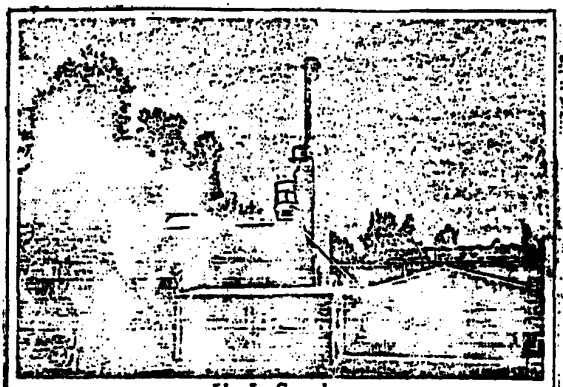
The Lakeville Journal, Thursday, July 13, 1978



Up In Smoke

A $300,000 thermal oxidizer, the heart of GE's pollution clean-up campaign, destroys PCBs and other toxic wastes by burning them at temperatures exceeding 2000 degrees. Designed by GE's James Thayer, the oxidizer is fed waste oils from a series of oil-water separators, burns, then cools them and they enter the atmosphere as harmless carbon dioxide, water and sodium chloride. Photo by Laurie O'Neill

'Pristine' PCBs Source Sampled By GE Tours

By Laurie O'Neill

The water at the outflow was cool, odorless, and a timid sip revealed it to be tasteless.

The now innocuous flow is the suspected former source of the bulk of PCBs pollution of the Housatonic River, after a massive clean-up effort by the General Electric Co. at its Pittsfield, Mass., plant.

The seven Connecticut reporters who scrambled over the gravel-covered bank, some snapping photos, were part of a press tour of that effort, conducted last week at the huge facility.

GE officials treated the group to a slide-show, lecture, auto and foot tour, and even refreshments — all geared to convince its downstream neighbors that the company is doing its best to halt further seepage of the suspected

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PCBs . . .

carcinogen into the Housatonic.

Having admitted playing a major part in the river's pollution by discharging toxic PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) into the Housatonic for over 40 years, GE has spent millions on the clean-up.

Besides last week's press tour, a group of Connecticut environmentalists and fishermen, and representatives of the Housatonic Valley Association, departments of health, and of environmental protection, and of U.S. Rep. Toby Moffett's Citizens' Watchdog Committee recently toured GE, returning generally impressed by the clean-up operations.

Reporters were given a look at GE's "total systems approach" to PCB and other pollution control. They were told GE has gone "full steam ahead" to purge the plant grounds of the chemicals, and were shown evidence of its efforts.

Because PCBs are carried by oil and water, collect in river sediment and in animal tissues and do not break down under normal conditions, many of the chemicals traveled for years over and underground and through drainage systems, finally into the narrow, shallow East Branch of the Housatonic, the group learned. Accidental spills and natural seepage for over 30 years allowed the introduction of thousands of the chemicals to the river.

So GE, faced with the problem of cleaning out all PCB residue, began dismantling all contaminated machinery and soil and shipping it to a government-controlled landfill in Illinois. All drainage pipes through which Pyranol wastes may have flowed have been relined with a thick plastic material or replaced. And all rain water and the over six and a half million gallons of water GE uses each day is fed into a series of oil-water separators, specially designed by GE engineer James Thayer.

The pride of the plant is a 30-foot-long by 10-foot-high "thermal oxidizer," which ultimately burns the PCBs and other toxic wastes. The oxidizer is the result of three years of work by James Thayer, the plant's environmental protection manager, and two associates, aided by a burner manufacturer in Tulsa, Okla. Construction was started in 1971 and completed two years later at a cost of $300,000.

"We catch the PCBs by catching the oil," Mr. Thayer said, explaining the oxidation process. From storage tanks the wastes are pumped into an incinerator, carefully controlled at 2000 degree temperatures. The wastes burn for a few seconds, then pass downward, and are cooled to about 150 degrees, then proceed into a scrubbing chamber and then into a stack where the wastes enter the atmosphere as harmless carbon dioxide, water and sodium chloride.

"See those trees?" Thayer asks, pointing to the greenery behind the oxidizer. "They've been bathed in this condensation for years and are perfectly healthy."

The water entering the Housatonic at four different outfalls is "drastically cleaner," say GE officials, than it was a few years ago. "We have fish and ducks right at the outfalls," Thayer said. "Some people, I'm sure, think we rent them for visitors," he laughed.

GE personnel explained the federal EPA has issued the company a permit calling for reduction of its PCB discharge level to five parts per billion. Reinhart said GE hopes to reduce the discharge to zero, but that "getting that last bit is a very difficult job. You have to realize," he said, "that one ppb is equal to one shot of whiskey in 12 million gallons."

In view of the millions GE has spent on reducing PCB contamination of the river, Reinhart resents press reports that the company "dumped" the chemicals into the river.

"If it's one thing we want to do today, it's to tell you we never 'dumped' anything in the river," he told reporters. "Pyranol costs $12 a gallon. That would be like dumping your best wine or bourbon!"

Most of those given the company tour returned impressed but some are hesitant about putting GE's part in the pollution problem to rest.

Ralph Goodno of the HVB, which organized the citizens' tour, told The Lakeville Journal, "they really gave us the royal treatment. We do realize they have done more than they had to with this problem, but, I do think they haven't done it all out of the kindness of their hearts. It was a good business move, let's face it. They can't allow themselves to look like a culprit in the public eye."

Goodno said, however, the HVA views GE as a partner rather than an opponent. "We'd much rather work with them instead of against them. That's why we didn't join the lawsuit."

He also said he doesn't think GE is "out of it as far as cleaning up what's already in the river. And," he added, "nor do they."

The HVA is concerned, Goodno said, with PCBs leaching into the river from sources other than the GE plant. "It's obvious, through both taken of the river, that the plant is still getting in from other points," he said.

Charles Frodette of the Department of Environmental Protection credits GE with "following up its concern with an ambitious environmental program." Frodette believes it will take "a long time" for PCBs to be cleansed from the river but said "you can't blame GE for creating a problem they didn't know they were creating."

Domenic Forcella, also of the DEP, says the EPA is considering a proposal to fund a study of 18 landfills in Massachusetts and Connecticut. "We have to keep looking at the river and its tributaries," Forcella said, "even though GE is lessening the chemical's introduction to the river."

It was obvious to reporters last week that GE is attempting to generate a positive feeling. But, as Forcella commented, "the fact is there are PCBs in the river. That," he declared, "is still the major problem."