Chapter 1

DISTRICT ORIGIN

The broad concept of County Sanitation Districts in Los Angeles County originated in the minds and vision of A. K. Warren, Hugh Pomeroy, and R. F. McClellen.

Albert Kendall Warren was employed by the Los Angeles County Surveyor on September 1, 1914 as an instrument man. He was promoted three times and by March 1, 1924, had achieved the grade of Construction Engineer. His field of activity was storm drainage. He was a man of great determination; one with whom action followed closely on the heels of inspiration. Warren had few close friends and fewer activities outside of his professional life. His knowledge of the County was phenomenal. He was particularly well informed about the political and physical characteristics of the County area in which drainage of storm waters was becoming increasingly important as the County was populated. While technically Warren was working under the direction of John Rockhold, County Surveyor, there is little doubt but that his plan for sewerage of the southern plain of the County on a District-wide basis contemplated himself as its Chief Engineer. He was so indissolubly associated with the plan that those who supported it never evidenced consideration of any other candidate and Warren had a clear field. Nothing could have been better for the future success of the Districts than his appointment.

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INAUGURATING THE JOINT OUTFALL SYSTEM—Although the South Bay sewers were well along, the first job to be constructed in the joint outfall system was the Wright Road trunk. Ground was broken September, 1925, near the intersection of Atlantic Boulevard and Fruitland Avenue, north of the north boundary of Maywood, by (from L to r.) Hugh Pomeroy, Supervisor R. F. McClellan, and Sanitation Districts Chief Engineer A. K. Warren. The shovel is now in the office of the present Chief Engineer, John D. Parkhurst.

Hugh Pomeroy was elected to the State Assembly in 1922 and served through the 1923-24 term, representing the south Santa Monica Bay cities area. He was appointed Director of County planning in 1924 and served ex-officio as Secretary of the Boards of Directors of the County Sanitation Districts until the appointment of C. J. S. Williamson in 1925. Pomeroy was a man of strong personality, eloquent, and of exemplary conduct. He was well-schooled in politics and debate and endowed with a natural ability to capture an audience on most any question. In 1923, he introduced, and guided through the Legislature, the Bill, which became the District law.

R. F. McClellan was Chairman of the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors at the time the County Sanitation District Act became law. He was an important figure in District formation and government. McClellan was wholeheartedly in favor of the
Districts and supported, without stint, the furtherance of the Act and setting its provisions in motion. He was a formidable man, an old “Sourdough,” who carried his Alaskan characteristics into his everyday life and was well known for his clear ideals of honesty and justice. A very highly respected and much loved man, he had great faith in Warren.

No doubt Warren's experience in use of the Drainage District Improvement (DDI) Act influenced his thinking when, in the early 1920's, he contemplated the sewerage situation in the southern plain of Los Angeles County. The regional features of that law probably seemed to him applicable to the situation which was developing, and indeed had developed, in, or about a number of the more settled areas. Neighboring city boundaries met in a number of locations and, at times, relief was sought by joint action in disposal of sewage; few of the existing sewerage works were adequate or properly operated. Some cities were vainly trying to find suitable locations for sewerage works within, or without, city boundaries. Warren and his associates saw an intolerable condition in the making and concluded, wisely, that it could not be solved piece-meal, but rather as a whole. Fortunately, they had the courage to tackle the problem with that vision in mind.

There was little actual precedent for such a plan as was contemplated. Systems were elsewhere in the making, seeking to correct situations similar to that which could occur in the Los Angeles County area in the absence of preliminary corrective measures, but nowhere appeared a system of trunk sewers known to be built, or contemplated, for an undeveloped area, as extensive as that envisioned. Certainly no one but a man of great courage and vision would undertake the promotion of a plan which, while being financed by all of the land which it could serve at some distant date, was of immediate benefit to but a small fraction of the debtor area.

The southern plain and valleys of the county are topographically separated from the northern county area by a range of hills extending east and south from south of Glendale to join the Puente Hills north of Whittier. This range of hills is broken at two points: one lets the Los Angeles River through and the other, a wider gap, passes the San Gabriel River and the Rio Hondo into the lower
COUNTY SANITATION DISTRICTS
OF LOS ANGELES COUNTY, CALIF.

ORIGINAL SANITATION DISTRICTS
(1924)
plain. North of the Puente Hills lie the San Gabriel Mountains and between the two ranges, extending east and northerly lies the San Gabriel Valley.

From the westerly pass through the hills, the Los Angeles River flows southerly to join with the Rio Hondo and discharge into the Pacific at Long Beach. The Rio Hondo flows through the eastern pass, thence west and south to join the Los Angeles River, while the San Gabriel, flowing through the eastern pass, continues south, joins Coyote Creek, and discharges at the east county line. Above the eastern pass, the San Gabriel is joined by San Jose and Puente Creeks.

The lower course of the Los Angeles River is determined by the Dominguez Hills and Signal Hill. The river flows between them and is kept in its channel and prevented from following its old course toward Redondo Beach, by the Dominguez Hills. The San Gabriel is prevented from joining the Los Angeles and flowing west by Signal Hill, the same topographical feature that keeps the Los Angeles from flowing east. Actually, the only surface outlet into the ocean to the south is San Pedro Bay, which is, and has been for many years, the harbor area of Los Angeles and Long Beach.

The entire southerly plain of the county has a general slope to the south, but the sand hills along the western shore, the San Pedro Hills and Signal Hill to the south, and the Los Angeles County Boundary limit a gravity surface outlet to the general harbor area. The influence of these topographical features and the east county boundary are apparent in the eventual choice of a route for disposal of District sewage to the sea.

Even had there been a natural surface outlet to the west from the southerly plain, it is likely that it would not have influenced District consideration of ocean disposal very much and for very good reasons. There was a desire to preserve the beaches of Santa Monica Bay and those at Long Beach from danger of contamination by discharge of large quantities of sewage effluent into the littoral waters. The City of Los Angeles, which had followed the course of Ballona Creek to the west with its system to discharge sewage, and later, sewage plant effluent almost in the geographical center of Santa Monica Bay beaches, was in deep trouble
with the Bay Cities. Los Angeles was in the process of constructing a more modern sewage treatment plant and ocean outfall which, it was hoped, would cure the deplorably insanitary condition which the city sewage was creating. It was felt by all concerned in the District plan that the best protection to recreational waters, particularly those used for bathing, was to locate sewer outlets, if possible, in an area remote from such waters.

In the early 1920's, when the Districts were being first considered, there were more than five hundred water districts or water dispensing agencies in Los Angeles County. It must be admitted that some of the supply, from wells being pumped, originated as sewage. Flowing underground, the water from individual cesspools, septic tanks, percolation beds, and municipal sewage treatment plants reached underground sources, purified to the extent of safe use for domestic purposes. Particularly in dry cycles, this was a factor in replenishing subsurface water pools. Storm runoff reached the underground only via percolation along the natural drainage routes. With increasing population and consequent water use, the water tables were getting lower year by year and the wasting of fresh water to the ocean in the form of sewage, was condemned by many. These critics felt that the sewage should be treated in land-based plants until it was in safe condition for use in industry and agriculture. The District proponents, while admitting the possibility of such conservation, reasoned that the primary consideration was unfailling sewage disposal which did not depend upon complete purification for disposal. As a counter-proposal it was argued that, once the disposal system, as such, was completed, sewage from selected residential areas could be used as a raw water supply and water conservation accomplished by separate treatment.

The proponents of the Districts and the plan for sewage disposal to the ocean were not unmindful of the need for both water conservation and increased importations from distant sources. The Owens River water had been delivered to Los Angeles City through the efforts of the great William Mulholland; yet, although it was anticipated that the acquisition of this supply was sufficient for the needs of two and a half million population, speculation was in the air that more would be needed for the metropolitan area and
engineers were looking towards the Colorado. Those who urged treatment of District sewage to a degree such as would produce usable water and, at the same time, dispose of the sewage problem, were not easily convinced of the Districts' intentions. In advancing their own arguments, however, they contributed to the cause of sewerage by bringing to light the complexities of the job and the potential possibilities on a districtwide scale.

In 1923, when the County Sanitation District Act became law, the population of the County was estimated to be 1,300,000 of whom 775,000 resided in Los Angeles City. There were forty incorporated cities in the county at the time; thirty-two in the proposed District area and eight which, for one reason or another could not be readily served by the District plan. In addition, there were many unincorporated settlements or communities. Of the communities, thirty-nine were in the anticipated District area. Much of the area was given to agricultural pursuits and supported a rural population.

No part of Los Angeles City was included in the original District scheme. This proved to be a very wise move, since it avoided conflict of interests with an already established large sewerage authority. It was apparent, however, that certain small areas proposed to be served by the Districts could best be served through the system of the City and vice versa. All was not harmonious between the City (Los Angeles) and the smaller cities and unincorporated villages in the early 1920's. This antipathy engendered distrust, manifested, naturally, by the weaker and less powerful. There can be no doubt but that inclusion of Los Angeles City, or any part of it, in the original District plan would have been a deterrent to the plan’s acceptance by many in the suburban and rural areas. It was not proposed that Los Angeles participate. Had it been, it is doubtful that Los Angeles city authorities would have accepted it without concessions greatly to the advantage of Los Angeles.

There was some ill-feeling at the time between engineers of the City and those engaged in the District enterprise. Mostly, it was resentment at the show of arrogance displayed by Los Angeles officials at any attempt on the part of the rest of the County to act collectively, independent of the big City. H. A. Van Norman was
City Engineer in the early 1920's, and his assistants in charge of City sewerage activities were W. T. Knowlton and H. G. Smith. These three men took an active interest in the proposed District scheme and Van Norman devoted considerable time to inspection and study of the entire proposal once the District Act was law. Van Norman was a man of great influence in Los Angeles affairs. He supported Warren in the latter's efforts and was wholly in sympathy with the proposed District plan of coordinated effort and ocean disposal. Warren often spoke of the value of his help.

Despite the friendship and help of Van Norman, Knowlton and Smith, there was a feeling on the part of Knowlton and Smith which inspired them to hold somewhat aloof from active participation with the Districts. They would brook no criticism of the City's sewerage system despite the deplorable condition which existed, not only at the ocean outfall at Hyperion, but in many of the main trunk sewers which were rapidly being destroyed by inadequate control of hydrogen sulfide generated in the sewage. Knowledge of sulfide control, as well as sewage dispersion in sea water, was not well understood at the time, and the City had made little effort to determine a proper course of action. It seemed to disturb them to have the Districts embark upon a plan which had as major objectives the correction of errors which were so evident in the City's lines and outfall. Also, they were embarrassed at having the City outfall permanently located in the center of one of the most popular and, certainly, most valuable recreational beaches in the world, when it could readily have followed the course proposed for the District trunks, with discharge into ocean waters in an area unfit for bathing or most any other water sport except boating.

Assistance in furthering the District plan was forthcoming from most of the engineers and managers of the cities proposed to be included in the District plan. Opposition developed in three cities, however, and for an understandable reason in each: Long Beach, Pasadena and Pomona each had a satisfactory sewerage system in operation and these cities were not inclined to promote the further expenditure of money for a job which they felt was, for them, adequately completed. Their city engineers quite properly reflected this view. Little support was had from the engineers in private practice in the area, nor was any great contribution expect-
ed from them. It was apparent that the District plan would obviate the necessity for small sewage treatment plants in and about the cities and towns in the County and the reluctance to support a plan which would diminish prospects for themselves was understandable. Some pretty harsh things were said publicly about Warren and his plan, but the statements had little effect upon his proposals and absolutely none upon Warren himself.

Some years prior to the proposals which led to the District plan, the Los Angeles County Surveyor, John Rockhold, had effected an agreement with the United States Geological Service whereby the two agencies, U.S. and County, were to jointly prepare standard geological maps of the entire area of the south plain of the County. Some of the maps were completed before the District plan was proposed; others were in preliminary form, but usable. All of the area was covered by the vital information which is the “hallmark” of these maps. To say that the maps were helpful would be a gross understatement. Actually, they made possible a preliminary office study of the area that would otherwise have taken months of expensive field surveys and an impressive amount of money not then available.

As conceived by Warren and his associates, the area proposed to be sewered by the District plan, comprising some 550 square miles, was (a) that portion of the southerly plain of Los Angeles County lying between the western boundary of the Los Angeles City “shoestring” strip and the Pacific and extending from the north boundary of Inglewood and Manhattan Beach, to, and including, the Palos Verdes Hills; (b) all of the area in Los Angeles County lying south and southeast of the southerly boundary of Los Angeles City, Monterey Hills, Whittier Narrows, and Puente and San Jose Hills, excepting any part of Los Angeles City; and (c) all of the county lying south of the San Gabriel Mountains in the San Gabriel Valley.

Of the 32 incorporated cities in the proposed District area, 19 were unsewered, depending entirely upon individual cesspools and septic tanks for disposal of domestic and limited industrial waste. Of the 39 unincorporated villages, one was partially sewer. No sewers were extended into the rural settlement areas. Thirteen of the incorporated cities had built sewage collection
systems and disposal works, mostly of indifferent quality and limited capacity. There were but five adequately designed small plants.

A considerable part of the City of Long Beach was sewer to a screening plant at the Long Beach harbor entrance. A portion of the sewage of Hermosa Beach was treated in a septic tank under the City Hall and part of Redondo Beach sewage was run into percolation beds near the northeast corner of the city. Compton was sewer to part of an Imhoff Tank which discharged effluent to Compton Creek in an area which now is a small municipal park.

Sherman (unincorporated) in West Hollywood was served by a sprinkling filter plant that had been constructed there to serve the commercial section of the settlement. Effluent from the plant flowed through an open ditch to a tributary of Ballona Creek.

Torrance was sewer to an Imhoff Tank near El Prado and Western Avenue. Effluent from the plant flowed into ponds of "storm runoff" which accumulated to the northeast of Torrance.

Pasadena had built an activated sludge plant in cooperation with South Pasadena and Alhambra. Later a contract with San Marino permitted that city to sewer to the plant. The Tri-Cities Plant (as it was called) discharged to the Rio Hondo and much of the discharged water or effluent found its way into the underground pools from which water was pumped for unrestricted use. The plant was well and expertly operated, presented a pleasing appearance, and, for the most part, produced a satisfactory effluent. Troubles were experienced with odors and the disposal of sludge, but the plant was of such character as to delay the District plan in the San Gabriel Valley for many years.

Pomona built a plant similar to the one at Pasadena. It served Pomona and La Verne, (and later, Claremont,) discharging its effluent to San Jose Creek or selling it, when needed, to neighboring ranches. Capacity of the plant was increased in a commendable manner. Like the plant at Pasadena, it served its purpose well as a substitute for regional sewerage. El Monte sewer to a sprinkling filter plant situated southwest of town and discharged plant effluent to the river, whence it flowed to join the Pasadena plant effluent and replenish the underground pools.

Monrovia sewer to a septic tank near the Rio Hondo wash
at Peck Road and Live Oak Avenue. Effluent was discharged to the wash and probably found its way to the underground pools.

Whittier disposed of sewage from a city collecting system through an outfall to a sprinkling filter plant near Imperial Highway and Carmenita Road. It was a well run plant and effluent from the plant replenished the underground pools in the area or was diverted directly from the open effluent channel to agriculture.

It was surprising to learn how few citizens knew that household sewage was an important source of well water. Cesspools and leaching beds contributed water from sewage to the soil whence it eventually joined pools from which domestic water supplies were drawn. On rare occasions, tastes and odors from aromatic substances in the waste water source apprised the user of its nature, resulting usually in complaints, soon forgotten. That some were aware of the value of local disposal of sewage as a means of replenishing water pools was reflected in their opposition to the District plan of ocean disposal, although it is possible that the thought of using sewage as a domestic water source stirred up such revulsion of feeling in most that it won as many supporters to the District plan as were lost by cold economics and logic.

In the 1920's, there were many unincorporated communities in the County which could have incorporated had they so desired. A number of them were of greater population than some other of the incorporated cities. How many of the incorporated cities had taken that step in order to be in position to forestall location of a neighboring city's sewerage works in their midst is not known to this narrator, but two examples come to mind—Monterey Park and West Covina. It is said that the Tri-cities plant had designs on establishment of a sewer farm in the area where Monterey Park now stands, and Covina had designs of a similar nature on the West Covina Area. It seems reasonable to surmise that other cities in the area, clustered together in groups, were organized in that manner for similar protection. It seems fair to say that lack of adequate sewerage, or the fear of encroachment from the sewerage works of neighboring cities, carried considerable weight in the decision to incorporate. Further validity is given this
conjecture by the knowledge that incorporation of cities came almost to a stop with the advent of the Sanitation District plan, and was dormant until 1956, at which latter date the tax situation induced many communities to incorporate. From 1927 to 1954 there were but four incorporations. From 1954 to 1964 there were 27. Both references are with respect to cities served by the Districts.