

April 10, 1931

Mr. G. B. Hunter,
Sterling Oil Company,
Eminton, Pa.

Dear Sir:

Mr. Webb of the Ethyl Gasoline Corporation has sent me a copy of your communication of March 28 in regard to suits at Woodsfield, Ohio, on account of leaking gasoline which had apparently contaminated well water.

I am delayed in answering your letter by reason of the fact that I was out of my office for more than a week.

A circumstance such as the one you describe in your letter came to our attention some months ago, when a similar leak permitted seepage of gasoline through a somewhat loose and sandy soil, thus contaminating seriously the water of a nearby well, and producing a definite but not dangerous illness in an individual who made use of the water for drinking purposes. The illness was chargeable only to the high gasoline content of the well water, which produced a very considerable amount of stomach and intestinal irritation, with later vomiting, diarrhoea, and loss of weight. The patient recovered without serious consequences. In this instance, despite the fact that the water tasted strongly of gasoline and showed a considerable amount of gasoline when we obtained samples and tested them, the sick person had used the water and was undoubtedly ill from this cause. It is of some importance to note that under the conditions that obtained, the lead in the gasoline was completely decomposed and precipitated out so that no lead could be found in the drinking water. This was not therefore a case of lead intoxication, but of gasoline intoxication.

I cite the incident because it is entirely possible from the description of the cases in your letter, that a similar situation occurred. It is possible for the gasoline to travel considerable distances through proper kind of soil, and to grossly contaminate the water. In any case, even after considerable periods of time, the water should show the presence of gasoline if there was any considerable amount of contamination. I would consider it highly advisable therefore, to look into the situation carefully, and to obtain samples of the water, particularly from the surface of the well, and to determine whether or not any detectable

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quantity of gasoline was present. As a means of preventing any fraud in the matter I would suggest that samples of water be taken by taking a first sample, then by pumping out considerable quantities of the water and then taking other samples.

The cases which you describe may not be in any way comparable to the one which I cite, and there may be no foundation for the claims which are made. However, it was felt in the former case that there was probably no reason for the complaint, and it was only after the examination of the water and the finding of definite quantities of gasoline that the gasoline company concerned became convinced of the existence of a leak, which, when carefully investigated, was found to have permitted the escape of several hundred gallons of gasoline over a period of some three or four months. I should think, therefore, it would be highly advisable to obtain all of the facts in the matter in order to determine whether gasoline actually contaminated the water. There would be very little difficulty in defending suit against the claim of lead poisoning. It might be somewhat more difficult in the case of the gasoline, and would be possible, I believe, only on the basis of ascertained facts. In the latter case, it would not be expected that serious illness would be produced or that injury would be prolonged after the elimination of the exposure to gasoline.

Very truly yours,

RAK:EJ

W. B. Hunter
Nov 12

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