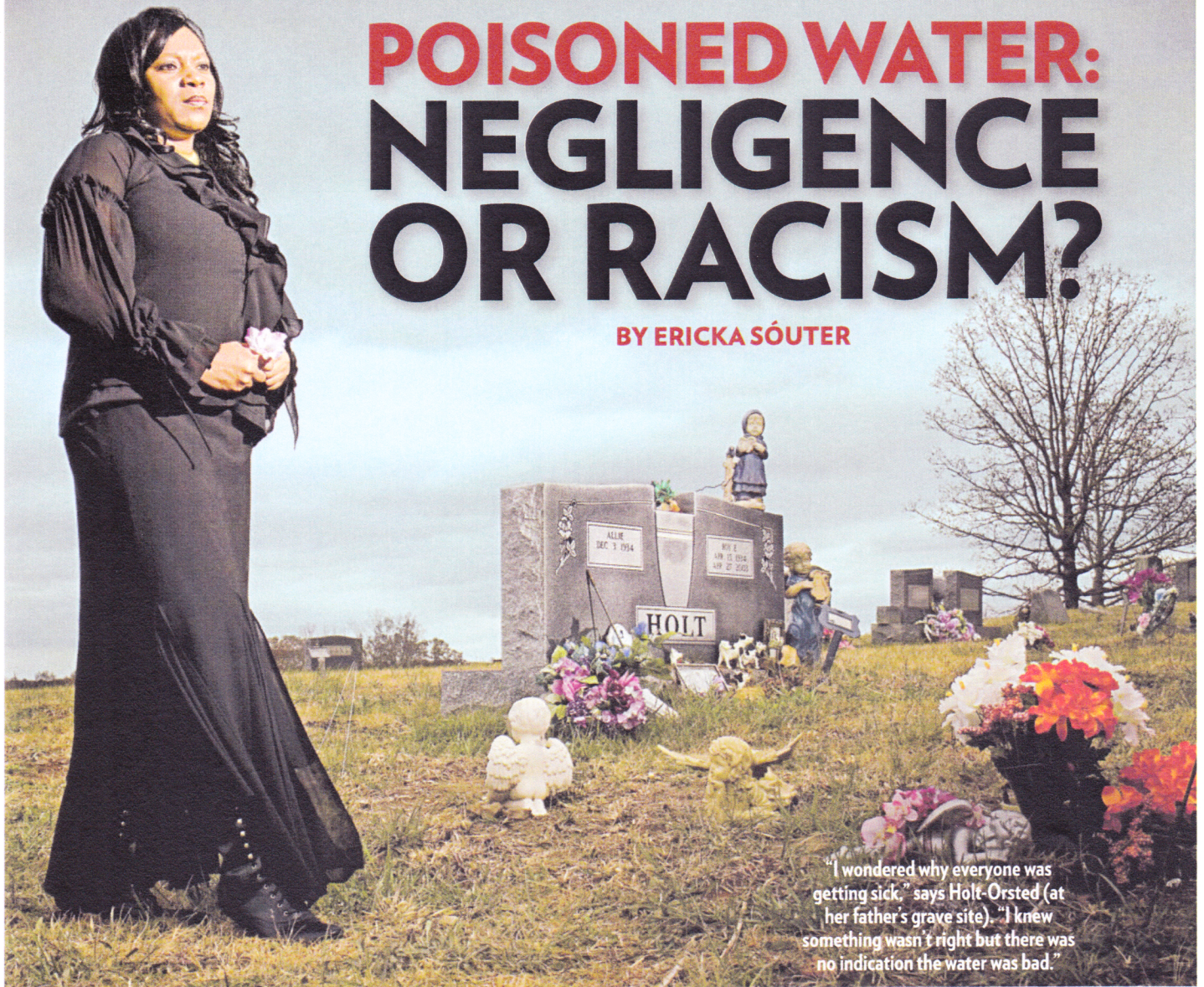


POISONED WATER: NEGLIGENCE OR RACISM?

BY ERICKA SÓUTER



"I wondered why everyone was getting sick," says Holt-Orsted (at her father's grave site). "I knew something wasn't right but there was no indication the water was bad."

Sheila Holt-Orsted smiles as she remembers a simple pleasure of growing up in the Tennessee countryside: the ice-cold water that flowed from the faucets of her family farm. "Every day I would fill up a jug," she says. "It had this wonderful, slightly sweet taste. I thought it was good for me."

Decades later, she learned her habit was far from healthy. Located 500 ft. from a neighboring landfill, the Holts' water well was contaminated with trichloroethylene (TCE), an industrial solvent that can cause liver and kidney damage and is suspected of causing cancer. Though no medical link to TCE has yet been proven, Holt-



Orsted, 45, says family members who lived on the land have come down with a spate of deadly illnesses: her father died of prostate cancer, her uncle died of Hodgkin's disease,

three cousins had cancer, her aunt next door has it too. And she, a non-smoker, had breast cancer. "You can't imagine what it is like for anyone in my family to go in for a physical," she says. "You prepare yourself to be shocked and terrified."

Today, the Holt family is locked in a legal battle with the city, county and state over damages related to their poisoned well—including an allegation of environmental racism that has stirred tensions in their Tennessee town. According to a federal civil rights claim filed by the family in May 2004, their white neighbors were warned of toxins in private wells and springs, and swiftly put on city water as far back as 1993. But the Holts, who

The samples collected from your well water was analyzed for metals, pesticides/PCBs, and extractable and volatile organic compounds. There were no constituents detected which exceed EPA's National Primary Drinking Water Regulations or any other health-based criteria. As such, use of your well water should not result in any adverse health effects. (a lie)

A 1991 letter sent by the EPA assuring the Holt family their well water was safe to drink.

allege they are the only African-Americans whose well tested dangerously high for TCE, say they were officially assured their water was safe in 1988 and 1991. After more tests, the city finally shifted them to the municipal supply in 2000. "They took the white people off the polluted water as soon as they found TCE," says Holt-Orsted, a former professional bodybuilder and personal trainer. "They let us drink that poison for 12 years. We were in the dark. As far as I am concerned, that was a death sentence."

State authorities defend their actions, describing seemingly alarming levels of TCE found in the first test of the Holts' well as a sampling error, and noting that two follow-up tests fell within EPA guidelines. As for the allegation of racism, says Joe

Sanders, general counsel for the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation, "We largely work off paper. Most people within the department would have no way to know what race anybody is."

But Sheila Holt-Orsted says state officials visited the farm to conduct the testing, and that the county-run landfill maintains an office within walking distance of her front door. "Of course they knew we were black," she says. Although Holt-Orsted has found no specific evidence of racial intent, supporters contend the circumstantial evidence is compelling. "We know state and local decision makers cared enough about some families to notify them they were drinking contaminated water," says

Matthew Colangelo of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, who represents the Holts. "They didn't care enough about this family to notify them—and that raises questions about why they were treated differently." Adds Dr. Robert Bullard, director of the Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark Atlanta University in Atlanta, who has served as an expert witness in dozens of environmental justice cases: "The black family was not protected. It's as simple as that."

Holt-Orsted is so passionate about her claims that she has transformed her

minivan into a mobile command center full of legal documents and devoted her life to winning justice for her family—even if it causes tension among her neighbors. While some have spoken out on her behalf—"I just want them to win their case," says Myra Beard, a white resident who has known the Holts for years—many have not. "At no time were the plaintiffs subject to discrimination," says Tim Potter, attorney for the county. "The contamination issues have affected many families... not just the [Holt] family."

On one point, there is little debate. "In hindsight, we've looked back and said they should have been taken off [the water] earlier," says Mike Apple, director of Solid and Hazardous Waste Management for the state. "It is unfortunate that they were drinking the water." That admission, says Holt-Orsted, provides little solace. After chemotherapy and surgery, she is consumed with the crusade, splitting her time between Dickson, Tenn., and the Dale City, Va., home she shares with her daughter Jasmine, 13, and husband of 13 years Corey Orsted, 38, an electrician. "It is definitely a strain on the family, but not the marriage," says Corey. "If I was done wrong like that, I would want to pursue it too."

Back in Dickson, Holt-Orsted points out that her family's 150-acre plot was once dotted with apple trees and roamed by chickens and cows. "This land has been in our family for generations. It was something my grandparents wanted passed down," she says. Now, because of the dispute over the tainted water, the land is worthless and their future precarious. "They can't bring my father back, they can't bring my health back," she says. "But we deserve some kind of justice." ●

"She won't give up," says Beatrice Holt of her daughter (with husband Corey and daughter Jasmine), "not until our family gets justice."

