

Gas Leak Continues to Leave Family Homeless

By Rex Graham
Daily Times Staff

"It's the damndest thing I've ever heard of," said Harold Roberts this week. His family was told to leave their house at 2113 Camino Rio over four months ago — a house his family had called home for 21 years.

Tests show invisible and odorless natural gas is leaching from the ground under and around Roberts' house, and investigating officials don't yet know where it is coming from.

The bizarre incident began Nov. 16 when a Gas Company of New Mexico crew, conducting a routine check, detected a high, explosive concentration of natural gas in front of the Roberts' and their neighbor, Guinevere H. "Winnie" Brady's houses.

Since that time, explosive levels of the gas continue to pour forth, neighbors are worried about the safety of their children walking to school, and vehicular traffic continues over the street where gas levels ten times the lower explosive limit have been repeatedly detected.

The two families were told to evacuate their premises two days before Thanksgiving to avoid the imminent possibility of an explosion. Officials didn't even allow their furniture to be removed. Their utilities were disconnected.

(Roberts said the water pipes in his basement froze and split open, but he was told to ignore it until the gas levels drop.)

Although Camino Rio is lined with houses, only the Roberts' and the home of their next door neighbor, Guinevere H. "Winnie" Brady had gas.

Is it a geologic fluke or, as one official put it, "an act of God?" Though the answer is not yet known, man may have had a hand in the weird affair.

After an intensive search of old drilling records, an abandoned well, about 200 feet from Roberts' house was unearthed.

The well had been improperly, and illegally abandoned, and was immediately suspected. It was merely covered with dirt and not plugged with cement as required, said Frank Chavez, district supervisor for the Oil Conservation Division.

Following that episode with the well, Chavez's OCD office in Aztec went through other records and came up with 12 additional wells — three in Farmington and four in Bloomfield — that had been abandoned years ago but not plugged.

(The owners or their estates have been notified, and a public hearing will be held Apr. 14 in the State Land Office Building in Santa Fe requesting those owners, "...to appear and show cause why... (the wells) should not be re-entered and plugged in accordance with a Division-approved plugging program.")

Chavez said the OCD spent \$200,000 pumping 1,400 bags worth of cement under high pressure into the Camino Rio well, "but it hasn't solved the problem," he said.

Meanwhile the Roberts and Brady families have stayed at motels and with a friends and relatives, but they are running out of patience. "We just feel like we have lost our home," Roberts said. He said his family has recently rented a nearby apartment.

Mrs. Brady is out of town and unavailable for comment.

And Roberts points out that the \$200,000 plugging job hasn't helped: the gas readings taken after the operation have even increased.

With frustration creeping into the voice of the unwilling refugee, Roberts said, "When people are evacuated, I would think this would be on a priority basis." But he added, "I've called three officials, and they say they are out of town."

Said the 60-year-old retiree, "It seems funny that the cars drive up and down the street." Gas Company of New Mexico distribution superintendent John Horn said the latest measurements, taken Mar. 25, showed 42 percent gas in the street in front of Roberts' house at 2109 Camino Rio.

Horn said five percent gas is the lower explosive limit for the gas, but he said the gas in the street does not pose a safety problem, in his opinion, because it dissipates rapidly.

In addition to the constant worry, the experience is taking an increasing financial and emotional toll on the Roberts family. "I was reimbursed for (lodging expenses) for the first five weeks by the Gas Company of New Mexico," Roberts said, but added that the payments stopped "two days after Christmas."

The gas company assumed financial liability in the beginning because the company's pipeline was suspected of leaking. But gas company officials say tests show the gas in Roberts' yard does not contain the artificial "odorant" added to pipelines.

Now Roberts says, "Nobody will accept responsibility on this thing. We feel just like we've lost our house."

For now Roberts is right.

The problem, however, is that, despite a superhuman effort, the OCD's Chavez hasn't been able to solve the riddle of the gas's source, and even if he does, the liability issue may be as tricky to solve as finding the source of the vapors.

Chavez said there are a couple possible reasons for the apparently sudden appearance of the gas, and his office is conducting a methodical investigation of the possibilities.

The most promising theory, he thinks, is that since Camino Rio is located at a very scenic overlook of the San

Juan River, with a beautiful view of the city's southern bluffs, a residential water well may have been sunk in the area — which could now be channeling gas to the surface.

Chavez's detective work led him to the University of New Mexico's technology center. The center has a library of old aerial photographs, but the only photo of the area, which would show an old water well, doesn't include the suspected water well location.

Meanwhile, the gas continues to seep from the ground.

Mar. 25 a test by the Gas Company of New Mexico showed that there was a 14 percent gas mixture in the crawl space under Roberts' house, according to the Gas Company's Horn. He said a five percent concentration is the lower explosive limit for the gas.

If the Roberts and Brady families can't return, or if they explode, who pays?

New Mexico oil and gas production companies are assessed a 0.01 percent levy to go into a reclamation fund. The \$200,000 was taken from the fund to put in the cement plug in the abandon well near the Roberts' house, and pay for the lodging of other families on Camino Rio, but, apparently the money in the fund will not go for damages to the evacuated families.

Chavez said, "It would not be appropriate to make a disbursement (to the Roberts or Brady families) out of public (reclamation) funds."

That apparently leaves the city: If an abandoned water well is found under Camino Rio, Joe Ramey, divisional director for the OCD in Santa Fe, said the city of Farmington may have to assume liability.

City manager Bill Manchester is out of town and unavailable for comment.



Gas Leak Continues Home Evacuation
Roberts family outside their empty home.

(Staff Photo)