

History Comes Alive!

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Tales From the City Archives



Board of Civil Service Commissioners, 1905.

■ Personnel Dept. created to protect City's best asset.

As Project Director for the upcoming book on the City of Los Angeles government history covering the years 1850-2000, I am saddened that, with 26 chapters devoted to the development and growth of this incredible institution, there is not a chapter dedicated to the employees that made this unbelievable majestic City possible.

It was not an intentional omission; we had an author who was hired to do the research and writing, but he had too many commitments and had not completed enough work before he left. Therefore, it was too late to find a replacement. A few weeks ago, I spoke with the Personnel Department's General Manager, Margaret (Maggie) Whelan, and offered to rectify the omission by writing an article on this most vital part of City government evolution, the birthplace for employees into the overall City government organization.

But it must be said at this time that the additions and changes within the Civil Service/Personnel Department are vast, but in this short article only a few items are noted.

The history of the Personnel Department begins at the federal level of government in 1883 – the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act, to be exact, which established the United States Civil Service Commission. After the Civil War, the federal government's system for selecting officials and supervising their work was inconsistent and irrational. During the 19th century, the common adage "to the victor belongs the spoils," otherwise known as the "spoils system," ran rampant. A major national calamity incited the change.

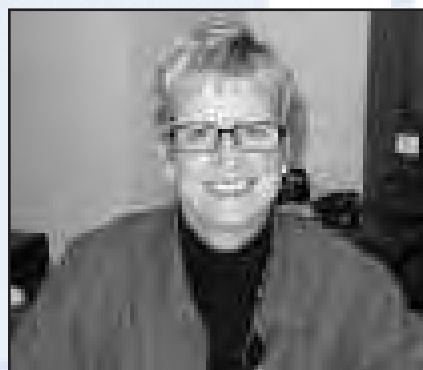
On July 2, 1881, our 20th president, James Garfield, was assassinated by a disgruntled office seeker. The Pendleton Act, sponsored by Senator George H. Pendleton of Ohio and written by the future first chairman of the U.S. Civil Services Commission, Dorman B. Eaton, a staunch opponent of the "spoils system," was passed into law January 16, 1883. The Act classified certain jobs, removing them from patronage ranks. The Commission administered a system based on merit rather than political connections.

But discontent about City officials and employment in Los Angeles government was expressed by the citizenry as far back in 1879. In February of that year, the newspaper, the Evening Express, reported that "the people of Los Angeles, having been long-suffering and

patient, have seen our hard earned money paid as taxes to irresponsible city officials...[who] squandered and lost... In return the citizenry demanded that there should be a thorough investigation of the financial affairs of the City, "including moneys collected as taxes or in any way belonging to the City of Los Angeles as well as the various public contracts and disposal of city lands and property." This, too, was part of the "spoils system."

By the 1903 amended 1889 Charter, the City's first Home Rule Charter, the Civil Service Department came into existence. Article XXIII, dedicated to the subject, states in Sec. 229, "The Mayor shall appoint, subject to confirmation by the Council, five persons known...to be devoted to the principles of civil service reform, who shall constitute and be known as the Board of Civil Service Commissioners." But the "spoils system" did not evaporate. The new Commission not only had to design new policies and procedures, but was also confronted with having to retain employees who had already tainted the system. Though in time, the merit system prevailed and the patronage system died out. One case in the 1930s returned as a political fiasco that truly sent Los Angeles government on its ear.

The new 1903 administration of five Civil Service Commissioners performed four duties that the Charter mandated: (1) Compiling a roster of all City employees and determining their individual Civil Service status; (2) Establishing Civil Service rules and regula-



Current Personnel General Manager Margaret Whelan.

tions to govern; (3) Classifying all positions under Civil Service needs; and (4) Establishing examination lists to fill City positions. These four mandates remain to this day the foundation of the Personnel Department. In 1903, there were 805 employees. Today, 103 years later, the City government population is about 47,692, including the proprietary departments.

A 1905 Charter amendment resolved that unskilled laborers were able to register as applicants, and if physically fit, were placed in order of application. The 1907 Charter amendment gave the Commission the authority to place at the head of a list any employee injured while engaged in any work for the City. Also, new provisions were made for certain exemptions by request of the department heads. In 1921, a special civil service allowance was given to veterans of war. An additional ten percent was given to honorably discharged war veterans and wives of incapacitated veterans and widows. Also, in that time period, Burton L. Hunter in his 1933 volume, *The Evolution of Municipal Organization and Administrative Practices in the City of Los*

Angeles, states, "[t]he number of names certified for any appointment was limited to two more names than the number of positions to be filled."

The 1925 Charter afforded the City to begin the modern era of the 20th century. The Civil Service Department shared with other departments many additions and changes of daily business. The following are some examples over the next few years:

(1)-November 1932 prohibited the Board on making limitations and age restrictions for candidate examinations, except for firemen and policemen; (2) May 1933: this was a new section to the Charter for the Board to provide "for the suspension and restoration to eligible lists of persons who were laid off because of lack of work, lack of funds, or other causes, except personal delinquency." (3) September 1934: a charge of \$1 for each application filed for open competitive examinations.

The 1940s and 1950s saw other enactments in the Department through Charter and Ordinance control. But in the 1930s, the old "Patronage System" raised its ugly head once again. It came during the infamous rule of Mayor Frank Shaw, 1933-39. He was the first Mayor in the country to be recalled. It was concluded he had the most corrupt municipal administration anywhere in the country, including New York and Chicago.

His brother, Joe Shaw, who was shown as a "private secretary" on the City's employee list, was in reality the Mayor's "chief fixer" in City Hall, in particular imposing his authority over the Fire and Police Departments. Mayor Shaw's infamous reputation ran far beyond employee misdoings. The issues were so scandalous the Mayor was recalled in 1937. In 1940, Joseph Shaw was convicted on 66 counts of a variety of civil service issues. On an appeal, the California Supreme Court reversed its decision on Shaw because General Manager Glenn G. Gravatt was found guilty of tampering with Civil Service Department examination scores, way before the Shaw administration came into power.

Ramifications of the misdoings in civil service were corrected by the recall of Mayor Fletcher Bowron (1938-53). There was a review of City job reclassification; test examinations were rewritten; and Bowron removed all the prior Civil Service Commissioners. Glenn Gravatt was discharged as General Manager and replaced by Burton L. Hunter, mentioned above, who served for a two-year period, 1939-41.

Name Change

On April 4, 1967, a ballot was sent to the electorate to change the name from the Civil Service Department to the Personnel Department. The requests for Charter revisions, Sections 70, 71 and 111, were sent from General Manager Muriel M. Morse to Mayor Sam Yorty. In 1966, Sam Yorty sent out a Directive instructing departments to informally refer to the employee Department as the Personnel Department. The reason for the change was due to many more responsibilities of the Department, namely more personnel management, Workman's Compensation, health insurance and more intense training. The Mayor and Council concurred over the

name change. On May 30, 1967, the name change became a reality by election, which was reflected in the 1925 Charter. The name of the Board of Civil Service Commissioners remained the same.

The 1970s gave the Personnel Department greater depth in the needs of the employee. On June 8, 1973, the City's first Affirmative Action Plan was adopted. In August 1974, the Board of Civil Service Commissioners adopted the first City of Los Angeles Affirmative Action Program. Both programs were vital to ending discrimination on many levels, the developing of action plans, and much, much more.

In 2000, a new City Charter came into being. This updated written constitution diminished some of the power of the Civil Service Commissioners, which had been in existence for almost one hundred years, and granted the Executive Staff more operating authority.

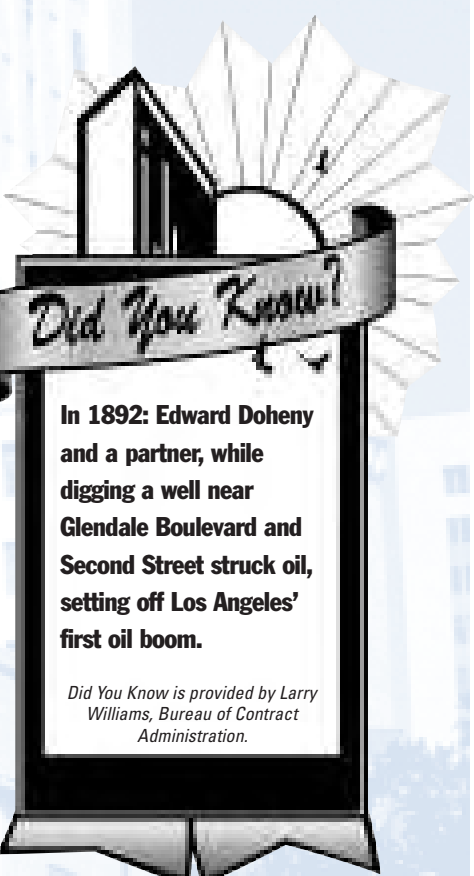
The Personnel Department is truly a living, breathing entity. It is not only the employee birthplace, but the structure gives



Center: Muriel Morse, General Manager, 1967

Photo courtesy Herald Examiner Collection, Los Angeles Public Library, Carolyn Cole, Photo Archive Director.

the employee a total lifestyle from birth to retirement in City government. My only sadness is that there is not enough space to give this monumental Department the total historic story it deserves.



Did You Know?
In 1892: Edward Doheny and a partner, while digging a well near Glendale Boulevard and Second Street struck oil, setting off Los Angeles' first oil boom.

Did You Know is provided by Larry Williams, Bureau of Contract Administration.