

ORGANIC LIVING

By

Robert Rodale

THE MYTH OF CLEAN WATER

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Residents of New Orleans got some bad news recently. The Environmental Protection Agency told them that the Mississippi River water they've been drinking is loaded with chemicals. And some of those compounds are potent cancer-causers.

That's bad enough. But the hard-headed reaction of city officials was even worse. One suggested that bad water was one of the smaller hazards of life in New Orleans. If a mother wants to insure the safety of her child, one council person said, she should buckle the child's auto safety belt — not worry about tap water. After all, the official continued, the biggest cause of death and injury for those under 35 is auto accidents.

Safety in the short term is all that counts to some people. Chemicalized water is a problem that kills over decades, and isn't going to go away unless strong measures are taken.

A nationwide EPA survey now under way is very likely to pinpoint similar poisons in the water supplies of many other cities. We can expect the situation to get worse before it improves unless we all change our attitudes.

Public indifference to bad water is the biggest problem. A new story or two about cancer-chemicals in water will get people worked up for a few weeks. There will be some protests and letters to the editor. Then a feeling of helplessness will set in. Water has come from the tap for years, and people have been drinking it all along without dropping over dead right away. So why change things now?

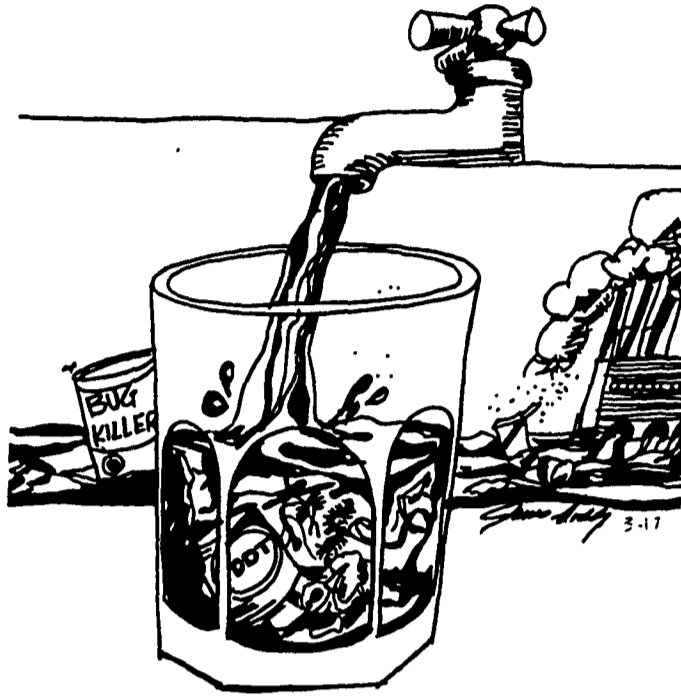
Old pioneer attitudes are at the root of the problem. Europeans first came to a country of endless forests and fresh streams, and we, their descendants, have adhered to the belief that a river automatically and naturally purifies itself every seven miles. My mother told me that when I

was a child, and probably it was true then because contaminants only entered a stream at occasional points.

But let's face facts. Most rivers today are overused bodies of water bearing little resemblance to what they're supposed to be. And the Mississippi ranks as one of the worst.

Environmentalists consider the Mississippi "the colon of America," filled with the industrial and human waste products of two-thirds of the United States. Manufacturing plants pour millions of tons of toxic materials into its muddy waters. Oil spills, raw sewage, pesticide runoff . . . you name it. If Americans don't want it, chances are it's ended up in the Mississippi at one time or another.

In the community of East Alton, Illinois, a sign along the river warns picnickers to avoid eating lunch near the Mississippi. They might get sick if their food should ac-



identally come in contact with spray from the polluted river.

To me, that the New Orleans water contains things it shouldn't is completely logical. How can a river — any river — recover from a massive load of wastes like those poured into the Mississippi?

Obviously, it can't.

Logic tells me to question another assumption that the people of New Orleans have been making for years.

How can purification systems, built to treat wastewater of another era, deal with the sophisticated wastes of the 20th century, complete with indestructible, man-made substances that have a lifetime of a million years? We're finding out that they can't.

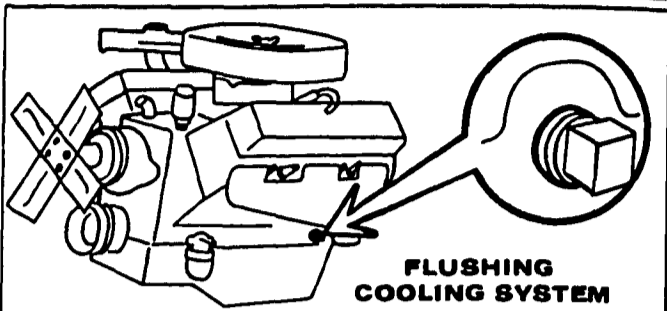
Some myths take a long time to die. The myth that everyone who opens a tap can expect a healthful glass of water may not last much longer, however. When the EPA study of the nation's drinking water is completed in a few months, we'll know for sure.

I suspect that the results will still be challenged. Of course, there will be more press conferences. I'll even be willing to bet some official will publically drink a glass of water just to "prove" that there is nothing wrong with it. Some of the people will turn to bottled water. Others will

shrug off the reports as nonsense. The fact remains, however, that everyone deserves a clean glass of water. Either we will have to stop river pollution at its source, or find new and safer ways to treat water before we drink it. xxx

(Editor's Note: The opinions appearing in "Organic Living" are those of its author, Robert Rodale, an independent columnist. Rodale's comments do not necessarily reflect the thinking of the Lancaster Farming editor or anyone else on the Lancaster Farming staff.)

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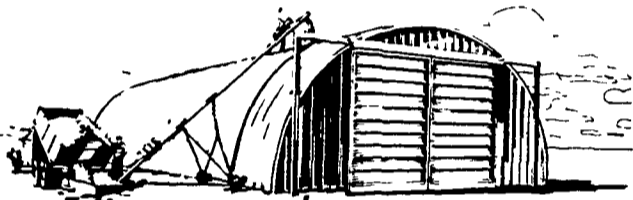
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