

Chapter 10: Suburban Slips Away; Oklahoma City Gets Treated to Waste

The early years of town government were fraught with trials and tribulations. Two of the major issues that faced the city were water and sewer service.

Just a few short months after the town was incorporated, the Suburban Water Company began making overtures to sell their private water system to the town. This endeavor quickly became sticky as the town attorney, Charles France also happened to be co-owner of the water system. In an apparent attempt to rid the town of an embarrassing conflict of interest, the town trustees quickly moved to distance themselves by abruptly ending the relationship. France was replaced as town counsel by an attorney named Albert Lynn. In keeping with the practice up to this point, town officials didn't go far to find Lynn. Lynn was a law partner of Sylvanus G. Felix, a close business partner of Floyd Harrison.

The town was very deliberative, some would say too much so, in its approach to the Suburban Water System question. The trustees examined the assets and liabilities of Suburban, but opted not to buy the system. According to Mayor John Chiaf, the system was appraised at a value of \$400,000. Oppenheim and France, however, wanted \$700,000 for the system.

Sensing that there was a problem, Floyd Harrison invited the trustees to his home to in a vain attempt to convince Chiaf and his fellow trustees to buy the system. According to Harrison, he had arranged for the town to purchase the system with no money down. The sales pitch apparently fell on deaf ears and the trustees balked. Chiaf recalls being disappointed that Suburban never provided an alternate appraisal that might be more acceptable to the town at that time. Chiaf, still to this day defends his position by maintaining that he and his fellow trustee's wanted to acquire the system but couldn't in good conscience pay that much for it. Continuing to hold out for a better deal, the trustees even considered going before the Corporation Commission for assistance.

Time passed by and Oklahoma City began to take an interest in the Suburban Water Company. In January 1952, rumors began to fly and the trustees considered reports that Oklahoma City was earnestly weighing its option to buy Suburban. The trustees, however, did not take the reports seriously and felt no urgency to act. However, by the summer of '52, and much to their chagrin, Oklahoma City had quietly consummated negotiations to purchase the water system at a price of \$1.2 million, --an amount three times higher than its appraised value. This was incomprehensible to town officials and the high price paid by Oklahoma City indeed raised some eyebrows.

Apparently oblivious to the potential future value of the system, town officials decided not to oppose Oklahoma City's purchase of the water system. In the absence of a counter offer from the Town of The Village and without a

fight, Oklahoma City took over the over Suburban Water Company in October of 1952. A year and a half later, permission was granted by the town to allow Oklahoma City to build additional water lines in The Village.

Oklahoma City's operation of their newly acquired water system, however, was not without difficulty. The first two summers were brutally dry and Oklahoma City had been forced to ration water. This caused some anxiety with local officials and in late '54 town officials discussed taking over the water system from Oklahoma City. Town officials quickly backed off this notion due to the high cost of sinking the many wells that would have been required to provide an adequate water supply. The bottom line was that local officials didn't think they could do any better than Oklahoma City in obtaining a dependable supply of water.

In March '55 high water rates prompted additional debate over purchasing the water system. With the passage of time, the prospect of buying the water system had become even more costly and complex and the question was once again put on the back burner.

Over the course of time, this issue would be revisited on several occasions. A hefty water rate increase in 1977 actually led to sufficient public outcry that City Fathers commissioned a study to determine the feasibility of taking over the water system. That study also concluded that the costs were prohibitive and the issue has not since been given further consideration.

Oklahoma City's ownership and operation of the local water system led to some interesting jurisdictional clashes early on. Oklahoma City, being the owner and operator of the water system, apparently felt justified in trying to exert authority over plumbing inspections in The Village. The gist of their argument was that plumbers tied into "their" lines and they, i.e. Oklahoma City, would be ultimately responsible for the safety of the water supply. Oklahoma City, so the argument went, should therefore be responsible for and exert control over plumbing inspections in The Village. It was a good argument, but this was The Village, --not Oklahoma City, and the town proudly stood its ground and refused to relinquish control over this local function.

One major obstacle to development of the area we know today as The Village was the availability of a reliable sewer system. The original Village Addition was arguably given its greatest impetus by the formation of Sewer District No. 3. Sewer District No. 3 had been created and operated by Oklahoma County since the late 1940's but was purchased by The Village in 1959.

In a newspaper article written by Floyd Myers in 1975, Myers reminisced about some of the early sewage problems.

"Naturally physical problems were encountered, some serious, or more so than the political ones. Perhaps the most serious, a sewerage

disposal system. Before a permanent plant could be built, the urgency of the situation demanded immediate action. We, accordingly, constructed a temporary system composed of a large digester tank, pumps to collect the overflow, and pumps to propel the fluid to nearby ponds or lagoons. (The lagoons were located somewhere in what is today the vicinity of Carlton Way and Village Drive.) The pumps were heavy-duty impeller design and wired to operate alternately. This installation was located just west of what is now a large apartment complex on North Pennsylvania (Originally Whispering Hills Apartments). Twice a day inspections were required to insure continuous and safe operation. I personally assumed the chore.

On one Thanksgiving morning, I ventured dutifully. On first inspection, both the sump pumps were not working. I called the pump installers for help. Upon arrival, the pumps were pulled and [inspection] revealed an almost unbelievable sight, --wrapped around the impellers were the discarded devices, common in that day to slow down the population explosion. To clean and repair took a long, long day. It was a lousy Thanksgiving.”

The city's purchase of the sewer district in 1959 would lead to one of the hottest political issues in the history of the young community. Gene Bumpass, the first and then city manager, told it this way.

“When it [the sewerage disposal system] was operated by the county, we were 90 to 95 percent users. But, when it became part of The Village, taxes had to be used to pay off bonded indebtedness and there was a service charge too. Consequently, many felt it amounted to double taxation and the issue became a major controversy. It was still the same amount of money, but it was just divided up differently,” recalled Bumpass.

As the community grew throughout the 50's and 60's, the city's sewage system expanded to meet the growing demands. Outfall lines and interceptor lines were added to the system. But, with ever increasing amounts of sewage discharge, the city's treatment plant located just east of Pennsylvania on NW 115th Street slowly but surely began to experience problems. Costly repairs were a frequent occurrence as the plant strained to meet the increased demand.

By 1963, odor from the plant started to become a significant liability for the city. Just a whiff away from the treatment plant was the Twin Penn Drive-In Theatre and the unpleasant odor had a tendency to drift in the direction of moviegoers from time to time. One can only imagine what effect the malodorous gas might have had on hormone enriched teenagers who frequented the theatre, --except, perhaps, to help keep the teenage birth rate under control. Whatever the case, the stench wasn't doing much

for business and the owners of the theatre, Jerry and Lewis Barton, soon began to make a stink about the stink.

As the dispute dragged on, the rhetoric on both sides picked up steam. In one heated exchange Councilman Bob Blakeley retorted, "Barton knew the plant was there when he built the drive-in. His prevailing prices are a lot worse than the odors he's complaining about [especially] when you consider the kind of pictures he's showing there."

According to Blakeley, the desire to get rid of the sewer plant had more to do with land speculation than odor.

"The drive-in is located to the south of the plant and everyone knows that in the summer time the prevailing winds are from the south," said Blakeley. "At \$8,000 an acre, that's a lot of speculation," added Blakeley.

In spite of the bellicose oratory, the city proceeded to act in good faith and moved to increase the capacity of the sewage plant by making application to the State Health Department for a permit to build additional lagoons on the site.

And, in what now seems somewhat naïve, if not comical, the city tried experimenting with an atmospheric spray for odor control, -- a thought which conjures up images of a colossal can of bathroom freshener ejecting a measured dose of potpourri to mask the offensive odor emanating from the plant. Needless to say, the novel idea didn't help much and the feces finally hit the fan, so to speak, in 1964 when the Bartons filed a civil action against the city.

The civil action dragged on for more than a year but in late 1965 the city eventually prevailed in the suit. The victory, regardless how satisfying it might have been at the time, would, however, only postpone the inevitable as the area surrounding the treatment plant was beginning to develop. It would only be a matter of time before the odor problems would lead to more public outcry and rancor.

Despite their legal setback, Jerry and Lewis Barton pressed on with the issue and paid the Council a visit in early 1966 hoping to bury the hatchet and to keep the dialog open. The Bartons had learned of Oklahoma City's plan to install a new outfall line and treatment plant to serve the Chisholm Creek Drainage area. They encouraged the city to investigate the possibility of tying into Oklahoma City's system.

The proposal was certainly worth exploring but Oklahoma City's proposed improvements were still a long way off. Four years later, in the

spring of 1970, Oklahoma City formally proposed a joint agreement between the two cities for Oklahoma City to treat the city's sewerage.

The Council directed the city manager to proceed with negotiations. It would not be an easy undertaking, especially for Oklahoma City. Not only did they have to contend with complex and increasingly stringent EPA regulations, but with the City of Guthrie as well. Guthrie officials it seems weren't too keen on the idea of a large sewage treatment facility being built just upwind from their historical community.

Oklahoma City pressed on but it would take almost the entire decade for all the all the hoops and hurdles to be cleared. In 1979 the deal was finally concluded and Oklahoma City began treating the city's sewerage. As part of the deal, Oklahoma City agreed to never charge sewage customers in The Village more than they charge sewage customers within their own jurisdiction.

The old disposal plant, by this time in an advanced state of entropy, was abandoned and later demolished. To this day, Oklahoma City continues to treat our solid and liquefied human excrescence and will most likely do so in "poop-etuity." [groan]