



A Hideous Stench

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"Sacramento's warm summer evenings prior to 1900 were often made hideous by a strong stench which drifted over the city- from which it was all but impossible to hide. Although this unpleasant aspect of living has scarcely been mentioned in the city's history, it was a matter of great concern at the time for it seemed to threaten not only the sensibilities but also the welfare of all citizens. It was in the words of a health official, 'a gross and palpable danger.'"

— from "Miasma In Sacramento," Golden Notes, Fall 1983

SACRAMENTO'S BOARD OF HEALTH was established in March, 1862, in an effort to combat the problems described above. Sacramento was the second city in the United States to create a Board of Health, following Boston.

The combination of the population explosion during the Gold Rush and the periodic flooding of the Sacramento and American Rivers caused enormous health hazards. Sacramento suffered "foul and disgusting" odors from open cesspools, animal and human wastes, refuse from slaughter houses, glue factories, and hog yards, to name a few of the offenders.

The new board urged a complete system of drainage and sewage. By 1864 a comprehensive city-wide drainage pattern was established. The city would have a centrally planned sewer system to carry surface runoff and sanitary sewage. Alley sewers would connect with larger street sewers at intersections. Manholes were set with bricks and extended three feet below the sewer bottoms to serve as settling basins for solids. Sewers would all empty in the direction of low ground south of R Street. Because of many lead poisoning cases, pipes were to be made of iron instead of lead.

Although this was a step in the right direction, the system never operated properly. Stagnant cesspools, reeking with unbelievable stench, could be found around Sacramento. One pond, near Broadway and 18th Street was known as "the terror of the south winds" because of its stench.

In addition to these problems with the sewer system, in the 1870s indoor privies began to appear in private homes. Many were not connected to the city system, thus building up sewage underneath homes. One public official noted of the potential problems, "The water-closet within the walls of a dwelling, I cannot look upon as a safe thing." The city set up standards for disposal of private wastes, but it was not until the 1880s that the regulations began to have an effect.

The city water supply was also a great concern to early Sacramentans because polluted water spread diseases such as cholera, dysentery, and typhoid fever. Early primitive surface wells were replaced by pumping unfiltered water from the Sacramento River. This worked for a time, for the river was unpolluted, but with the increasing population, the waste dumping, and the debris from hydraulic mining, the water quickly became polluted.

Despite efforts of the Board of Health and the physicians of Sacramento, only after 1900 did Sacramento establish a deep-well system on the east side to improve water quality. Today, Sacramento has a modern system for waste and water management that has facilitated the phenomenal growth of Sacramento.

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