

History Comes Alive!

~ Tales From the City Archives ~



by Michael E. Holland
City Archivist

Photos courtesy the City Archives and the Los Angeles Public Library

The history of LA's air pollution goes all the way back to Juan Cabrillo's observations from his ship off San Pedro Bay in 1542. He described watching the smoke from American Indian fires rise up into the sky and proceed to flatten out horizontally, referring to the area as "the bay of smokes." Smog is as much a part of the Los Angeles DNA as the movies, freeways and the beaches. We can't seem to get rid of the brown sky image, even though the air is better nowadays everywhere.

But how do we define "clean air" today? Advances in automobiles and public transportation have helped reduce smog along with controls on refineries and other smokestack industries. The noxious fumes from the slaughterhouses and soap plants of the old days are the ancestors of the recent *sriracha* sauce factory in the local news. But I wonder if we would be able to smell the *sriracha* at all if we still burned our trash today. Who remembers Smog Red and Smog Green? Who remembers the backyard incinerator?

The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors spent almost a decade creating policies that would start cleaning up the air in Southern California. Big industries lobbied hard against new rules and equipment they saw as too expensive and intrusive, but they eventually gave in to modest reforms. The City of Los Angeles played a big part in



Backyard incinerators, 1957.

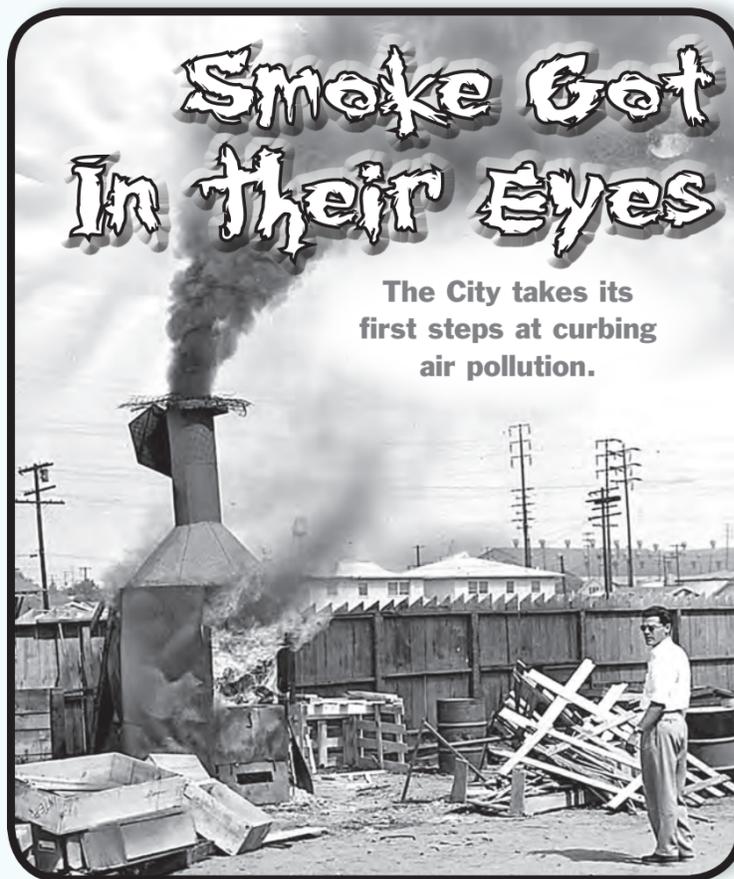
the first of many fights over the next few decades when they started making changes that affected their citizens directly in how they lived. It started when they changed the rules for the backyard incinerator.



An officer of the county's Air Pollution Control District (APCD) measures air quality at an incinerator site. The APCD, created in 1947, was the first of its kind in the nation.

A 1950 LA County report described incinerators in Los Angeles as a "firmly established, although somewhat unique, practice of long years standing. It is unique in that backyard incinerators are virtually unknown elsewhere in the country." Private homeowners and landlords had been allowed to burn their rubbish since the turn of the century. There was an existing business of incinerator dealers and service providers. The practice was entrenched well enough that City voters approved two bond measures in 1947 and 1949 to build municipal incinerators at a cost of more than \$4 million. They were to be located in various parts of the City servicing the local users. There was one central incinerator already in use that began operating in the 1920s.

The City's official incinerator, locat-



Backyard incinerators such as these were commonplace in LA and one of the causes of the City's smog problem. Photo from 1957.

Smoke Got In their Eyes

The City takes its first steps at curbing air pollution.

ed on 26th Street bordering the city of Vernon, operated under strict rules of what constituted "combustible rubbish" – what could be burned and what had to be taken to the City dump instead. The Los Angeles Municipal Code allowed combustible rubbish to include "carpet, rags, clothing, books, boots, shoes... articles that will incinerate through contact with flames of ordinary temperature." "Garbage" was defined as "animal and vegetable refuse... used in the preparation as food." The distinction was important because there were hog producers who operated legally outside the City limits and were allowed to feed garbage to their hogs. "Non-combustible" were bottles, tin cans and broken crockery. No one used the word "trash" in everyday language at this time in favor of "rubbish."

But residents in the City and county could burn their own rubbish if they had an incinerator on their property. The only rule had been that their rubbish be burned within 24 hours. But starting in 1940, the City passed an ordinance specifying hours of burning between 6 and 9 a.m. daily. By 1946, the rules had expanded to disallow use of barbecues to burn rubbish and require spark arrestors on the stacks, and operating hours were extended to 10 a.m. Metal pails of cold ashes were hauled away by sanitation workers.

The county started taking the first steps in controlling air pollution with the creation of the Air Pollution Control District in 1948. Their first targets were the smokestack industries including refineries, foundries and mills. There was growing scientific evidence that hydrocarbons and nitrous dioxide plus sunlight created smog. The APCD sought to control other sources of pollution, the backyard incinerator among them, but they needed a big city partner to take that first step. Los Angeles was ready in the autumn of 1954.

Council File 65937 begins with a new ordinance 104,301, which changed the hours of rubbish burning from the morning hours to a new schedule of 4 to 7 p.m. The idea was that, without sunlight, smog wouldn't form and the evening breezes would carry away the smoke. This was the reasoning behind the City Council's approval of the ordinance on Oct. 21, 1954. It would take effect on Nov. 10 for a 90-day trial period.

Before the council acted, City Clerk Walter Petersen had sent a letter to every city clerk in every city in the county, advising them of the upcoming vote and the text of the resolution. The county continued to push the various city councils to adopt the new rules. Within a week of LA's vote, Santa Monica had approved the change in hours, while Rancho Palos Verdes and El Monte were among the cities considering the resolution. El Segundo was considering changing the hours to 3 to 6 p.m. Other cities chose not to discuss the matter locally.

Angry letters started coming into Mayor Norris Poulson's office complaining about twilight burning of trash within days of the council vote. "Is it not enough

that we must suffer from gaseous smog all day, without adding insult to injury by night burning of trash?" wrote one woman. Another letter read, "Those responsible for this new law have made no study of facts... are you *men* or politicians?" Yet another asked pointedly, "Do all of you live out of the city where the air is clearer?" But the ordinance took effect as scheduled and was then extended after the initial trial ended. The debate on who was responsible for smog continued.

A 1956 public opinion study found in Council file 73154 focused on 3,000 county residents about their thoughts on air pollution and the effect on their health and a trash collection fee. Sixty-five percent of respondents believed smog had gotten worse during the previous year; 61 percent believed their health had suffered because of smog. But nearly 30 percent of those surveyed had not noticed an increase in smog or ill effects. Half of the survey sample expressed a desire to leave Los Angeles because of the air pollution and the other half did not. The cited sources of smog led with industry at 39 percent, automobiles at 28 percent, but only five percent for home incinerators. Twenty-three percent of respondents had no opinion on who generated the pollution.

The subject of a trash collection fee generated mixed results – 67 percent favored a fee and the rest did not. The majority of those in opposition believed home incinerators were not responsible, and 73 percent stated that automobiles should have exhaust controls installed. Some people expressed other concerns not related to air quality – 21 percent believed a fee would lead to "politics and graft," and 11 percent objected to the collection fee of \$1.50 per month as "excessive." By the summer of 1956, the City



A line of trucks awaits unloading at the City's municipal incinerator on East 26th Street (photo undated).

had started to phase in trash collection in areas where incinerator use was being phased out. A total ban was in place on Oct. 1, 1957.

Norris Poulson was re-elected in 1957 even as the total ban on incinerators was taking effect. But his luck ran out four years later. Former congressman Sam Yorty used the incinerator ban and the problems of separated waste collection in his populist effort that unseated the two-term mayor. Of course, it turns out that burning trash was only one of many sources of air pollution. Smog Red/Green may be gone, but we still have Burn/No Burn days from the Air Quality Management District right now. Many battles would follow to bring us the relatively clean air we enjoy today. But that is a story for another day.

Some "History Comes Alive!" columns can be heard on 89.3-KPCC's Off-Ramp, online at www.kpcc.org/offramp/



A mock funeral is held for this then-outlawed backyard incinerator, 1957.