completes a confirmation sample, testing City Lake and TCE was not detected. The division's separate test of untreated water at DK-21's well source showed TCE at 14 parts per billion and Cis-1, 2 dichloroethene at 1.3 parts per billion.

- 4/18/97 City of Dickson stopped using the DK-21 well as a supplement to the municipal water source after a call from the state requiring an aeration, or water filtration, system, according to the TDEC Division of Water Supply.
- 10/9/00 Harry Holt well tested and registered a whopping 120 ppb TCE, 24 times higher than the Maximum Contaminant Level (MCL) of 5ppb set by the federal EPA.
- 10/20/00 The Holt family was placed on Dickson City water—twelve years after the first government tests found TCE in their well in 1988.
- 10/25/00 A second test performed on Harry Holt well registered 145 ppb—24 times higher than the Maximum Contaminant Level (MCL).
- 12/3/03 Harry Holt family filed a lawsuit against the City of Dickson, County of Dickson, and Scovill, Inc.
- 11/23/04 Dickson County Circuit Court Judge George Sexton ruled that a racial discrimination amendment could be added to the Holt family’s complaint involving the alleged toxic poisoning of their well water near the Dickson County Landfill.
- 11/6/06 In a special called meeting, Dickson County Commissioners voted unanimously to settle lawsuits with several white families that had alleged ground water contamination from the leaky landfill. The city and county have agreed to give the families 75 percent of whatever money they may receive in New York bankruptcy court in a claim (that each has against Saltire Industrial Inc., which the lawsuits allege dumped toxic waste at the landfill on Eno Road. Both the city of Dickson and Dickson County have claims lodged against Saltire Industrial Inc., in New York in excess of \$4 million.
- 1/09/07 Harry "Highway" Holt, founding member of the Nashville gospel group the Dynamic Dixie Travelers, died on January 9, 2007 after a long bout with cancer. He was 66.
- 2/26/07 The case is still pending in court.

Robert D. Bullard, Ph.D., directs the Environmental Justice Research Center at Clark Atlanta University in Atlanta, GA. He is the author of [The Quest For Environmental Justice: Human Rights and the Politics of Pollution](#) (Sierra Club Books, 2005).

For more information on the Dickson County Landfill, please contact the Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark Atlanta University, 223 James P. Brawley Drive, Atlanta, GA 30314, (404) 880-6920 (ph), (404) 880-8132 (fx), or E-mail at ejrc@cau.edu.