

# DAISY'S STORY: A TALE OF SACRAMENTO IN THE PROGRESSIVE ERA

*Lorraine Dias Herbon*

---

Sacramento traditionally swelters in the summer heat, and August 9, 1915, saw temperatures soaring into the mid to upper 90's.<sup>1</sup> However, it was Saturday, and for seven-year-old Daisy Dias and two of her brothers, it was an opportunity to play outside in the sunshine, far away from the daily grind of schoolwork and household chores. The three children, as they had done many times before, walked the short distance from their home on 3<sup>rd</sup> Street in Sacramento to the grounds of the city's incinerator.<sup>2</sup> Located on the block between U and V, Front and Second Streets, the incinerator grounds saw many neighborhood residents crossing its boundaries, from children seeking a place to play to adults using it as a shortcut between Second Street and the embarcadero along the Sacramento River.<sup>3</sup> The deposits of garbage awaiting incineration in the giant furnace especially captivated the local children, tantalizing them with the promise of buried treasure. Daisy Dias was no exception. Spotting a porcelain doll laying just off the path she was walking, she impulsively stepped onto a pile of hardened ashes in an effort to secure the precious dolly for herself. Without warning, the cool crust on the top of the ashes gave way, and Daisy found herself sinking up to her thighs in hot ashes beneath.<sup>4</sup>

One can only imagine the little girl's screams as she desperately tried to push herself out of the smoldering embers. Equally horrific must have been the panic of her two brothers, just nine and five years old themselves, as they hastened to help their sister, pulling her from the ashes and crying out for adult assistance. Suffering burns to her legs, her forearms, and her hands, Daisy Dias died an agonizing eight days later from tetanus as a result of her injuries.<sup>5</sup>

Daisy's story has passed down through the generations of her family. Though tragic, the details surrounding her accident and surrounding the installation and maintenance of Sacramento's incinerator provide an interesting glimpse at a Progressive Era reform effort that was emblematic of both the good

- 
1. "Weather Forecast," *Sacramento Bee*, August 9, 1915.
  2. Dias family oral history as related to the author by her grandfather, Bart V. Dias.
  3. *Dias vs. City of Sacramento*, Superior Court of California, County of Sacramento, Case No. 20756. Accessed at the Center for Sacramento History, Sacramento, California.
  4. Dias family oral history as related to the author by her grandfather, Bart V. Dias.
  5. State of California, Department of Health Services, *Death Certificate of Daisy Dias*, August 17, 1915.

that came from that time and the shortcomings that tended to limit the success of reform endeavors. The civic leaders of Sacramento, as did others in leadership positions throughout the country, went about their business of governance with many of the characteristics typical of the Progressive Era.

***“The effort to improve the city was compromised by class and ethnic biases.”***

These characteristics included the conviction that technology could solve many of society's problems, a belief in the benefits of sanitation for both health and moral improvement, and faith in the power of the collective efforts of citizens to affect change.

Unfortunately, in this instance, the effort to improve the city through the installation of a modern garbage incinerator was compromised by other characteristics common to many Progressives—class and ethnic biases that tended to lash out, however benignly or inadvertently, against immigrant working-class Americans. Despite the biases against them and the diversity among them, however, residents of a Sacramento neighborhood banded together to protect their homes and businesses, a legacy of collaboration that has lasted to this very day.

Historians measure the Progressive Era as lasting from roughly 1890 until 1920. In many ways, it was a reaction to the tumultuous growth and change occurring in the United States as a result of the Industrial Revolution during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Progressives overall sought new solutions to the new problems of their individual communities and for the nation as a whole. According to historian Michael McGerr in *A Fierce Discontent*, middle-class men and women provided the driving force behind Progressive Era reforms throughout the United States. At the dawn of the twentieth century, these predominately white Protestant Americans had come to the opinion that both the upper class and the working class had developed values and practices that were unfamiliar, strange and, in some sense, even un-American. The Industrial Revolution had produced a definite divide between the classes; the merchants, shopkeepers, and professionals who made up the middle class saw the traditional values that had once encompassed the nation torn asunder. Middle-class men and women felt caught in the cross-fire between business and labor, between the very wealthy and the very poor, and they sought reforms to ensure safety and a secure future for both themselves and their children.<sup>6</sup>

The civic leaders in Sacramento just after the turn of the century comprised exactly the type of middle-class reformers about whom McGerr has written. The City Council of 1905 included nine men, all of whom were white, all but one of whom were born in the United States.<sup>7</sup> While eight of these men were first-generation American, their parents all emigrated from countries in the north and west of Europe, including Ireland, Germany and England. The lone foreign-born councilman, James Popert, was born in Germany but had lived in the United States for over 30 years by the time of his service to the city. The majority of the Councilmembers were independent businessmen, including a restaurateur,

---

6. Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 79.

7. During the period covered in this work, Sacramento's leadership body was known at various times as a Board of Trustees, a Board of Commissioners, and a City Council. For clarity, the current designation of the leadership body, City Council, is used here.

a druggist, and four shopkeepers. There was only one man on the Council of that time identified as a laborer, R. E. Callahan, and he was a skilled laborer at that, a plasterer.<sup>8</sup> These men and men like them made up the backbone of the solid middle-class. In a city the size of Sacramento, they encompassed exactly the type of men one could expect to find in leadership roles during the Progressive Era.

As in many cities across the United States, Progressive reform efforts in Sacramento took a variety of forms. The city's (and the state's) largest employer, the Southern Pacific Railroad, had long dominated city government. Largely due to this situation, Sacramentans became early proponents of the "good government" movement sweeping California, hoping to root out the undue influence exerted by the railroad.<sup>9</sup> Civic leaders also promoted efforts to curtail illegal gambling, change the City Charter to make politicians more accountable and responsive, and worked to boost the image across California and throughout the nation that Sacramento was a fine place to live.<sup>10</sup>

Reformers in Sacramento and across the country sought to improve their communities in another way, through a theory called positive environmentalism. Positive environmentalism proposed the idea that improving the aesthetic and sanitary conditions of a community could inspire its residents to become better citizens.<sup>11</sup> According to engineer William Mayo Venable in his 1906 work *Garbage Crematories in America*, the goal of ridding the world of corruption in both government and private sector businesses also applied to a desire to improve the waste disposal methods of a city.<sup>12</sup> Michael Melosi, an historian who published *Garbage in the Cities* in 1981, put it another way. He wrote that the Progressives believed that "polluting the physical surroundings threatened health and promoted squalor....One could hardly expect citizens to seek moral and material progress in a despoiled habitat."<sup>13</sup> To build a community of good citizens, the physical surroundings needed to reflect a clean, orderly environment. In Sacramento, the effort to improve the community and its residents included new and more efficient means to dispose of solid waste materials.

As Sacramento civic leaders moved toward improving the community through positive environmentalism, they did so with a typical Progressive Era belief in the supremacy of science and technological innovation. The first decades of the twentieth century saw an increased emphasis on the use of technology to resolve problems, both in civic government and in the private sector. Garbage

- 
8. Ancestry.com. 1910 *United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2006. Original data: United States of America, Bureau of the Census. *Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910*. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1910, T624, 1,178 rolls.
  9. Steven M. Avella, *Sacramento and the Catholic Church: Shaping a Capital City* ( Reno, Nevada: University of Nevada Press, 2008), 138.
  10. Steven M. Avella, *Sacramento Indomitable City* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Press, 2003), 78.
  11. Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1978), 190.
  12. Martin V. Melosi, *Garbage in the Cities: Refuse, Reform, and the Environment, 1880-1980* (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 1981), 105.
  13. *Ibid.*, 109-110.

incinerators constituted the cutting edge in waste disposal methods of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; as Martin Melosi put it, “disposal by fire was hailed as a technological panacea.”<sup>14</sup> Installation of the first incinerator in the United States had occurred in New York Harbor in 1885 for the United States government.<sup>15</sup> Following those initial efforts, the use of garbage incinerators spread across the country, from New York to West Virginia, to Pennsylvania and to Iowa.<sup>16</sup> According to John Joseph Cosgrove, in his 1909 work, *History of Sanitation*, “...at the present time most of the large cities of the United States have constructed garbage destructors, or are seriously considering the step.”<sup>17</sup> Sacramento was even a little ahead of the curve when they began considering the benefits of garbage incineration in late 1904. By bringing in the latest technology, civic leaders believed they were well on their way to creating a better environment for their residents.

Sacramento's leaders needed to ensure that they were employing the best and most effective means of garbage disposal when they made the decision to move from traditional landfills to an incinerator. As they accepted bids from various vendors of incinerators and “garbage destructors,” they also sought information and endorsements from other cities employing this technology to eliminate solid waste material. Among the cities raving about the benefits of incinerators were Spokane, Washington, Atlanta, Georgia, Minneapolis, Minnesota, and Johnstown, Pennsylvania. In addition, Sacramento city officials received correspondence from civic leaders in Los Angeles as to their findings as they contemplated the installation of an incinerator in that city.<sup>18</sup> It looked as if this new technology was having a positive impact across the country, and Sacramento was ready and willing to jump on the bandwagon.

Sacramento officials wanted still more investigation, however, before they committed. In early 1905, Mayor W. J. Hassett sent a representative, a Mr. C. M. Phinney, to Spokane, Washington, to investigate the operation of that city's state-of-the-art garbage incinerator. Mr. Phinney reported back to Sacramento city officials that the incinerator he had observed seemed sufficient to destroy the garbage collected; however, in spite of promises to the contrary, odors still emanated from the machinery. Possibly because of the health implications of these odors, Spokane city leaders made the decision to place the incinerator under the jurisdiction of their city's Health Officer.<sup>19</sup> The members of Sacramento's City Council reviewed and discussed this information upon its presentation, but they would seem to forget what they had learned when complaints rose in later years about the smoke and odors surrounding

---

14. Ibid., 48.

15. Richard C. Corey, *Principles and Practices of Incineration* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1969), 3.

16. Martin V. Melosi, *Garbage in the Cities*, 48.

17. John Joseph Cosgrove, *History of Sanitation* (Pittsburgh: Standard Sanitary Manufacturing Co., 1909), 116-117.

18. City of Sacramento, *City Council Minute Records 1905*, folder marked “Miscellaneous Reports 1/2 – 2/20,” Box 75. Accessed at the Center for Sacramento History, Sacramento, California.

19. City of Sacramento, *City Council Minute Records 1905*, folder marked “Miscellaneous Reports 1/2 – 2/20,” Box 75. Accessed at the Center for Sacramento History, Sacramento, California.

Sacramento's own incinerator.

Having thoroughly investigated the technology and the results from other communities across the United States, the Sanitation Committee, an offshoot of the City Council, began studying the three proposals received from private companies to install and maintain an incinerator for the city. With the

***“One Councilmember dissented. The influence of financial savings on the businessmen on the City Council proved strong.”***

testimonials and the site visit, the Committee decided to recommend the bid from the DeCarie Company to install their DeCarie Patent Incinerator, a model similar to that in Spokane.<sup>20</sup> One Councilmember and member

of the Sanitation Committee, however, dissented from the recommendation. Councilman George Rider strongly urged his fellow Councilmembers to choose the less-expensive alternative offered, the Meldrum model offered by P. F. Dundon Steel Manufacturing of San Francisco. The financial savings achieved by choosing the Dundon model amounted to just over \$6,000. The businessmen on the City Council well understood the notion of financial savings, and Rider's influence proved strong. The City Council took Rider's recommendation over the strongly voiced opposition of the other members of the Sanitation Committee, and Dundon won the contract to install Sacramento's first garbage incinerator.<sup>21</sup> Were the Councilmembers not swayed by their faith in their ability to manage money, they may have made a decision more in line with public health needs rather than in financial savings.

Indications are that the members of Sacramento's City Council had the best of intentions when they decided to install the incinerator. They followed the prevailing wisdom of the Progressive Era with regard to technology and sanitation; from all appearances, it is clear that their motives were noble. Unfortunately, those good intentions did not cover the site selection for placement of the incinerator. Here the Council fell short of its reform-minded intentions, when the members let traditional class and ethnic biases color their judgment. This, too, was in keeping with Progressive Era characteristics.

The Progressive Era, with all its good intentions toward improvement in government, the betterment of everyday life for the citizens, and the elimination of the wickedness believed to be inherent in urban life, was still a time in which bias, both classism and racism, ran rampant. The years between 1890 and 1920 saw some of the most restrictive immigration laws in the country's history. No less a person than Theodore Roosevelt, the Progressive reformer in the White House, was concerned about the ongoing flood of immigrants to America's shores. In his first State of the Union address after becoming President, Roosevelt warned that the current immigration laws existing in 1901 were insufficient. Under Roosevelt's watch, immigration law placed new restrictions based on the political views and economic feasibility of the immigrant seeking residency in the United States.<sup>22</sup>

20. City of Sacramento, *City Council Minute Records 1905*, folder "Miscellaneous Reports 5/15-5/26," Box 76. Accessed at the Center for Sacramento History, Sacramento, California.

21. City of Sacramento, *City Council Minutes*, Vol. 12, Pages 244-246. Accessed at the Center for Sacramento History, Sacramento, California.

22. Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 211-212.

Immigration during the Progressive Era differed in two major ways from the immigration that had occurred during the nineteenth century. First, the number of immigrants stepping onto American shores was higher than ever before, with fifteen million new arrivals during the period between 1894 and 1914. Second, these immigrants flowing into the United States in such large numbers did not feature the same ethnic makeup as their predecessors of the nineteenth century. In his book *A Very Different Age*, historian Steven J. Diner notes that the majority of immigrants arriving after 1890 were from southern and eastern Europe, from Italy, Russia, Greece, Romania, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Turkey. These new U.S. residents were not predominantly Protestant and the languages they spoke were unfamiliar to American ears.<sup>23</sup> Many Americans reacted to this influx of strangers with suspicion and distrust, and it showed in the laws enacted and the actions undertaken.

On the West Coast of the United States, concerns about immigration focused primarily on would-be citizens arriving from Asia, although the states felt keenly the influx of eastern and southern Europeans. In 1903, Congress renewed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 at the urging of President Roosevelt, legislation that was far more restrictive than any impacting immigration from Europe.<sup>24</sup> Also

***“The Second Ward citizens, largely foreign-born, did not seem to have the political clout as the ‘more American’ neighborhoods in other wards.”***

under fire in the West at this time were immigrants from Japan, especially as the majority had settled in California. Initially protective of Japanese immigration, at least to some degree and due possibly to a need

for positive diplomatic relations with Japan, President Roosevelt eventually caved to pressure from white westerners and allowed greater restrictions on Japanese people seeking to enter the United States.<sup>25</sup>

In Sacramento, the Second Ward especially was an enclave for immigrants and first generation Americans. Located from the center of K Street to the southern edge of the City limits (roughly where Broadway runs today) and from the Sacramento River to 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, the area became known as the “South Side.”<sup>26</sup> According to the 1900 U.S. Census, while the city of Sacramento overall was home to a population that was 57 percent foreign-born or first generation American, the Second Ward’s residents included 72 percent who were either immigrants from other lands or had at least one foreign-born parent.<sup>27</sup> The majority of Sacramento’s first-generation or foreign-born residents were from Germany

23. Steven J. Diner, *A Very Different Age: Americans of the Progressive Era* (New York: Hill and Ward, 1998), 77.

24. Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 212

25. Ibid, 212-213.

26. City of Sacramento, *City Council Minutes*, Vol. 12, Page 465. Accessed at the Center for Sacramento History, Sacramento, California.

27. United States Census Bureau, *Census of Population and Housing: 1900 Census*, <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/decennial/1900.htm>. Methodology used to identify immigrant or first-generation Americans in Sacramento’s Second Ward included a page-by-page review of digital copies of original census pages, available through Ancestry.com. *1900 United States Federal Census* [database on-line].

and Ireland, but, as was the case throughout the nation, there were a growing number of Italian immigrants as well as newcomers from South America and Mexico. The Second Ward was home to a large population of Portuguese families, as well as residents of Irish, German, and Italian descent. In addition, the Second Ward housed a large number of residents of Japanese ancestry and a smattering of residents with Chinese ancestry. These Asian immigrants made up nearly 11 percent of the Ward's total population.<sup>28</sup> Contrasted with the population of the entire City, these Second Ward citizens, largely foreign-born, did not seem to have the political clout as the "more American" neighborhoods in other wards.

The immigrant status not only affected the way in which the rest of Sacramento viewed the Second Ward, it was also somewhat different due to its mainly working-class population. Just as with the issue of immigration, Progressive Era minds were conflicted about class status. Dr. David Paul Nord, a professor of journalism at Indiana University, wrote in 1982 of the paradoxical way in which the Progressives viewed class. Nord points out, like McGerr, that the majority of reform-minded individuals were members of the white middle class, and these good citizens maintained a strong belief in popular democracy. Yet, at the same time, they found it within themselves to support "class-biased social reforms and undemocratic structural changes in city government."<sup>29</sup> This certainly was the case in Sacramento as the debate over the site of the city incinerator came to a head.

The majority of the residents of the Second Ward were part of the working class at the dawn of the twentieth century. In a study of 175 heads of household identified in the 1900 Census, 50 percent were unskilled laborers, including bartenders, laundrymen, hostlers, railroad workers, and servants. Another 30 percent listed themselves as skilled laborers, including engineers, machinists, tailors, musicians, barbers, plumbers, and carpenters. There were only 23 merchants counted in this cross-section of the Second Ward, including grocers, restaurateurs, and boardinghouse owners; an additional 11 residents claimed white-collar jobs, including salesmen and women, clerks, insurance agents, typewriters, and bookkeepers.<sup>30</sup> All considered, according to this sample, the skilled and unskilled workers made up 80 percent of the Second Ward's employed heads of household.<sup>31</sup> With a City Council

28. Ancestry.com. *1900 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2004. Original data: United States of America, Bureau of the Census. *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900*. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1900. T623, 1854 rolls.

29. David Paul Nord, "The Paradox of Municipal Reform in the Late Nineteenth Century," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, Vol. 66, No. 2 (Winter, 1982-1983), 129.

30. To determine these statistics, the author conducted a page-by-page review of digital copies of original census pages for Sacramento's Second Ward, accessed through Ancestry.com. *1900 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. A total of 483 residents in the Second Ward were identified as heads of household who listed a paying occupation. Of those, a sample of 175 residents (36%) was taken to identify their occupations.

31. Ancestry.com. *1900 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2004. Original data: United States of America, Bureau of the Census. *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900*. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1900. T623, 1854 rolls.

populated mainly by self-employed merchants, the polyglot laborers of the Second Ward would have seemed like just the type of people who would benefit from the positive environmentalism embodied by a new garbage incinerator.

When the time came to make the decision for the site of the new incinerator, the ethnic and class status of the residents in each ward played a role, whether consciously or unconsciously, in spite of the best intentions. In the spring of 1905, the Councilmembers agreed that each of them would identify a possible location within their ward where the incinerator could be appropriately located.<sup>32</sup> Here the

***“When the time came to make the decision for the site of the new incinerator, the ethnic and class status of the residents in each ward played a role.”***

Council found itself caught on the horns of a dilemma. The very citizens whose moral improvement was their goal lived in the Second Ward. When the decision came for the location of the

new incinerator, with its attendant odors, health risks, safety concerns, and unfortunate appearance, the Councilmembers representing the eight other wards in the city were determined not to see the incinerator placed within their neighborhoods.<sup>33</sup> Here was a “not in my backyard” approach to politics that would still seem familiar 100 years later.

The actual debate over where to locate the incinerator took place during June of 1905. City Surveyor J. C. Pierson and Councilmember George Rider recommended a site on the block surrounded by U and V, Front and Second Streets.<sup>34</sup> Putting the recommendation before the Council at their June 12, 1905, meeting, it immediately stirred controversy. Councilmember McEwen indicated that he and the residents of the Second Ward were opposed to the recommended site, suggesting instead that the city should advertise for bids as part of a new selection process. Second Ward resident P. H. Hannahan, a Massachusetts-born merchant, spoke on behalf of his neighbors, warning that he thought the new incinerator was a “cheap-John affair” and would certainly lower the property values in the area.<sup>35</sup> Next to speak for the neighborhood was one M. F. Kent, an Irishman who operated a bakery.<sup>36</sup> According to coverage in the *Sacramento Union*, Kent told the Council that “the people of the Second Ward thought as much of their property as do the people on H Street and did not want a garbage crematory.” George Rider, the Councilmember whose urging had resulted in the selection of the Dundon incinerator,

---

32. “Meldrum Plant Will Be Tried,” *Sacramento Bee*, May 30, 1905.

33. City of Sacramento, *City Council Minutes*, Vol. 12, Pages 244-246. Accessed at the Center for Sacramento History, Sacramento, California.

34. *Ibid*, 280.

35. “Locating the New Crematory,” *Sacramento Union*, June 13, 1905.

36. Ancestry.com. *1910 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2006. Original data: United States of America, Bureau of the Census. *Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910*. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1910. T624, 1,178 rolls. Census Place: *Sacramento Ward 2, Sacramento, California*; Roll *T624\_92*; Page: *5B*; Enumeration District: *103*; Image: *911*

protested that the residents of the Second Ward were complaining before they had even been hurt.<sup>37</sup> Yet the evidence in the City Council minute records is clear—Rider and the other members of the Council knew there were actual health and safety concerns attendant to having the incinerator in the neighborhood. The initial report made by C. W. Phinney during his site visit to Spokane indicated that the site for a garbage incinerator should not be near a residential neighborhood due to the odors and soot.<sup>38</sup>

The residents of the Second Ward themselves reacted to the recommendation on placement of the incinerator in a collaborative manner more typical of the Progressive methods of their white, middle-class Sacramento city leaders. They came together as a group to fight for their neighborhood, submitting two petitions, one by residents and one by local businesses, to protest the site selection.<sup>39</sup> This must have been a surprise to the City Council at their June 12 meeting. After all, the Councilmembers were the true reformers in Sacramento, the men chosen to make the hard decisions that would give rise to a

***“In the way they chose to protect their homes and families, the Second Ward residents rejected the traditional bulwark of Americanism, the emphasis on the individual, and relied instead on collaboration.”***

better place to live. Yet here were a group of immigrant working-class citizens who formed a cohesive unit and actively campaigned for the improvement and protection of

*their* neighborhood.

In the way they chose to protect their homes and families, the Second Ward residents rejected the traditional bulwark of Americanism, the emphasis on the individual, and relied instead on collaboration. According to Michael McGerr, the Progressives discovered the power of the collective effort as a result of witnessing the sometimes violent labor strikes of the 1890s.<sup>40</sup> Happily for the tranquility of Sacramento, the residents of the Second Ward chose a more peaceful means of making their collective voices heard. The citizens produced a petition, labeling themselves the “property holders of the Second Ward” and protesting “having the Garbage Crematory located at Front and S Street.” They claimed in their petition that the incinerator “would be an injure [sic] to the property and health of the people of this part of the city.” Included among the over 80 signatories was a cross-section of residents of the Ward. Names like Soares, Frates, Azevedo, and Enos featured prominently, marking the influence of the Portuguese community in the Second Ward. There were also names like Cecchettini and Caligari representing the Italians, Daily and Burke of Irish descent, and Meyer and Newbauer of German/Austrian ancestry.<sup>41</sup>

37. “Locating the New Crematory,” *Sacramento Union*, June 13, 1905.

38. City of Sacramento, *City Council Minute Records 1905*, folder marked “Miscellaneous Reports 1/2 – 2/20,” Box 75. Accessed at the Center for Sacramento History, Sacramento, California.

39. City of Sacramento, *City Council Minute Records 1905*, folder marked “Protests,” Box 77. Accessed at the Center for Sacramento History, Sacramento, California.

40. Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 59.

41. City of Sacramento, *City Council Minute Records 1905*, folder marked “Protests,” Box 77. Accessed at

Included among the signatures on this petition were those of the father, the grandfather, and the great-uncle of little Daisy Dias who would lose her life at the incinerator site in August of 1915.<sup>42</sup>

While its ethnic make-up may have been diverse, the cohesiveness of the Second Ward may have come from its working-class status. Roughly 52 percent of the signatories to the residents' petition were unskilled laborers, with over half of those working for the railroad. Another 21 percent were skilled workers, including shoemakers, carpenters, and barbers. Only 13 percent of the signatures on the petition came from the merchant or white-collar class, including grocers, shop managers, saloon owners, and clerks. There were an additional eight signatures from women residents of the Second Ward, and one from a man identifying himself as a Deputy City Collector.<sup>43</sup> With nearly three-quarters of the signatories to the residents' petition coming from the working class, the white middle-class members of the City Council clearly found the plea to move the incinerator site to be less than persuasive.

Private citizens were not the only entities concerned with the placement of the incinerator in the Second Ward. Neighborhood business owners submitted a separate petition to the City Council. Among the 47 signatories to this petition were representatives of Friend & Terry Lumber Company, Premier Box Company, Capital Box Factory, Sacramento Laundry, Castle Brothers, and many small-business owners. Their concerns included the odors emanating from the incinerator and the effect these smells would have on property values, as well as the fact that "some of the largest lumber yards of this City are located in that vicinity and the danger to them from fire will greatly increase the insurance on such stock of lumber." They were also worried that the stench from the incinerator would prohibit the expansion of Sacramento's waterfront usage south from R Street, right through the Second Ward. With their claim that the waterfront as it existed at the time in Sacramento was much too small, this smelly incinerator would surely "retard the growth of Sacramento City" and limit the possibilities for improvement in the south side.<sup>44</sup> While their interests overlapped in some measure with the residents surrounding their businesses, their businesslike perspective would have resounded with the businessmen of the City Council and would likely have had more impact on subsequent Council decisions.

The debate stretched into the Council's June 19, 1905 meeting and grew more contentious. Councilmember McEwen urged reconsideration of the site selection. Councilman John C. Ing reminded

---

the Center for Sacramento History, Sacramento, California. Also, Ancestry.com. *1900 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2004. Original data: United States of America, Bureau of the Census. *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900*. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1900. T623, 1854 rolls.

42. City of Sacramento, *City Council Minute Records 1905*, folder marked "Protests," Box 77. Accessed at the Center for Sacramento History, Sacramento, California.
43. To determine the occupations of the signatories to the residents' petition, a search was made of the Sacramento City Directories of 1904, 1905, and 1906; in addition, a page-by-page search was made of the 1900 and 1910 United States Federal Census records for Sacramento's Second Ward. Of the 80 signatures on the petition, 62 residents (78%) were identified, and their occupations were used to determine the percentages used above.
44. City of Sacramento, *City Council Minute Records 1905*, folder marked "Protests," Box 77. Accessed at the Center for Sacramento History, Sacramento, California.

the Council that some of the signers of the protest petitions were “heavy taxpayers,” and worried that, should the incinerator not operate as promised, it would have to be torn down to appease these revenue-generating entities. Things got particularly ugly at the meeting when Councilmember Rider called out by name several of the protesting residents of the Second Ward, claiming that their own property was not sanitary and, thus, they had no call to complain about the incinerator.<sup>45</sup> If anything demonstrated the Council’s underlying reasoning, it was Rider’s contention that the properties of the Second Ward were already disreputable and the residents deserved the placement of the incinerator in their neighborhood. Rider’s disdain proved persuasive. When put to a vote of the Council, approval of the site in the Second Ward carried by a six to three margin.

Perhaps as a result of the controversy over the site of the crematory, the Second Ward residents subsequently became more active in their efforts to protect their neighborhood. This involved another familiar aspect of the collective spirit of the Progressive Era—the establishment of improvement clubs. According to historian Martin Melosi, improvement clubs in specific communities across the country dedicated themselves to enhancing the living conditions, aesthetics, and overall health of their residents.<sup>46</sup> In Sacramento, improvement clubs included the Oak Park Improvement Club, the M Street Improvement Club, and several others.<sup>47</sup> With their petition efforts before the City Council, the residents of the Second Ward were taking the first tentative steps in what would eventually result in the South Side Improvement Club.

When the debate was finished and the final decision made to locate the incinerator in the Second Ward, P. F. Dundon Manufacturing built and began testing their Meldrum model incinerator in December, 1905.<sup>48</sup> Unfortunately, after a lengthy test period, the model proved unable to meet the specifications originally set by the Council. George Rider, in spite of the evidence that the incinerator could meet neither the volume of garbage nor the cost limit set, still advocated for the Meldrum. This time, however, his influence over his fellow Councilmembers proved insufficient.<sup>49</sup> The Council rejected the Meldrum model and reopened the bidding process. In October of 1907, a DeCarie model, similar to that in use in Spokane and recommended by the original Sanitation Committee, replaced Dundon’s Meldrum model.<sup>50</sup> With this latest improvement, surely now the City could begin to enjoy the fruits of positive environmentalism.

Even with the newer, more efficient incinerator in place, the residents of the Second Ward were still concerned. By 1913, with the establishment of the South Side Improvement Club, residents once

---

45. “Sump Chosen for Crematory,” *Sacramento Bee*, June 20, 1905.

46. Martin V. Melosi, *Garbage in the Cities*, 108.

47. Various improvement clubs are noted in City of Sacramento, *City Council Minutes*, Vols. 12, 13, 14, 20B, and 22B. Accessed at the Center for Sacramento History, Sacramento, California.

48. “Garbage Destructor to Begin Thursday,” *Sacramento Union*, December 5, 1905.

49. “Garbage Crematory Rejected by Trustees,” *Sacramento Union*, May 30, 1906.

50. “Incinerator is Tested,” *Sacramento Union*, October 15, 1907.

again came together to request that the incinerator be moved out of their residential neighborhood. The fact that city and DeCarie officials had promised an odorless, smokeless operation of the incinerator proved to be untrue; Second Ward residents complained that, when there was no breeze blowing, the incinerator's smoke hung over their homes for hours at a time.<sup>51</sup> Again, their complaints fell on deaf ears, and the DeCarie garbage destructor continued to operate in the Second Ward.

Not only was the DeCarie incinerator bringing ashes and odors into the homes of Second Ward residents, it proved an eyesore to the neighborhood as well. Attorney Eugene Wachhorst, in documents he filed in support of the 1915 lawsuit of Joseph X. Dias, Jr., provides a detailed description of the premises, although admittedly one designed to favor the cause of his client. Wachhorst asserts that, in addition to the incinerator and loading platform, it had become the practice of the laborers at the incinerator to collect the noncombustible items, articles made with iron or tin, into piles located around the grounds. These piles, growing over the years, had reached heights of up to 15 feet by 1915. In close proximity to these piles were the ashes taken out of the incinerator, these also containing articles that did not burn completely during the incineration process. The ashes alone, stacked in piles just like the noncombustible materials, reached heights upwards of six to ten feet. While the City, in its defense of the lawsuit filed by Attorney Wachhorst, denied this description, it did admit to the fact that the deposits of ashes and other materials raised the grounds of the incinerator above the actual street level of the roads around it. In addition, these piles of ashes and other materials spilled out onto Second Street at a height of five to six feet, causing the City to block Second Street between U and V Streets to both pedestrian and vehicle traffic. Materials spilled out also onto U Street, causing closure of that thoroughfare between Second and Third Streets as well. These road closures, and the fact that the incinerator grounds were not fenced in any way, left pedestrians with a means of taking a quick shortcut through the grounds to get to Front Street from Second Street.<sup>52</sup> Ultimately, it was this free passage of people across the grounds that would lead to disaster for the Dias family. Additionally, between Wachhorst's assertions and the admissions of the City, it is clear that the grounds of the incinerator were not aesthetically pleasant and must have caused quite an eyesore in the Second Ward. This hardly seems in keeping with the Progressive ideal of positive environmentalism.

The death of little Daisy Dias on August 17, 1915, reverberated through the Second Ward, and city officials were quick to bring out a defense in the press. According to the *Sacramento Bee*, City Councilman Thomas Coulter indicated that he did not believe the ash heaps on the incinerator grounds could adequately be fenced and, in any event, there were other methods to keep out the local children. He did not apparently elaborate on what those other methods might include, but he did indicate that there were no funds available for the construction of a fence or the employment of a guard.<sup>53</sup> In all

---

51. "South Siders Want Crematory Moved," *Sacramento Bee*, November 3, 1913.

52. *Dias vs. City of Sacramento*, Superior Court of California, County of Sacramento, Case No. 20756. Accessed at the Center for Sacramento History, Sacramento, California.

53. "Guard Unlikely for City's Hot Ash Dump," *Sacramento Bee*, August 19, 1915.

likelihood, the simple logistics of fencing the incinerator grounds made the plan initially impractical in the eyes of officials like Coulter. Ashes piled onto both 2<sup>nd</sup> Street and U Street made any attempt to fence in that portion of the incinerator grounds extremely complicated. As there had been no attempt during the prior ten years to protect the residents of the Second Ward from such a safety and health menace, nor to address the aesthetic concerns that had existed since the 1905 decision on the incinerator's location, Coulter's opinion about the fencing was not surprising.

Daisy was not the first child injured on the grounds of the incinerator, and her death sparked concern over the safety of the site. According to a further *Sacramento Union* report published after her death, "a number of children had been hurt" during the 10-year existence of the incinerator. Later, the defense put forth by the City of Sacramento was that the manager of the incinerator, M. J. Lamb, was alone on the premises when the accident occurred, and he claimed to have warned the Dias children just moments before the accident to leave the premises.<sup>54</sup> Interestingly, Lamb was one of the original signers of the 1905 petition protesting the installation of the incinerator in the Second Ward.<sup>55</sup>

As they had done in 1905 and again in 1913, community members representing the Second Ward came together to address the City Council on the topic of the incinerator, this time with the death of the Dias girl fresh on their minds. In a statement submitted on August 23, 1915, before the Council's meeting the next day, John Irwin, a Second Ward resident and laborer working for the railroad, penned an eloquent plea asking that the Council find the funds necessary to provide a fence for the incinerator grounds. Irwin wrote:

Recently, as you are fully aware, the life of a little girl was unfortunately forfeited, by innocently (while playing in this lot) jumping into a pile of hot ashes dumped from the crematory. Whether through any carelessness on the child's part, or of any one else, is not to be discussed at this time, but the fact remains that, if this lot had been properly enclosed, the little girl would still be in the land of the living. The cost of erecting a fence is not to be considered, if the lives of innocent children at play, are placed in jeopardy.<sup>56</sup>

This time, the Second Ward's efforts were successful, at least partially. In spite of former statements that there was not enough money, nor even a need, for a fence, the City Council approved the expenditure of funds to enclose the entire yard in August of 1915.<sup>57</sup> They further unanimously voted in favor of the City obtaining several blocks of land outside the City limits on which to dispose of the

---

54. *Dias vs. City of Sacramento*, Superior Court of California, County of Sacramento, Case No. 20756. Accessed at the Center for Sacramento History, Sacramento, California.

55. City of Sacramento, *City Council Minute Records 1905*, folder marked "Protests," Box 77. Accessed at the Center for Sacramento History, Sacramento, California.

56. City of Sacramento, *City Council Minute Records 1915*, folder marked "Petitions, July-Dec. 1915, File 460," Box 166. Accessed at the Center for Sacramento History, Sacramento, California,

57. City of Sacramento, *City Council Minutes*, Vol. 22B, Page 126. Accessed at the Center for Sacramento History, Sacramento, California.

residue from the incinerator.<sup>58</sup> It would be another seven years, however, before Sacramento civic leaders would see fit to consider moving the incinerator from the residential neighborhood of the Second Ward to a location in an industrial part of town.<sup>59</sup>

The tardy decision of the City Council to address Second Ward concerns over the incinerator was not enough for the despondent father of Daisy Dias. On April 5, 1916, Joseph X. Dias, Jr., filed a lawsuit against the City of Sacramento for the wrongful death of his daughter. The case lingered in the court system for more than three years before Dias accepted an out-of-court settlement of \$2,000.<sup>60</sup> The matter was finished, but the story would linger on in the Dias family for years to come.

In just a ten-year period, from 1905 to 1915, residents of Sacramento's Second Ward saw their lives changed significantly. The decision by city officials to install a garbage incinerator spoke to both the good and the bad of the Progressive Era. It was certainly a step toward positive environmentalism, a means of ensuring a more sanitary, orderly venue in which residents could lead their lives and pursue their business interests. The good intentions of the City Council over the ten year span were clear—they meant to improve the living conditions for Sacramento residents, ultimately to make them better citizens. Progressive leaders in the city government firmly believed the new technology of garbage incineration would aide them in their efforts. In the end, however, the Councilmembers could not overcome their own biases. The working-class, ethnically diverse neighborhood of the Second Ward proved too tempting as a location for the incinerator. No one considered placing the incinerator near the affluent residents of the H Street corridor or the wealthy landowners of Poverty Ridge. As Councilmember Rider proved when he took Second Ward residents to task for the conditions of their property, the bias against that neighborhood and its residents undermined and tainted the Progressive drive for positive environmentalism.

In spite of everything, or maybe because of what happened surrounding the incinerator, the residents of the South Side came together to protect and defend their unique neighborhood. Even today, current and former residents of the South Side gather monthly to discuss issues, raise funds, and reminisce about the old days. Among those former residents participating in the South Side Club are two grandsons of Joseph X. Dias, Jr., two men who still remember the story their elders told them of the tragic fate of their young aunt, Daisy. Perhaps that sense of cohesiveness and community collaboration, beginning in 1905 and still true today, is the real Progressive victory for Sacramento. Perhaps that is the true legacy of little Daisy Dias.

---

58. Ibid, 142.

59. City of Sacramento, *City Council Minutes*, Vol. 26A, Pages 315. Accessed at the Center for Sacramento History, Sacramento, California.

60. City of Sacramento, *City Council Minutes*, Vol. 26A, Page 315. Accessed at the Center for Sacramento History, Sacramento, California..