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East Dallas neighborhoods want to bust the rust in their water

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For a few poor souls who live near White Rock Lake, the horror stories run deeper than [Halloween](#). There's something in the water, they say.

In the Casa Linda neighborhood, Brad Rogers was mortified a few months back when a guest ran a bathtub full of what looked like diluted tea.

"No one wants to take a bath in weak iced tea," he said.

No one wants Kim Tierney's shower curtain, either. Stained orange from rusty tap water, it looks like a prop from the pivotal scene of *Psycho*.

In Hollywood Heights, Susan Campbell's accounts would fit the script for *Poltergeist*.

There was the day in 2005 when her tap – it had been running red for months – spewed globs of white foam into the bathtub, spooking even her pet starling.

A few months later, Campbell turned on the bathroom faucet and the sink leapt off the floor. She later discovered the pipe was full of ligustrum seeds.

Today, Campbell keeps the seeds in a plastic container labeled "My Collection of Interesting Drinking Water Contaminates" along with vials of blood-red tap water, rust-smearing paper towels and a heap of blue cards left behind by the perplexed city workers who drop by twice a month to sample her water, but still can't tell her why it's full of rust.

'Water wars'

By all accounts, what Campbell calls "the water wars" have abated from what they were several years ago, when veritable rivers of rust ran through the ancient pipes beneath East Dallas.

The city may have unwittingly given rise to the red tide when it equipped its water-treatment plants with ozone, a special oxygen molecule that efficiently gobbles up toxins, but also tends to corrode the cast-iron pipes in use throughout 60 percent of the city.

"I wouldn't say we really expected some of the problems," said Charles Stringer, who oversees the city's water operations. "Nothing indicative of the magnitude we've had."



Photos by COURTNEY PERRY/DMN
A vial of rust-colored water from 2005 is part of a collection of contaminants kept by Hollywood Heights resident Susan Campbell, who has also found seeds and globs of white foam in her water.

In the last three years, the department has been working overtime to replace 12.5 miles of old pipe in the Lakewood area alone with nonrustable materials such as concrete or PVC – at a cost of nearly \$30 million.

"We've taken out just about every pipe in Hollywood Heights that can be replaced," Stringer said.

The department's efforts have won it praise – neighborhood groups and City Council member Sheffie Kadane said they know of only scattered complaints in the area, including some from residents in Forest Hills and Little Forest Hills.

But, like puddles after a flood, a handful of households are still swimming in troubled waters.

Even while her neighbors report clear water, Campbell's toilet tank blossoms with rust crystals, her laundry comes out stained, and her pipes flow with what looks like nature's chicken broth.

"We don't get literally UT orange coming through anymore," she said. "It just looks like someone vomited into our water system."

Mystery rust

Campbell's house may just be unfortunately situated, or, as Stringer suspects, her rusty pipes may be a private issue.

While the city tries to sort it out, it regularly deploys its frontline forces in an effort to mollify residents at wit's end.

A rusty orange streak runs for half a block along Campbell's curb, a remnant of the fire-hydrant enemas she frequently orders from the city. The flushings clear the household water, but only temporarily.

Behind the scenes, the water department has recently started adding an anti-rusting agent to the water, antacid for antiquated pipes it hopes to rip out as soon as possible.

"When we get through, hopefully this will be just a memory for everyone," Stringer said.

In the meantime, some have little choice but to adjust to a murky reality.

In Casa Linda, Kim Tierney has resigned herself to calling her water "normal yellow" on good days – in contrast to the mahogany-colored horror that has spewed forth on bad ones.

She blasts through water filters and strives to keep the problem a secret from her 8-year-old daughter. "There'd be no getting her in a tub," Tierney said.

And she comforts herself, somewhat, with the city's assurances that while her water may be ugly, at least it's not toxic.

"They say it won't hurt you ... " she began to say, just before she twisted her faucet open.

Something black sprayed out.

"Oh, dear God."