

MY DAD AND THE SAN JOSE PUBLIC
HEALTH DEPARTMENT

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Table of Contents

Page 1: Preface

Page 2: Picture

Page 3 - 7: A Brief History

Page 8 - 9: Epilogue

Page 10: Bibliography

Preface

I have written this essay in the hope that old-time San Joseans will remember the best of times when San Jose was truly "The Garden City", and that those new to this "Valley of Heart's Delight", (before it became known as "Silicon Valley") can be made aware of the beauty and healthy city San Jose really was.

This essay is dedicated to those pioneers in the Public Service in San Jose, California



WILLIAM B. CHAMPION

1896 - 1949

A Brief History

I must have been a very little girl when I was first made aware of the San Jose Public Health Department. I know only that that was where my Dad went when he went to work. I remember being taken frequently to "the office" where Dad worked. It was on the second floor of the old brick city hall, the police department and city jail were on the lowest floor. I remember vividly meeting Dr. Brown who was the health officer and Mr. M.B. Ball who was Dad's superior. Mr. Ball was a rather short, (Ball) stocky man and my Dad was tall and well built. They made quite a team as they, together, visited the various food establishments which they inspected.

My dad's first position in the health department was as meat inspector. He was responsible for inspecting the meat in the slaughter houses, wholesale meat processors, sausage kitchens, chicken processing plants and butcher shops.

I met many of the employees with whom Dad worked. Among those I remember fondly were Luther Sovy the bacteriologist, "Barney" Bernard the milk inspector, Dorothy Wunderlich, the public health nurse, Emilee Cornac the secretary, and other inspectors Lester Keaton and Jim MacMurtrie.

I remember vividly the stamps used with purple ink pads to stamp the products which had passed inspection, as I frequently played with the stamp and pad getting purple ink all over my clothes and hands much to the consternation of my mother. Often Dad would take me and my sisters with him on his rounds. I especially likes going to the Golden State Meat Company or the Peerless Sausage Co. where we would be given the fresh wonderful "weenies" straight from the cooking ovens. San Jose in the late 20's and all through the 30's and early 40's was perhaps the healthiest city, as far as public health was concerned, in the whole state. This was due in part to the ordinances regarding "food handling" which my father had instituted. Some of these rules are in use today. No fresh foods were allowed to be placed on top of the counters, women were required to wear hair nets whenever

handling foods. There was no outside cooking allowed by restaurants or delicatessens. Hand washing was mandatory after each task was completed. The water was tested to make sure there was no contamination, and also to make sure that the proper temperature was reached in order to clean utensils, dishes, and silverware.

After a few years as Meat Inspector, Dad was promoted to Food Inspector. This involved all food handling establishments including restaurants, grocery stores, ice cream parlors and even the local canneries.

These inspectors were meticulous in their duties - dedicated professionals who kept San Jose a wonderful healthy place to live. All manner of vermin was eradicated - flies, ants, and even some rats were reasons for citations given they were diligent inspectors.

Recently there was a letter to the editor of the San Jose Mercury relating to the "dirty" streets and places of business in San Jose during the 1930's. This is patently untrue - I practically lived on First Street between Santa Clara Street and San Carlos Street. I loved shopping in that area and I walked up and down those streets on almost a daily basis. It was never "strewn with garbage" as stated in that letter. Our vigilant inspectors would never have allowed that to happen.

When dad had occasion to inspect the restaurant at Alum Rock Park we always went with him. The park was fun (in the early years we rode the merry-go-round before it burned to the ground) the swimming pool too was a wonderful place to be during the hot summer days, but we didn't like the awful tasting mineral waters.

When I decided that I would like to research the old San Jose Public Health Department, and after talking with everyone I could find who had any memories of this, I decided to visit the California Room at the San Jose Public Library.

I was dismayed to find that there was very little relating to the origin and history of this important part of San Jose history. I found only the yearly reports given to the city managers and councilmen.

I discovered that the first full time sanitary inspector was appointed in 1914, the first full time health officer appointed in 1920, and the first public health nurse in 1922. There was no

information about who these people were, but it gave me some insight into when the department actually was formed. It had to be 1920 or 1921 for I found Dads name and occupation in the city registry of 1921 - he was listed as a Meat Inspector.

The earliest report I could find was the annual report submitted by Dr. H.C. Brown the health officer to Clarence B. Goodwin, the city manager was for the year 1926.

Mr. M.B. Bell was listed as Chief Meat and Food Inspector with Thomas Gruroell and William B. Champion listed as his assistants. Mr. Gruroell a year or two later was no longer listed but was replaced by Mr. Louie Couhape.

The reports contained many public health statistics. They reported the population for that year approximately 50,500, the birth and deaths, and included diseases of the specific body systems. All deaths were listed and the principal causes of death were listed.

In 1926 the principal causes of death were not unlike of those today. They were listed as: Organic Heart Disease, Chronic Nephritis, Cancer, Cerebral Hemorrhage, Tuberculosis, and Pneumonia. All communicable diseases were reported to the Public Health Department although tuberculosis control was limited to reporting and controlling food handlers. All other tuberculosis control was done by the Santa Clara County Tuberculosis Associations.

It was interesting to note that only one legal action was taken by the health officer in 1926. This was against a Jim Lee for conducting his laundry in an unsatisfactory sanitary manner.

A card file of all cases of communicable diseases was kept and submitted every year by the committee of disease control and kept current by the public health nurses. Miss Dorothy Wunderlich, R.N., P.H.N., was responsible for keeping these records, and visiting families where someone might be quarantined, and ^{for} visiting the schools. She was joined by Margaret Nelson, R.N., P.H.N. in 1936 or 1937. As more and more school children began being vaccinated and immunized on entering school the incidence of many of these formerly frightening diseases began to lessen.

Dr. Marshall Mason became school physician in 1930. Twenty five minutes per week were given to health instruction by teachers and nurses in the schools, and immunization of the students was carried out yearly in each school.

A monthly bulletin was mailed to all doctors, nurses, schools and social workers, and reached the public by means of the two local newspapers the San Jose Mercury News and the San Jose Mercury Herald.

In 1941 or 1942, Dr. Brown retired and Dr. Dwight Bissell became the health officer, and several new inspectors were appointed as the population grew and the war demanded more and more public health services.

In 1942, my father organized the first classes for food handlers, and he became Chief Sanitarian in the San Jose Health Department. During that time he taught classes at the University of California at Los Angeles. The sanitation field was growing, and degrees were being awarded in that field.

The first and only time I ever saw my dad really angry was in 1945 when Dr. Bissell wanted to demote him and place a friend of his, Levitt Mendel, who had a degree in sanitation, as Chief Sanitarian. Dad insisted that he and Mr. Mendel be given an examination to determine who should hold that position. Mr. Mendel appealed the decision of the examination, even threatening to quit but the Civil Service Commission saw no reason for the appeal and the decision was kept.

Due to his knowledge and years of experience Dad had passed the examination well ahead of the newcomer, and reclaimed his title and position until his early death from cancer of the pancreas in 1949. He was only 54 years of age. This was especially heart breaking as he was approached by officials in Washington D.C. regarding their desire to have him assist in the re-sanitation of war torn Europe.

I presume that Levitt Mendel became chief sanitarian but I found no information regarding this.

Dad had many many friends during the twenty five years in the health department, a few being still around and they remember him as a fair, conscientious and honest San Jose employee. Rocky Bongiorino of the Lincoln Glen Market and Paul Tedesco of the Sodality Meat Co. are only two in the meat business who remember him fondly.

In September 1968 the San Jose Public Health Department was no more. It was combined with the Santa Clara County Health Department as the need for more and more services grew with the expanding population.

This was no doubt necessary, and financially expedient, but I, Bill Champion's daughter, was saddened to know that the department he loved was no longer in existence.

Epilogue

There are far more memories than those I have related here. There are still a few left in San Jose who remember those who worked so diligently to keep the citizens healthy.

In my research I found that there was a polio epidemic in town in 1943 and 49 people fell ill to that dreaded disease. Reading that brought back memories of that year. Dad required that we be extra careful about our hygiene. We were not allowed to go to the "show" very often or to be where there would be too many crowds of people, this was before the age of antibiotics and my younger sisters were not allowed to go to peoples homes to collect newspapers for the paper drives. He felt that there was too much danger of being exposed to some communicable disease. He was most particularly worried about exposure to polio or tuberculosis. I've always been sorry that he didn't live long enough to have known the gigantic strides medicine had achieved, not the least being Salk vaccine against polio.

The decades of the 1920's and 1930's were the halcyon days of San Jose. The good health of the people reflected the diligence of theses inspectors and public health nurses. It was a clean, healthy, beautiful place to live. The valleys largest resource was horticulture - orchards, wheat, truck farms, cattle, canneries and dairy farms were predominant.

Most of this is gone now the area is given to housing and large business forcing the name change from "The Valley of Hearts Delight" to "Silicon Valley".

Several years ago I attended a city council meeting in San Jose. I had learned that the area where my parents lived all of their married life was going to be made a park - the house they moved into on the day they were married was torn down due to the airport. I pleaded that the park be named after my father, since he had resided there for so long, and in recognition of his diligent and faithful service to the city of San Jose. I was told that they didn't name parks or buildings after people any longer. I was later to find the mayor had a building named after him. Somehow I was not surprised.

Fortunate in its history, secure in its progress San Jose was the center of a wondrous setting, and this was due in large part to the caring people at the old city hall who kept it a healthy clean city. This is, I hope, a tribute to them all.

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