

Where Does Your Garbage Go?

BY HELEN HOOVER
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SOME OF PORTLAND'S best families are living on old potato peelings, coffee grounds and egg shells.

Under many a home in Beaverton, Rose City, Overlook, Madrona Park and Alberta districts, are all these and heaven knows what else in the line of garbage. The garbage was put there, not carelessly, but scientifically, under the direction of William G. "Billy" Helber, who has a rough idea of where practically everything has gone that Portlanders have discarded over the past 42 years.

Helber, now superintendent of Portland's bureau of refuse disposal, not only can point to former wrinkles and pocks in the face of his city that have been smoothed out with tin cans, cabbage leaves and the like to enable people to build houses and parks and causeways over them. Had he wished, he could have made an interesting graph, with peaks for prosperity and hollows for lean times, covering the four decades since he joined the city service as fireman in the old Guilds Lake "crematory" based on the quality and quantity of garbage and other refuse that its people have cast off, it was an easily read index to their collective fortunes.

Since last March, when the refuse bureau patted the last load of earth on top of the 48,000 tons of garbage it had dumped into the old Mt. Hood Railway cut at 90th avenue and E. Burnside in the operations have been confined entirely to 288 acres of overflow land in the Columbia slough beyond Swift boulevard at St. Johns. "Billy" Helber does not expect to have to look farther for holes in the topography to receive the materials over which he is custodian, for before those acres have been raised 30 feet above sea level according to present designs, it will be 1967 or '72 and Portland's bureau head will be a rather old man.

Helber began life in Gronau, Germany on October 19, 1875, of a French mother and a German father, most of whose family was in the building contracting business.

Eight years after her husband's death when Billy was 3½, Mrs. Helber sent her son to America, where there were Helber relatives in New York and Maryland. The 14-year-old boy took up glassmaking, a trade common to Marylanders, Ohioans and Pennsylvanians at the time, and learned to engrave on flint glass such as bottles and tumblers.

When a new sand-blasting process made hand-engraving obsolete, Helber looked toward the west, to which he had been drawn ever since reaching America. St. Louis, Mo., when he arrived there in 1893, was considered well "out west."

After an interlude of working in a butcher shop, the young man hit on the job that was to lead to his life-time vocation. It was in a chemical firm, forerunner of Merck. Helber assisted the millwrights in erecting, moving and repairing apparatus with which experiments were made. There he learned from the chemists themselves a great deal about handling acids and explosives; about the composition and reaction of materials, that later proved essential to his business of refuse burning.

When Helber took his next big leap westward in March, 1898, he left behind with her parents, his bride of four months, the former Florence E. Hoeker. The Alaska gold trek was on, and the young husband intended making a fortune in it

William Helber, Refuse Superintendent, Directs Throw-Outs to City Fill-in Jobs Except When Law Says Burning Required

for his family. Portland was his starting point.

Together with an equally adventurous partner, he planned taking a dredge to Alaskan waters and running it up to the gold fields that summer when the streams should thaw. The golden bubble collapsed, the partners sold their vessel into service as a ferryboat across the Snake river.

GREENNESS:

Attracted Helber To Live in Oregon

Helber hung around Portland's waterfront until July of that year. In the few months' stay he concluded this was where he wanted ultimately to live. The climate, the greenness, the scenery, the character of the people appealed to him. But not to Mrs. Helber, waiting back in the "civilized" Midwest. Unable to persuade his wife to follow him, Helber returned to her at St. Louis in midsummer. However, he had already been introduced to the occupation that would once be his—introduced to it by a smell.

The garbage "crematory" at Guilds Lake had started operating in the late summer of 1897. Its grounds comprised five acres at 25th and Nicolai streets, on the shores of Guilds lake, a respectable body of water with the crematory crew proceeded to diminish by soaking it up with ashes and other items. The sky and horizons were the limit when smoke began rolling up from burning refuse. It was good heavy smoke, too. Several fish canneries contributed all their offal, not having yet learned to convert it to eggs by feeding it to hens or to potatoes by using it for fertilizer. The numerous animals of that pre-mechanized era, after laying down their final burdens, had also to be carted to the crematory.

The plant had a capacity of 50 tons and went 24 hours a day. Such refuse as declined to burn was covered with ashes and piled into the lake. There were plenty of ashes coming in via garbage collectors too, for nearly everyone used wood for fuel.

Back in St. Louis, the young husband did something more than sniff the aroma of refuse; he went to work in it, with the

St. Louis Sanitary company, under contract with the city to handle its garbage reduction.

On the side, Helber worked at persuading his wife that it would be quite safe for her and their children to live in Portland. It took him until 1905 to convince her that Indians hanging around Washington and Broadway wouldn't snatch the blond polls from small William Jr., Henry and Amelia.

Preceding the rest of his family, Helber arrived again in Portland January 18, with a letter to Mayor George H. Williams. At 10:30 A. M. that same day he was in the mayor's office and at 11 was an employee of the crematory. A year later he was advanced from furnace operator to foreman.

The old Engle furnace at Guilds lake, with its all-brick grates had no combustion chambers. The stench shot up the chimney; it was in Helber's words, "something awful," and people complained loudly and consistently.

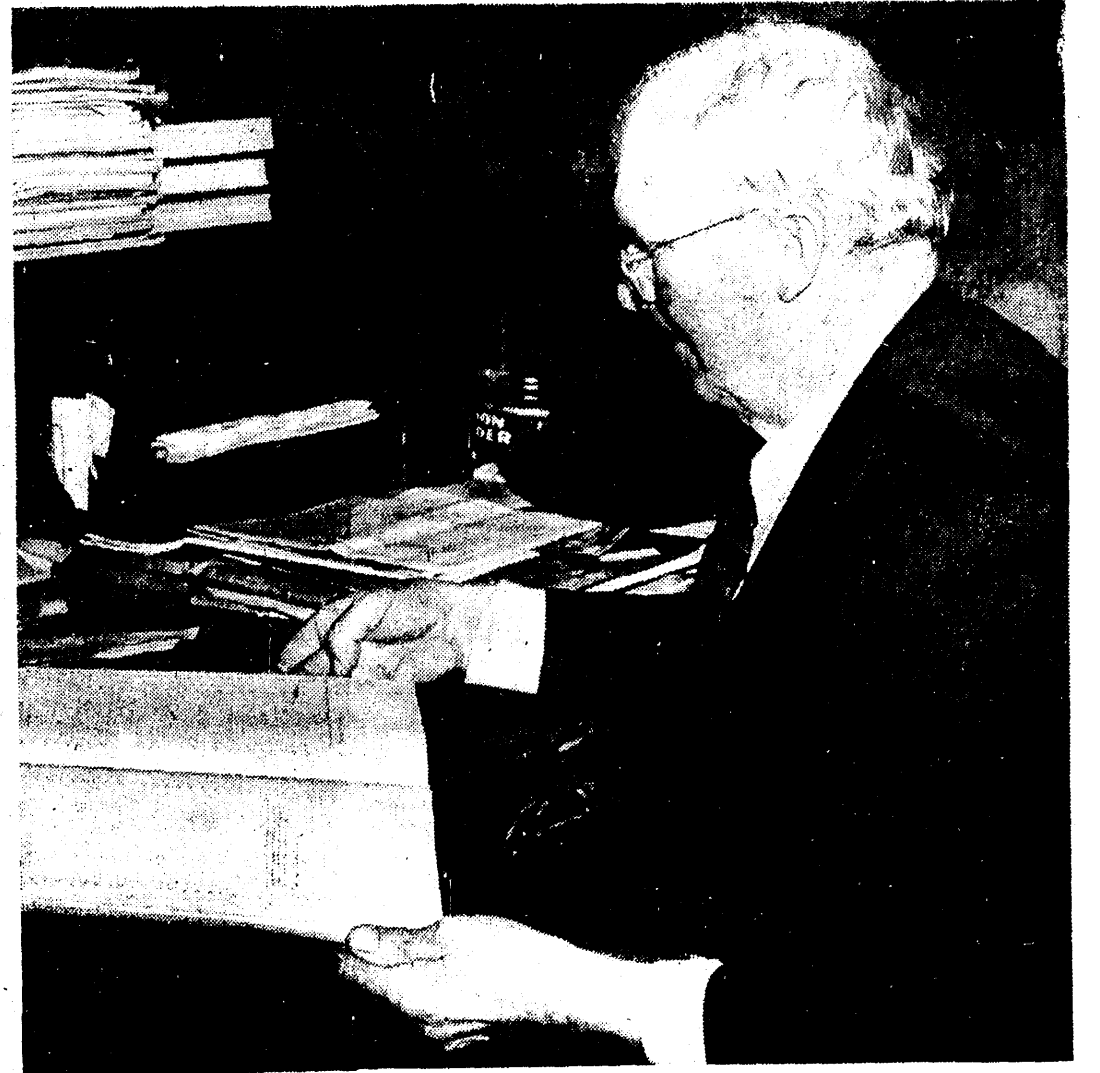
In 1910 the present building

at Guilds lake was erected and a Fred P. Smith furnace installed. It was not until 1927, however, that this was replaced with three units of Nye odorless furnaces.

Over the years the lake disappeared, completely absorbed. In 1923 ten more acres were added to the crematory holdings. Helber had advanced to general foreman in charge of the plant in September, 1913, when after adoption of the commission form of government for Portland the garbage disposal plant was assigned to the public utilities department. He was appointed superintendent of the bureau of garbage disposal in April, 1918.

The bureau went off the Guilds Lake reservation with its sanitary filling program the first time in February, 1923, when it leveled off a gravel pit at N. E. 33d avenue and Fremont street, now a residential area. Its second venture was a pretentious one—the filling of Marquam gulch, a deep gash in the heart of the West Hills that eventually became an attractive park.

In succession, two more gravel pits were filled, one between 37th and 38th, Klickitat and Siskiyou streets, now the site of five homes, and one south of the Rose City golf course at 65th and Tillamook. A gulch be-



Sanitation engineers from over the nation ask Billy Helber, above, Portland's superintendent of refuse disposal, about filling operations in this city that have converted pitted areas into places where are built houses, parks and causeways.



Although people paw over the dump for small treasures, gulls, thousands of them, cloud the sky and carpet the ground. Banding proves that the same ones come back year after year.

and mouth disease); city, bank and telegraph records, and election ballots. The men who supervise these cremations must give an affidavit that they have been done.

If the furnace is designated for an incoming load, the truck backs to a square hole in the cement floor of the incinerator and an iron lid is lifted briefly and the load spills into an inferno below.

Attendants know exactly what will happen then, how long it will take the materials to burn. Under 2000 degrees temperature this ordinarily is a half-hour for a load, with fans forcing air pre-heated to 450 degrees into the combustion chambers. All gases, i.e., smells, are consumed at 1250 degrees.

The furnace has three units. Ordinarily, only one of these is in use at a time. A mephistophelean scene is presented at the base of the furnace by the young stoker who moves from door to door of the unit, poking the glowing mass with a heavy iron rake.

Ashes and cans that fail to burn drop into a hopper. When this is filled a truck is driven under it on a lower level and the ashes and cans are hauled off to the fill. All operations at the incinerator are by gravity.

The incinerator is quiet, dignified and orderly—but not the fill. There, chattering tractors with bulldozers and scrapers shove masses of refuse about the landscape as fast as trucks arrive with them. In the wake of the trucks come secondary scavengers. Paper, rags, metal, even bits of wood and glass are eagerly reclaimed, usually by the same individuals daily. During the depression, Helber recalls, as many as 50 a day pawed over the dump. Helber makes no objection to these individuals so long as they "behave themselves" and keep out of the way of trucks and tractors.

To another group of scavengers Helber has nothing to say. These are the gulls, thousands of them, clouding the sky, carpeting the ground and barely dodging the scrapers and "dozers." With the punctuality of a Capistrano swallow they arrive each morning at 10 o'clock and depart, to no one knows where.

tween 20th and 21st, Belmont and Yamhill was then tackled and emerged a city park. Next came the Penn street gulch, to provide a road to the then airport on Swan Island.

GULCH:

Erased With Garbage Fill

A small fill was made in a sand pit at St. Johns, and both park and private property benefited by the erasing of a gulch at Alberta and Greeley. Next came a gravel pit at Alberta street and 39th avenue, and a gulch in Overlook park on Interstate avenue.

Last, and most successful of these field operations, and the one that found neighbors most apprehensive, was the E. 90th avenue fill, which took 13 months and was completed in March, 1946. The bureau crews cut down adjoining high land to about the same depth as the cut, 30 feet at its maximum, then spread four layers of refuse over the whole area, using the excavated earth to cover the garbage each night. To quiet the fears of the adjacent residents that the garbage would draw flies, Helber stood by with a can of fly-tox in his hand, but he says he never had to use it. Even the rats were disappointed. Bulldozers attached to tractors packed the layers so hard that the rodents might as well have tried burrowing in cement.

Meantime the bureau had established the St. Johns incinerator in 1932, and ran both this and the one at Guilds Lake until October, 1942, when the latter closed permanently.

The St. Johns plant would seem nearly an ideal arrangement. The incinerator itself sits

in a small park, behind which is a sizable hump of ground being cut down for covering material. Across Swift boulevard, in the slough, is the 286-acre dumping ground, 175 acres of which is an island, where the bureau has been working for seven years, with a life expectancy of from 20 to 25 more. The fill is remote from any residential areas, and as for the furnace itself, Helber declares its 100-foot chimney emits no odor.

The materials in the furnace, tested for refractory qualities, have been chosen by Helber himself, out of knowledge gained through long experience and observation. All repairs, except the major ones, are handled by him.

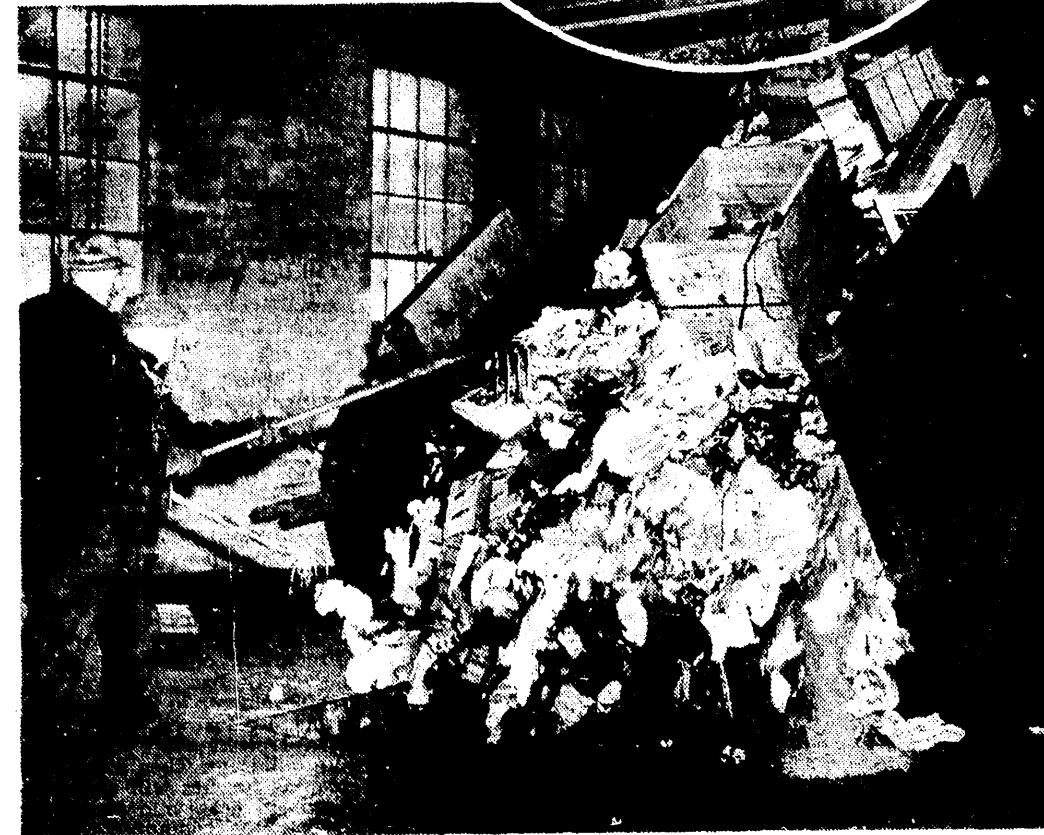
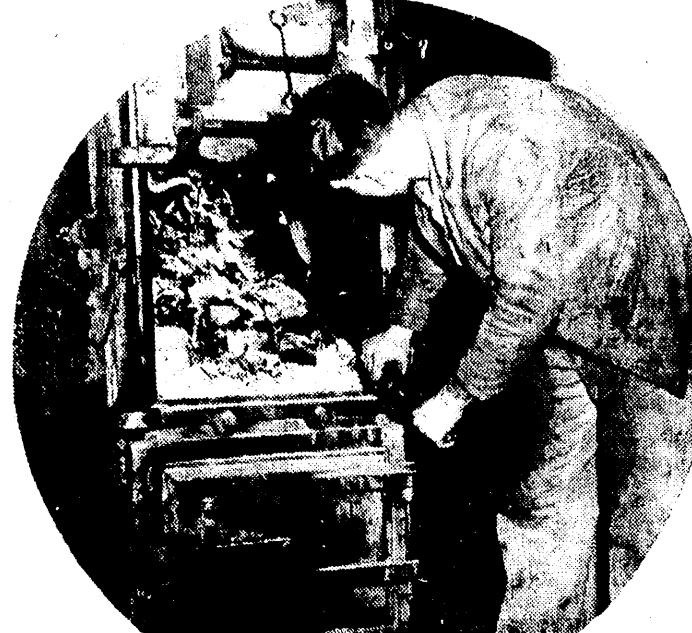
Some 300 truckloads of refuse arrive at the fill each day, another 100 at the burning dump and 25 to 40 at the incinerator, brought in by more than 200 regular collectors and a few private vehicles. Portland operators pay no fee to the bureau except the nominal one charged the regular collectors for washing their trucks after each unloading, which they are required to do. Collectors from outside the city pay \$1 a ton.

The foreman weighs in each truck, because the bureau likes to know how much refuse it is handling, then decides whether its contents will go into the furnace or out on the fill.

DISPOSAL:

Done Scientifically With No Guess Work

The law requires that some things be burned. Among these are spoiled goods received from incoming ships; all garbage that arrives by vessels from foreign ports (a precaution against hoof



When incoming refuse is to be burned, the truck backs up to a square hole in cement floor of incinerator, an iron lid is lifted briefly and the load spills into an inferno below. Attendants know how long it will take materials to burn. Under 2000 degrees, it's half hour for load.

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TEXAS

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Mrs. L. Hawkins, Texas, writes: "I used to weigh 170 lbs. now I weigh 119, a loss of 51 lbs., thanks to AYDS Vitamin Candy Reducing Plan." Mrs. Hawkins also had an amazing reduction in her measurements, reducing 11 inches in the waist, 10 inches at the hips and 8 inches in the bust.

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