

Garbage, Hygiene, and Street cleaning in the 1890's

Today, we take for granted that the garbage we produce will be disposed of. We know that the street department will keep our streets free of refuse and safe to travel upon. In the 1890's that was not the case. In those days coal was the king for heating homes and powering factories. Heavy clouds of soot were commonplace in winter and white snow was soon blackened.



A horse drawn sweeper preceded by a sprinkler wagon 1894

There were several types of waste that had to be collected; food waste, coal ash, and everything else. Horses provided both transportation and all the functions we use tractors and trucks for today. Streets of brick or cobblestone often were covered in dust and animal droppings. To clean the streets, street sweepers were employed along with new mechanical devices like sprinklers and automatic sweepers. Waste was picked up by sheer manpower and carted away in horse drawn garbage wagons. Sanitation was in its infancy. In the big cities garbage wagons were emptied into scows (barges used to haul the waste) a short distance from

the city and dump it into the water. If no



body of water lay near, open dumpsites festering with rats and vermin of all sorts served the purpose. In smaller towns, these dumps might be in a nearby ditch or down a hillside. Thousands of street sweepers were hired in the big cities.



Wagons dump into the scow and rags dry on the wharf

Rag picking is no longer a recognized profession, but in the 19th century rags were valuable and so they were picked from the combined refuse. These rags were sold by

a master rag picker to industries for making cardboard. Earlier in the century pickers



Italian Immigrant rag Pickers on Scow - New York City 1894

removed dog feces from the streets for a living, the product being used in tanning hides in conjunction with urine and water. The whole concoction was called “bate”. One writer said of these poverty stricken workers at the lowest level of society: “it is well worth the time of any New Yorker who is disposed to feel that his lot in life is a hard one to go to one of the garbage dumps and learn to be content.”

Because many streets were not paved, choking dust often permeated neighborhoods, working into the cleanest homes. Sprinklers also were used to try to keep down the dust. Even then streets were often torn up to install or repair sewer and water lines. Snow removal was a near

impossibility usually dealt with as much as possible by armies of shovelers.



A Garbage Sorter 1894

Sewers carried untreated waste into the nearest river, lake, or ocean. Many used outhouses or kept chamber pots which were dumped into the back yard. This waste often seeped into nearby wells, spreading Cholera.

This was not an era of big government and over-regulation, so accumulated filth, and filth infested neighborhoods often lead to the outbreak of disease. One source describes personal hygiene in the Victorian Era as follows: “*Personal hygiene was not regarded as being important. The only parts of the body that received regular washing were arms, neck, face and hands. Bathhouses were very popular, but were frequented mainly by men.*” Typhus, Cholera, Diphtheria, Smallpox, and Tuberculosis were common. Laws existed to prevent funeral displays in churches or public buildings of the bodies of those who had died of infectious diseases.

Section 12. Anyone having charge of any school house or church, or of any room or building used for school or church purposes or for any public assembly in this city shall not permit the body of any person dead from smallpox, diphtheria, scarlet fever, typhoid fever, Asiatic cholera, or other dangerous contagious disease to be taken into such building or room for the purpose of holding funeral services over such body; and no sexton, undertaker or other person having charge or direction of the burial of any body dead from any of the diseases herein mentioned shall permit the coffin or casket containing such person to be opened in the presence of and child, neither shall any child be permitted to act as pallbearer or carrier at any such funeral; and the commissioner of health shall have power to prevent the attendance at the funeral or burial of any person dead from dangerous contagious disease of all persons other than those necessary for the interment of such body. Any person who shall violate any of the provisions of this section shall be liable to a fine of not less than twenty-five dollars, or to imprisonment for a term of not less than thirty days or

A CITY ORDINANCE OF OSHKOSH 1895

All in all we should be thankful that our lives are so improved. So much of what we take for granted is the result of scientific exploration and regulation based on the knowledge gleaned. We still are not totally free of unclean streets and ubiquitous garbage. If you travel south of Madison toward Cambridge you will see on the left a mountain of garbage, the offerings of the citizens of our capital city. Large Buzzards still find delight in their work of exploration and discovery, but you will find no rag pickers or sorters there. The fine art of scavenging now excludes the dump in most cases, but think what treasures are lost in not looking. The rag pickers of the 1890's practiced a far more stringent recycling than we care to do. With the increase in Amish citizens in our area we do again have an

opportunity to view the horse droppings that were such a part of everyday life in days gone by. Imagine the scope of that problem in a city teeming with buggy and coach traffic. We no longer cower in our homes holding our children, fearing the dread diseases that swept the countryside in those days. A tour of the old grave yards will familiarize you with numbers of children who died of diphtheria and other then common diseases, common no more. Such was the life of our ancestors.

