

4/20/09 Item 2b

**From:** <russ12985@aol.com>  
**To:** <sconcolino@cityofsacramento.org>  
**Date:** 4/3/2009 11:42 AM  
**Subject:** For The Charter Committee  
**Attachments:** Notes On The Commission System.doc

Attached to this e-mail (assuming all worked out properly) is a class paper I wrote in the spring of 2007, studying the commission system of government as it was conducted in the City of Sacramento during the 1910s and early 1920s.

I place no conditions about the use of this document, provided that I receive proper credit for this work.

Thank you.

Russell MacKenzie Fehr

When writing history, there are several subjects that tend to have large amount written about them. One of these subjects is political history, the study of politicians, offices, movements, and anything else that relates to government. Even in this topic, however, there are gaps. One of these comes in terms of the commission system of government, which, in spite of being a rather important form of government in the 1910s, tends to receive very little writing that goes beyond a superficial level. Also lacking are case studies of particular cities: Some cities receive a large number of studies, while others receive none at all. The general plan of this paper is to combine these two gaps by studying the Sacramento City Commission from its proposal in 1911 to its abolition in 1921. This analysis will look at the Commission in terms of why it came to be, how it differed from the previous form of city government, elements of its operation, the people who served on it both as themselves and as they compared to the public at large, the races for seats on the Commission, efforts to get rid of it, and, finally, reasons why the Commission was ultimately abolished.

In late 1911, large sections of the population of the City of Sacramento were displeased with the state of their local government. One of the reasons for these feelings was the lack of a clear leader. The Mayor of Sacramento, M. R. Beard, had a reputation for being both a nice man in terms of his conduct towards people and as an honest one personally. However, he also had the image of being somewhat of a cipher in terms of political views (trying his hardest to avoid making commitments)<sup>1</sup> and as being a figurehead in terms of power,<sup>2</sup> with the actual power in the city being held largely by two

---

<sup>1</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, November 6, 1911, p.5.

<sup>2</sup> William E. Maher, "The Political Response to Urban Growth: Sacramento and Mayor Marshall R. Beard, 1863-1914", *California History*, 69 no. 4 (Winter 1990-1991), 354-371, makes the argument that

members of the City Board of Trustees: E. P. Hammond, the President of the Board, and E. J. Carraghar, who chaired the board's Finance Committee.

In addition to this lack of leadership at the top, there were problems involving various actions taken (or, as often, not taken) by city officials. First, the City of Sacramento had granted several long-term contracts, or franchises, to various companies (especially ones, like the Southern Pacific and Pacific Gas & Electric, for streetcar services) which were held as being, for various reasons (length of contract and the ability of the city to purchase the franchise or otherwise alter it being two of the most notable ones), overly beneficial to the franchise holders.<sup>3</sup> Another problem related to the annexation in that year of Oak Park, East Sacramento, and other areas to the south and east of the old city limits. As part of the annexation, it appears that there had been an agreement to have all saloons in the area (which had been licensed by the County) shut down upon becoming part of the city, to fulfill an ordinance limiting the number of saloons in residential neighborhoods. However, when the actual annexation occurred, officials were slow in shutting these saloons down,<sup>4</sup> with some officials (such as Hammond, a saloonkeeper in private life, and Carraghar)<sup>5</sup> stating that they saw no reason to do so, even going as far at one point as denying liquor licenses to any parts of the

---

Beard was regarded as a political boss throughout his service as Mayor. This may have been the case in the early stages of his career (which are beyond the scope of this paper), but it was clearly not the case by 1911: Newspaper sources (such as *Sacramento Bee*, October 10, 1911, p.4) show him as being bossed, not as the boss.

<sup>3</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, October 9, 1911, p.4.

<sup>4</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, October 2, 1911, p.1.

<sup>5</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, October 11, 1911, p.2.

annexed district in protest.<sup>6</sup> Another embarrassment came with state investigations into Chinatown, which revealed that Chinatown had numerous illicit acts practiced within it (such as narcotic dealing, gambling, and prostitution), and that a member of the Board of Trustees was claimed to have been making money from this and ordering the Chief of Police to ignore illegal actions<sup>7</sup>. Even basic elements of operation were problems: the County Grand Jury determined that the streets of Sacramento were in a state of disrepair,<sup>8</sup> and Mayor Beard had admitted to lacking the money for improvements.<sup>9</sup> The city, quite clearly, was in some sort of mess to large sections of the public.

These feelings would soon receive public expression. In the summer of 1911, a Board of Freeholders had been elected to propose a new charter for Sacramento. In their new charter, they chose to replace the mayor-council system with a new form, the commission system, in which several officeholders would serve as a joint executive/legislative body. This was not an idea that was new, either nationally, or even in Sacramento, which had been governed by a three-member Board of Trustees from 1863 to 1893. However, after Galveston had enacted the system after their hurricane in 1900 and had success in rebuilding,<sup>10</sup> it had become a popular form of government: in 1912, 160 cities were using it as a form of government,<sup>11</sup> a number that would grow to

---

<sup>6</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, October 7, 1911, p.5.

<sup>7</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, October 16, 1911, p.5. The Trustee in question, George K. Rider, appears to have never received any sort of criminal investigations as a result of this claim.

<sup>8</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, October 20, 1911, p.26.

<sup>9</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, October 13, 1911, p.2.

<sup>10</sup> Bradley Robert Rice, *Progressive Cities: The Commission Government Movement in America, 1901-1920* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1977), p.7-18.

<sup>11</sup> *World Almanac*, 1912.

350 by 1915.<sup>12</sup> That it was becoming popular regionally was also apparent, as Stockton voted to adopt the commission system in October of 1911.<sup>13</sup> The commission system tended to be tied to other Progressive-era reforms, which also were popular in the Sacramento area at that time: A string of constitutional amendments proposed by Hiram Johnson (including those responsible for the referendum, the initiative, the recall, and women's suffrage in California) passed in Sacramento in October, in most cases by a two to one margin of the vote.<sup>14</sup> A fairly wide range of people and organizations ended up supporting the proposed charter: the Retail Merchants Association,<sup>15</sup> the Progressive Republican Club,<sup>16</sup> the Sacramento Women's Council,<sup>17</sup> Berkeley Mayor J. Stitt Wilson,<sup>18</sup> and (last but not least) Hiram Johnson<sup>19</sup> all engaged in activities for the proposed charter. Against them, for the most part, was a combination of government-supporting politicians in and out of power, and franchise holders (in particular, Pacific Gas and Electric and streetcar line operators). This was, in good part, a direct referendum on city government; the general election for city offices was held the same day, and many of the pro-charter groups were also Beard, Hammond, Carraghar, and their ilk.

---

<sup>12</sup> *World Almanac*, 1916.

<sup>13</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, October 18, 1911, p.2.

<sup>14</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, October 11, 1911, pgs.1, 6.

<sup>15</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, November 2, 1911, p.2.

<sup>16</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, November 3, 1911, p.8. This club, while it did endorse a ticket in the 1911 elections, should be distinguished from the Sacramento Republican Party, as it endorsed some non-Republicans (notably M. J. Burke) and refused to endorse some Republicans (such as E. P. Hammond).

<sup>17</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, November 2, 1911, p.3.

<sup>18</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, November 2, 1911, p.1.

<sup>19</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, November 3, 1911, p.1.

Ultimately, the results were mixed: Beard and a majority of his ticket won reelection (in part, especially in Beard's case, to split opposition), but, by less than one hundred votes, the Charter of 1911 was enacted.<sup>20</sup>

Looking at the Charter of 1911 in comparison to the Charter of 1893 (the one previously in effect), several changes in the views as to how city government should operate are apparent. The idea that service to the city is a full-time job is apparent: the City Board of Trustees was a part-time position, while the City Commission was a full-time job.<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, both consolidation and devolution of powers are apparent in the Charter of 1911. Consolidation is apparent in terms of elected officials: Officials that previously had been elected city-wide by the voters (such as the City Attorney, the City Collector, and the City Assessor/Auditor) were turned into positions appointed by the Commission as a whole,<sup>22</sup> and the Board of Education went from being an independent body to one identical to the City Commission in membership.<sup>23</sup> Devolution, on the other hand, comes in the case of executive authority. The Charter of 1893 has one full-time executive, the Mayor, while the Charter of 1911 has five in the Commissioners, each with their own departmental authority,<sup>24</sup> and positions that previously had been appointed by the Mayor with the consent of the Board of Trustees (such as the Superintendent of Streets, the Chief of Police, and the Water Works Superintendent) came to be under the

---

<sup>20</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, November 8, 1911, p.1.

<sup>21</sup> City of Sacramento Board of Freeholders, *Charter of the City of Sacramento 1893*, Article XVIII, Section 205; City of Sacramento Board of Freeholders, *Charter of the City of Sacramento 1911*, Article II, Section 15.

<sup>22</sup> *Charter of 1893*, Article III, Sections 37, 42, 44, and 79; *Charter of 1911*, Article II, Section 10.

<sup>23</sup> *Charter of 1893*, Article VIII, Section 110; *Charter of 1911*, Article XXII, Section 221.

<sup>24</sup> *Charter of 1893*, Article III, Section 26; *Charter of 1911*, Article II, Section 9.

authority of the relevant Commissioner (in these case, the ones for Streets, Public Health and Safety, and Public Works).<sup>25</sup> The influence of reform views of government is also apparent, in the newfound presence in the Charter of 1911 of such things as the Civil Service Board (and, for that matter, the very concept of civil service),<sup>26</sup> the initiative (in which legislation could be placed on the ballot with as little as five percent of the last electorate's signatures),<sup>27</sup> the referendum (in which, if ten percent of the last electorate signed a petition within thirty days, any ordinary Commission ordinance could be forced to a vote),<sup>28</sup> and the recall (in which ten percent of the last electorate's signatures could force any Commissioner to immediately run for re-election).<sup>29</sup> A final noticeable difference, and a major one, comes in terms of franchises. In the Charter of 1893, this subject merits a few lines, while the Charter of 1911 gives it a full section. With this expanded attention comes an expansion of authority: the Charter of 1911 gives the Commission the right to look at franchise holders' records,<sup>30</sup> the right to, at fair compensation, take over any franchise for city use,<sup>31</sup> and bars the granting of exclusive franchises,<sup>32</sup> all restrictions not found in the Charter of 1893, as well as requiring holders of streetcar franchises to grant a large percentage of revenues to the city treasury.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> *Charter of 1893*, Articles V, IX, and XI, Sections 64, 123, and 195; *Charter of 1911*, Article II, Section 11.

<sup>26</sup> *Charter of 1911*, Article XV, Section 183.

<sup>27</sup> *Charter of 1911*, Article XXV, Section 264.

<sup>28</sup> *Charter of 1911*, Article XXVI, Section 270.

<sup>29</sup> *Charter of 1911*, Article XXVII, Section 275.

<sup>30</sup> *Charter of 1911*, Article XXIII, Section 237.

<sup>31</sup> *Charter of 1911*, Article XXIII, Section 245.

<sup>32</sup> *Charter of 1911*, Article XXIII, Section 251.

Members of the Sacramento City Commission held two separate governmental roles, that of an executive and a legislative branch. This is in contrast to the traditional tendencies with local government, in which executive and legislative offices are kept separate. Moreover, it was a split executive, in which branches were divided among the officeholders. For ease of comprehension, I have elected to list the five Commission offices in alphabetical order, with comments about their powers:<sup>34</sup>

*Commissioner of Education*- The holder of this office, by virtue of the office, was automatically the head of the City Board of Education (the other members of which being the other four Commissioners), the Board of Park Directors, and the Board of Playground Directors (both of these offices had membership chosen by the Commission as a whole). In addition to power over schools,<sup>35</sup> the Commissioner of Education also controlled Sacramento's libraries and parks. Moreover, the Commissioner seems to have had the role of being the *de facto* controller of many types of entertainment events in Sacramento, as dances, motion picture showings, and various sorts of sporting events had to obtain the Commissioner's personal approval before the Board of Commissioners was willing to grant a license.<sup>36</sup>

*Commissioner of Finance*- Of all the Commission seats, this is by far the most limited in terms of executive power. This Commissioner was head of the Department of

<sup>33</sup> *Charter of 1893*, Article II, Section 25, mandated 1% of revenue after five years, while the *Charter of 1911*, Article XXIII, Section 229, mandated, depending on franchise length, 2%, 4%, or 5%.

<sup>34</sup> Unless otherwise mentioned, all information in the following paragraphs is taken from the *Sacramento Official Gazette*, August 3, 1914 (vol. 1, no.1)

<sup>35</sup> These powers are not determinable now, as the material relating to that subject is not present in Commission materials.

<sup>36</sup> The *Sacramento Official Gazette*, on numerous occasions, identifies the Commissioner of Education as doing this, with boxing, wrestling, and ju jitsu all being directly identified.

Finance, but most of the important financial offices, such as the Purchasing Agent (who controls all purchases), the Assessor (responsible for valuing property, which is highly important in an era when tax revenue was generated by property taxes rather than sales or income taxes), the Treasurer (who sells city bonds), the Collector (who engages in the actual collection of tax revenue), and the Auditor (who monitored city expenditures) were held by independently appointed officials who were not subordinate to the Commissioner. As a result, the Commissioner of Finance could not give orders to them, and did not have the hiring-and-firing control that other Commissioners held. The Commissioner of Finance also was Chairman of the Finance Committee, which approved all requests by various governmental departments for appropriations, but this committee tended to rubber-stamp the requests of the various Commissioners.<sup>37</sup>

*Commissioner of Public Health and Safety-* This Commissioner was responsible for the actions the Department of Health and Sanitation, the Fire Department, and the Police Department. The Department of Health and Sanitation's chief role was to ensure that various health-related laws were enforced, especially those relating to food quality and to sanitation.<sup>38</sup> In addition, this department supervised Sacramento's cemeteries.<sup>39</sup> The other departments played the same roles that they do now, albeit with a much smaller

---

<sup>37</sup> The Sacramento *Official Gazette* shows these meetings as tending to be short and the measures in them being passed without opposition.

<sup>38</sup> Ordinance 232, Third Series (*Official Gazette*) gives health inspectors the authority given to police officers in terms of investigative powers, and requires the citizenry to obey them as they would police officers.

<sup>39</sup> Ordinance 238, Third Series (*Official Gazette*)

staff (even with expansion, the Police Department never reached one hundred members during the Commission era) than is now the case<sup>40</sup>.

*Commissioner of Public Works-* The chief job that the Department of Public Works, and its' Commissioner, held involved the city's water supply, which was (unlike many other services, such as transportation) owned by the City of Sacramento. In this case, the department was responsible for the pumping of the water, maintaining the water mains, and billing water users. The department also ran the electric lighting of the city, cremated garbage (but not pickup and delivery, which was done by private individuals), and monitored the work done by private contractors for constructing city buildings.

*Commissioner of Streets-* This post had one department under its control, the Department of Streets. However, that department had three major functions. First, it engaged in construction of and improvements to the street system of Sacramento. Second, it was the department that was responsible for keeping the streets clean. Finally, the construction of sewers, as well as the cleaning of said sewers, was the responsibility of the Department of Streets, rather than the Department of Public Works, which handled almost all the rest of the water-related posts.

Previous writing on the commission form of government has promoted several commonplace ideas.<sup>41</sup> The first of these is that commissioners tended to come from business backgrounds, and to not have been engaged in politics (and especially the

---

<sup>40</sup> The *Official Gazette* cited in footnote 1 identifies the Sacramento Police Department as having members in mid-1914 and the Sacramento Fire Department as having members at the same time, and it does not seem to expand significantly during this time.

<sup>41</sup> Bradley Robert Rice, *Progressive Cities: The Commission Government Movement in America, 1901-1920* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1977) is the sole book-length study of the commission form of government. Most of the material which shall be cited consists of discussions of this system in works not dedicated to the subject.

politics of office-holding) before then<sup>42</sup>. The second of these ideas is that commissioners tended to take stances in favor of business interests, and opposed to that of labor. The third common idea is that the Socialist Party (which, during the era of the commission system, was at its peak) tended to oppose the commission forms of government, and that this opposition was based the fact that elements of the system used to elect commissioners (in particular, the use of at-large elections) made it harder for Socialists to be elected, even as their percentages of the vote increased.<sup>43</sup> All three of these concepts have holes of one form or another when applied to the Sacramento City Commission. First, of the thirteen men and one woman who served on the Sacramento City Commission, the prior experience was different, with many of the Commissioners having a role in politics beforehand, and many of them not having been from the world of business.

The second idea, similarly, has problems. On the one hand, there was a tendency for candidates to campaign on platforms of running Sacramento like a business,<sup>44</sup> and it seems to have been considered very important to gain the support of the Retail Merchants Association, which tended to play a large role in political campaigning.<sup>45</sup> At the same

---

<sup>42</sup> James Weinstein, "Organized Business and the City Commission and Manager Movements", *The Journal of Southern History* 28, no. 2 (May 1962): 173, John Henry Baker, *Urban Politics in America* (New York: Scribners, 1971), p.80-81, Carl A. McCandless, *Urban Politics and Government* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), p.171, Willis D. Hawley, *Nonpartisan Elections and the Case for Party Politics* (New York: Wiley, 1973), pgs. 8, 11, Martin J. Schiesl, *The Politics of Efficiency: Municipal Administration and Reform in America, 1800-1920* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1977), pgs. 139-140.

<sup>43</sup> Weinstein: 176. Rice, 86-87, while pointing out exceptions to this rule, makes a similar point.

<sup>44</sup> Examples of this sort of campaigning in action include *Sacramento Bee*, May 1, 1917, p.2 (D. W. Carmichael ad), *Sacramento Bee*, May 5, 1915, p.4 (Gus S. Turner ad), and *Sacramento Bee*, May 2, 1919, p.17 (W. F. Purnell ad).

<sup>45</sup> For instance, it campaigned for the successful slate of Thomas Coulter and Dr. F. E. Shaw in 1914 (*Sacramento Bee*, May 1, 1914, p.4) and for Edward Haynes in 1918 (*Sacramento Union*, May 17, 1918, p.1).

time, however, it should be noted that there are several counter-examples to this trend. Firstly, the commission system came to Sacramento in part due to the tendency for franchise-holding companies (especially the streetcar lines) to have a level of influence thought of as being corrupting, and, throughout the Commission era, there was a tendency for the Commission (as individuals and as a whole) and franchise-holders (especially the Southern Pacific Railroad, which held many of the streetcar-line franchises) to have a frosty relationship.<sup>46</sup> Secondly, several of the Commissioners came from some sort of labor background (Burke was a blacksmith for the Southern Pacific, Carraghar a short-order cook, and Haynes lost a leg working as a train conductor), considering it a thing of pride (using it in campaign material), and even those who did not come from this background seem to have considered it important to be friendly with labor, resulting in labor movements, in turn, being friendly with them. As a few examples of this, the Typographical Union defended the Municipal Voters League slate in 1912 when they were charged with issuing non-union publishers for campaign literature,<sup>47</sup> then-Commission candidate and Railroad Conductors Union member Edward Haynes openly rejected an endorsement by one business association in 1917 due to that organization's involvement in anti-union work,<sup>48</sup> and the campaign of Lee Gebhart for Commissioner in 1919 failed in part due to the Teachers Union's criticism of his record in the Assembly.

---

<sup>46</sup> The corruption of the franchise holders is shown in *Sacramento Bee*, November 2, 1911, p.2. For a proposal to revoke franchises, see *Sacramento Union*, May 14, 1920, p.1.

<sup>47</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 17, 1912, p.1

<sup>48</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 4, 1917, p.1

Finally, as to the point involving the Socialist Party, the party locally seems to have been split on the subject, but J. Stitt Wilson, who at this point was probably the leading Socialist politician in the state through his being the Mayor of Berkeley and with his electoral performance in a bid for Governor in 1910, was a strong supporter of the commission form of government (which was in use in Berkeley at that time), and campaigned in Sacramento for it when proposed in the Charter of 1911, showing that at least some Socialists were in favor of this form of government.<sup>49</sup> As for it keeping Socialists out of office, this was a moot point in Sacramento, as they appear to have never been able to elect officials (though they did come close) under the ward system, and the Socialist vote in Sacramento municipal politics seems to have deteriorated rapidly after 1911 (when its mayoral candidate outpolled the Republican candidate).<sup>50</sup> In all then, several common views on how the commission form of government tended to work were inapplicable in the case of Sacramento.

When looking at an elected system of government, it is always useful to try to determine the nature of the officials within it. In the case of the Sacramento City Commission, this is a rather hard thing. The private papers of the members of the Commission seem to have all disappeared after they themselves died. Using public statements as recorded in the press as a clue to their beliefs is also not especially useful, as, for every candidate who does have clear, unquestionable views (E. M. Wilder's view that municipal ownership was necessary, or R. C. Irvine's view that the Commission was

---

<sup>49</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, November 6, 1911, p.3

<sup>50</sup> To see the deterioration of the Sacramento Socialist vote, compare *Sacramento Bee*, November 8, 1911, p.1, *Sacramento Bee*, May 6, 1912, p.1, and *Sacramento Bee*, May 5, 1913, p.1.

useless and that the mayor-council form of government should return),<sup>51</sup> there are other candidates who either made commonplace claims as to goals (the belief in running the Commission as one would run a business being one very common claim),<sup>52</sup> have goals that amount to, basically, running their office as mandated under the Charter and various city ordinances (G. C. Simmons in 1915 and Charles A. Bliss in 1920, both successful candidates for Commissioner of Public Health and Safety, are guilty of this),<sup>53</sup> or, most annoyingly of all, actively refuse to commit themselves to any sort of goals. As a result, analyzing the members of the Sacramento City Commission in terms of what they thought is somewhat futile, as the type of evidence needed for any sort of in-depth analysis is no longer available.

Who the members of the Sacramento City Commission were, however, and how they compare with the population as a whole, is something that still can be determined. Of the fourteen Commissioners, a majority held prior electoral political experience: Charles A. Bliss had been elected to the State Assembly in 1910 (defeating Hiram Johnson's father, Grove Johnson, in the Republican primary),<sup>54</sup> J. A. Filcher had been a State Senator for Placer County in the 1880s,<sup>55</sup> M. J. Burke, G. C. Simmons, and E. J. Carraghar had all been members of the City Board of Trustees (in modern terms, the City

---

<sup>51</sup> Wilder's view is found in *Sacramento Bee*, February 19, 1914, p.1, whilst Irvine's is found in *Sacramento Bee*, May 15, 1915, p.1.

<sup>52</sup> Examples of this approach are listed in footnote 8.

<sup>53</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 15, 1915, p.1; *Sacramento Union*, May 11, 1920, p.6

<sup>54</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, October 3, 1967.

<sup>55</sup> William L. Willis, *History of Sacramento County, California* (Los Angeles: Historic Record Company, 1913): 1014-1016.

Council) when it was abolished in 1912,<sup>56</sup> Thomas Coulter and F. E. Shaw likewise were on the School Board when it was abolished at the same time,<sup>57</sup> Edward Haynes had been the City Assessor-Auditor when it was an elected post,<sup>58</sup> and D. W. Carmichael had been the Treasurer (at separate times) of both the City and County of Sacramento.<sup>59</sup> Even the handful who had not been in elected office tended to have some political experience: John Q. Brown had been Gas Inspector for the City and County of San Francisco and Deputy District Attorney of Sacramento County,<sup>60</sup> Dr. E. M. Wilder had been on the commission that wrote the Charter of 1911,<sup>61</sup> and Gus S. Turner had been a deputy postmaster for Sacramento. They ranged quite a bit in the work that they had done before entering the Commission. Three members (Burke, Haynes, and Turner) had been at one point or another employed by the Southern Pacific Railroad, and Burke was still employed by them as a blacksmith when elected to the Commission. The professional classes were well represented on the Commission, with three doctors (Wilder, Simmons, and Shaw) and two lawyers (Bliss and Brown) serving on the Commission at various points. Business, though not unrepresented, was not represented to the extent that some historians have had it, and the businesses represented were mixed: Carmichael may have been the most prominent entrepreneur in Sacramento at the time, and George W. Lorenz

---

<sup>56</sup> Their election to said body is mentioned in *Sacramento Bee*, November 8, 1911, p.1.

<sup>57</sup> Willis: 613-614 (source for Shaw), *Sacramento Bee*, December 31, 1927 (source for Coulter).

<sup>58</sup> William L. Willis, *History of Sacramento County, California* (Los Angeles: Historic Record Company, 1913): 818-819.

<sup>59</sup> G. Walter Reed, *History of Sacramento County, California* (Los Angeles: Historic Record Company, 1923).

<sup>60</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, June 25, 1929.

<sup>61</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 2, 1912, p.5

had been a longtime Cashier and Director for the People's Savings Bank, but no one involved in manufacturing ever served on the Commission. Three Commissioners had been involved in real estate: Carmichael was a developer of land, Coulter ran a company that sold land, and Turner worked as a salesman for a real-estate firm.<sup>62</sup> In all then, members of the Commission tended to be highly involved in politics, and tended, for the most part, to hold positions that would place them in the middle classes of their time.

In terms of how the members of the Commission compared to the public of their times, they tended to be better off than their constituents. Another way of looking at them is how they compared politically. While ideology is hard to track down in retrospect, party affiliation is not as hard. Of the fourteen Commissioners, five were identified as being Republicans (Bliss, Wilder, Simmons, Haynes, and Brown), four were documented as being Democrats (Burke, Filcher, Carraghar, and Carmichael), one appears not to have been a member of a political party (Shaw), and four (Johnston, Lorenz, Coulter, and Turner) were not identified by party in the existing references. This mix of party support corresponds to other election results of the time, which show Sacramento as being a place that split tickets both in statewide elections and in elections to the state legislature.<sup>63</sup> Another field to look at is ethnicity and religion. In this era, Sacramento's population was mostly white, and many of the non-white residents did not have the franchise.<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup> Positions listed taken from *Sacramento City Directory* of 1912.

<sup>63</sup> The *California Blue Book* from 1911 to 1921 inclusive shows Sacramento as electing Republicans, Democrats, and Progressives locally and supporting them statewide.

<sup>64</sup> Population figures, here and elsewhere, are based on those given in the 1910 and 1920 U.S. Censuses. The 1910 U.S. Census, for instance, shows 486 African-Americans and 2,499 Asian-Americans out of a total population of 46,696, and 675 African-Americans and 3,008 Asian-Americans out of a population of 65,908. (The Census figures as tabulated make an accurate determination of the Hispanic population impossible without research out of the scope of this paper).

Therefore, it comes as no real surprise that the one candidate for Commission clearly known of as being non-white (J. Allen Harvey, an African-American minister who ran in 1919) didn't fare well, finishing close to last and never factoring as an important candidate. The white population in Sacramento, further, tended to be divided into four major ethnic groups: those of English descent, those of Irish descent, those of German descent, and those of Italian descent. Of these groups, none of the Commissioners seem to have been of Italian heritage, and the only indisputable German heritage Commissioner was Lorenz, but Burke, Carraghar, and Coulter were all of Irish heritage, with the others appearing to be largely of English heritage. A notable place of imbalance is that of gender. Luella Johnston, who was elected to the Commission in the first election in 1912, was the only woman to serve on the Commission, and, after her defeat for re-election in 1913, no other woman seems to have even bothered to run for the Commission, much less come close to winning a seat on it. It also was present in terms of where they came from, in terms of birthplace. While some Commissioners had been born in Sacramento, others came from such places as Massachusetts (Shaw), Michigan (Haynes), Amador County (Bliss), Iowa (Filcher), and even Canada (Coulter). Religion is a bit harder to determine, as it seems to have been somewhat uncouth to bring up one's religious practices in the political realm in Sacramento and many of the biographical listings do not mention this. However, based in large part on where funeral rites were held, it would appear that Burke, Carraghar, and Shaw were Catholics, Lorenz a Baptist, and Wilder and Brown Episcopalians.<sup>65</sup> In all, then, there appears to be range in terms of

---

<sup>65</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, November 20, 1914 (Shaw); September 20, 1915 (Lorenz); February 17, 1916 (Carraghar); June 25, 1929 (Brown); May 17, 1933 (Burke); October 8, 1963 (Wilder).

the origins of the Commissioners, which in many respects matched that of the population as a whole.

Before going into a description of the elections for the Sacramento City Commission, it should be noted that descriptions of city politics tend to use the same three terms or sets of terms in order to describe sections of the City of Sacramento in relationship to one another. These are as follows:

*“Downtown”*- This section is one that is clear in concept, but less so in actual location. The area thought of as being the “downtown” area tended to be the parts of town that in other places would be considered a tenderloin district. This is an area of cheap housing, saloons, and, according to many, much criminal activity involving such things as gambling, prostitution, drug dealing, and (during election times) charges of vote fraud.<sup>66</sup> This area was always somewhat vague in contemporary description, being anything from all parts of the city west of 10<sup>th</sup> Street<sup>67</sup> to a handful of specific precincts, but there does seem to be a constant in that the industrial waterfront (between B and O Streets) always seemed to be part of it. At any rate, these neighborhoods cannot be traced: Many of them were destroyed for either the construction of I-5 or other urban development during the 1960s, and a large part of what was left became the Old Sacramento tourist trap.

*“The Homes District”*- Again, this is an area that is clear in terms of what the concepts to in are in terms of content, but less so in terms of boundaries. This is the parts of the city that are for the most part residential districts, and, as such, contrasts with the “downtown” area. Here, the unclarity comes from two separate issues. One, the

---

<sup>66</sup> *Sacramento Union*, May 11, 1918, p.1.

<sup>67</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 4, 1914, p.1.

“downtown” area is not well defined in terms of boundaries, making it hard to draw the boundary in terms where it separates from the “homes district”. Second, there was some disagreement over how the “annexed territory” (to be explained in detail below) should be considered, with some references including it in the “homes district”, and others regarding it as being separate.

*“The Annexed District”*- Unlike the previous areas, this area is unquestionable in terms of area. Between 1849 and 1911, Sacramento used a set of boundaries in which the eastern city limit was 31<sup>st</sup> Street and the southern city limit Y Street. Shortly before the vote on charter government in 1911, however, the City expanded southward and eastward, annexing Oak Park (at that point an independent city), modern Land Park (at that point largely undeveloped), Curtis Park, and East Sacramento. With the boundaries being so clear, they are easier to study than the others. Many of the events that occur in government in this era will come from efforts to unify this area with that which had always been part of the city.

A useful way to understand the workings of city government, in terms of understanding the issues, what the public found important, and the nature of those who desired to serve, among other things, is to look at the campaigns for Commission seat. Due in part to space limitations and in part due to some campaigns not being as interesting, a complete listing of all these races is impossible. However, by looking at some representative examples, tendencies within city government can be determined.

The first race for the City Commission, in 1912, was the largest both in terms of available seats (for the first and last time, all five seats on the Commission were up for grabs) and in terms of candidates, with thirty-five candidates participating in the primary

election on May 4<sup>th</sup>. For the most part, these candidates ran independently of one another, as only three candidate slates, with fourteen candidates, formed before the primary was held. Of these slates, one consisted of Socialist Party members, whom, after their decent performance in the 1911 election, tried to follow it up in this election. The candidates they ran, however, were mixed in terms of quality, with one being regarded as one of the best candidates running overall,<sup>68</sup> while others lacked the ability to respond to questions other than by reading party literature,<sup>69</sup> and none of the ticket's members were able to make the runoff. Another slate, consisting originally of Mayor Beard, Trustee Carraghar, member of the County Board of Supervisors R. E. Callahan, and Trustee W. B. Hicks,<sup>70</sup> with President of the Board Hammond later joining as the fifth candidate,<sup>71</sup> ran in an attempt to keep the prior government in control of the city.<sup>72</sup> That the members of this slate were not happy at the changes to city government can be determined by their conduct at candidate forums: Beard, seeming to get flustered, managed to claim that he could and that he could not fight gambling within a few minutes of the same speech,<sup>73</sup> Callahan denounced the Municipal Voters League, which had rated him poorly in fitness for office,<sup>74</sup> Carraghar, during audience questioning, insulted several questioners,<sup>75</sup> and

---

<sup>68</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, April 18, 1912, p.5.

<sup>69</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, April 24, 1912, p.1.

<sup>70</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, April 23, 1912, p.1.

<sup>71</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 3, 1912, p.1.

<sup>72</sup> The *Sacramento Bee*, on April 23, 1912, p.1, lists a division of Commission offices rumored to take effect in the event that the candidates of their slate won control of the Commission. It also merits note that the organization slate was not a partisan one: Beard, Carraghar and Hicks were Democrats, and Callahan and Hammond Republicans.

<sup>73</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, April 24, 1912, p.1.

<sup>74</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, April 24, 1912, p.1.

Hammond and Hicks never bothered to attend.<sup>76</sup> That Carraghar, in particular, would get a rough time is not particularly surprising, as he had managed to alienate many people both by proposing a referendum to re-open the Oak Park saloons, which, while passing (even in Oak Park, albeit by a small margin),<sup>77</sup> still annoyed those who felt that they should have stayed closed, and in his efforts to get a streetcar franchise for a company that employed his son as a lawyer.<sup>78</sup>

The final slate was one that both took time and was fairly complex to assemble. The Municipal Voters League, first, looked at all thirty-five candidates, and, after grading them (in the case of the organization candidates, rather poorly), chose eight to serve on a preliminary list of preferred candidates.<sup>79</sup> A week later, presumably as a response to the public announcement of the organization slate, the League formed its own slate from previously-endorsed candidates, consisting of Assemblyman Charles Bliss, physician Dr. E. M. Wilder (Wilder and Bliss had been among the Freeholders who wrote the Charter of 1911, and had been endorsed by their fellow Freeholders), State Fair administrator J.A. Filcher, and women's club leader Luella Johnston.<sup>80</sup> When the primary election occurred on May 4<sup>th</sup>, all four of the Municipal Voters League candidates, four of the organization slate (Hammond being the exception), and two independent candidates qualified for the

---

<sup>75</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, April 25, 1912, p.1.

<sup>76</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, April 26, 1912, p.1.

<sup>77</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, April 29, 1912, p.1.

<sup>78</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, April 16, 1912, p.16.

<sup>79</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, April 18, 1912, p.5.

<sup>80</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 1, 1912, p.1. Maher, p.369, errs in stating that Johnston was added on the ticket after the preliminary election.

runoff.<sup>81</sup> One of these, newspaper editor P. A. Fitzgerald, had been previously considered unsuitable by the League and was also ignored by the organization slate. The other one, longtime Trustee M. J. Burke, had been on the preliminary League list, and was added to their ticket immediately after the primary.<sup>82</sup> In the general election, the chief issue involved whether or not the old government deserved to stay in power. As a result, the campaign ended up being one where the important goal was building coalitions of voters in order to either gain or maintain power. In the case of the Municipal Voters League, this included various types of reformers (represented by Bliss and Wilder), residents of the annexed territory (Filcher, who was the only candidate in the runoff from that area),<sup>83</sup> women, able to vote in a local election for the first time (Johnston),<sup>84</sup> and elements of organized labor (Burke).<sup>85</sup> Their goal, ultimately, came to become beating Beard, Carraghar, and Callahan, as Fitzgerald appears to have never been a factor and Hicks essentially dropped out a few days before the election.<sup>86</sup>

In 1917, the two Commissioner races (one for the full term, the other to replace E. J. Carraghar, who had died in February)<sup>87</sup> were overwhelmed by outside events. The United States entered World War One in April of 1917, and, for most of that month, the

---

<sup>81</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 6, 1912, p.1.

<sup>82</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 7, 1912, p.1.

<sup>83</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 9, 1912, p.2.

<sup>84</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 10, 1912, p.1.

<sup>85</sup> Maher, 369, probably exaggerates both the importance of Burke's partisan affiliation (Filcher was also a Democrat), and, possibly, his labor importance as well; the whole slate was supported by the Sheet Metal Workers (*Sacramento Bee*, May 18, 1912, p.3), and Bliss, in addition to Burke, was supported by the Truck Drivers Union (*Sacramento Bee*, May 17, 1912, p.11).

<sup>86</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 17, 1912, p.1.

<sup>87</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, February 17, 1917, p.1

general focus in Sacramento was on international events, rather than local politics, to the point where the *Bee* published an editorial cartoon making fun of the lack of interest in local politics.<sup>88</sup> As a result, the campaign for City Commission appears to have started in full only in late April, with only a limited amount of time before the first election (held on the first Saturday in May). Two different sets of candidates ran for the Commission seats. In the case of the short-term (Carraghar would have been running for re-election in 1918) Commission seat, the chief candidates were Edward Haynes, the longtime elected and appointed City Assessor who had fared well in a bid for Commissioner in 1916, O. W. Erlewine, who had served for around twenty years as the elected city Superintendent of Schools,<sup>89</sup> and J. H. Dolan, who had been involved in the Oak Park business community.<sup>90</sup> For the most part, this seems to have been a rather uneventful race. In terms of campaigning, Haynes focused on his candidacy being requested by the voters at large, and refused to promise anything about the actions he would take as Commissioner.<sup>91</sup> This may not seem like much of a campaign, but it fared reasonably well compared to the campaigns of Erlewine (who seems to have been focused on denying that his removal from the position of Superintendent of Schools by the Commission in 1912 had anything to do with his conduct in the position)<sup>92</sup> and Dolan (who ran on the fairly vague and somewhat shopworn promise of economy in

---

<sup>88</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, April 17, 1917, p.6.

<sup>89</sup> *Sacramento City Directory*, 1912.

<sup>90</sup> *Sacramento City Directory*, 1912.

<sup>91</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 2, 1917, p.4.

<sup>92</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 2, 1917, p.5.

government).<sup>93</sup> Ultimately, Haynes, with the support of the *Bee*,<sup>94</sup> was elected Commissioner in the first round of voting,<sup>95</sup> and immediately was sworn into office to fill the Carraghar vacancy.<sup>96</sup>

The race for the long-term seat on the Commission, on the other hand, was a much larger affair. This largely had to do with the fact that all five of the candidates had, at some point or another, been major players on the political scene. These candidates were incumbent Commissioner of Streets M. J. Burke, former Commissioner of Public Works Dr. E. M. Wilder, former Commissioner of Public Health and Safety Charles A. Bliss, prominent business tycoon and former city and county Treasurer D. W. Carmichael, and J. H. Devine, who had served on the City Board of Trustees during the 1890s and 1900s. In the campaign before the first round of voting, these candidates (except, possibly, for Bliss, for whom I have not been able to find any campaign materials) used the practice of finding one thing to center their campaign around and to stick with it. Devine focused his advertising on his role as a Trustee in obtaining city ownership of the water supply.<sup>97</sup> Carmichael announced plans to engage in business administration when in office.<sup>98</sup> Burke pointed out that he had served well, had managed to avoid making enemies, and did not have any conflicts of interest.<sup>99</sup> Wilder, meanwhile

---

<sup>93</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 3, 1917, p.10.

<sup>94</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 2, 1917, p.2.

<sup>95</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 7, 1917, p.1.

<sup>96</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 8, 1917, p.5.

<sup>97</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 4, 1917, p.5.

<sup>98</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 1, 1917, p.2.

<sup>99</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 1, 1917, p.3.

(with the assistance of the *Bee*, which editorialized at several points in his favor),<sup>100</sup> ran a campaign similar to his campaign in 1914,<sup>101</sup> in which he provided a long list of things he had done while a Commissioner, including equalizing water rates, getting the gas rate reduced, and establishing municipal control over street lighting.<sup>102</sup> In addition to this, Wilder also engaged in a style of campaigning in which he would make a large number of speeches in numerous places in a fairly short period of time.<sup>103</sup> In the first round of voting, Wilder managed to be first by a large margin, but he did not receive a majority and ended up in a run-off with Carmichael.<sup>104</sup>

Once the run-off started, the wheels started to come off of the Wilder campaign. Some of this seems to have been predicted by one of Wilder's strongest supporters, the *Sacramento Bee*, which noted, firstly, that there were people so opposed to Wilder that they had encouraged Burke to run again in an effort to cut the Wilder vote,<sup>105</sup> and that Wilder's personal style was one that could annoy people, and one that was not necessarily conducive to the politics of the time, which involved large amounts of personal interaction.<sup>106</sup> Wilder, during most of his campaign, ran on his achievements in office. Towards the end of the campaign, however, he purchased an ad that commented

---

<sup>100</sup> An example of this can be found at *Sacramento Bee*, April 27, 1917, p.1.

<sup>101</sup> An example of this sort of campaign in 1914 can be found in *Sacramento Bee*, May 1, 1914, p.13.

<sup>102</sup> One of these ads can be found in *Sacramento Bee*, April 27, 1917, p.13.

<sup>103</sup> He is recorded as doing this in *Sacramento Bee*, April 30, 1917, p.12, and in *Sacramento Bee*, May 3, 1917, p.3.

<sup>104</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 7, 1917, p.1.

<sup>105</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, April 28, 1917, p.36.

<sup>106</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, April 26, 1917, p.6.

about the difficulties of running for office when one's opponent has a large amount of money and is not afraid to use it.<sup>107</sup> This ad, which was rather obviously a slap at Carmichael (who at that point was probably one of the richest men in the city), had two effects. First, it resulted in a rebuke by the *Bee*, which felt it to be beyond the pale in terms of campaigning.<sup>108</sup> Second, it appears that that ad angered Carmichael, who, in response, started up a series of ads, which turned his success into a virtue. He started by pointing out in two ads how his personal success had enabled him to perform on behalf of the city.<sup>109</sup> After these ads, Carmichael changes the nature of his ads, and went directly at Wilder. Carmichael, in his ads, commented that one should serve the public before being in elected politics, which appears aimed at the fact that Carmichael's service to the community (over twenty years) was much more and over a longer period of time than Wilder's.<sup>110</sup> Carmichael then ran an ad in which he billed himself as a dignified gentleman and Wilder as a brash jerk.<sup>111</sup> To cap this, Carmichael, in response to an ad in which Wilder pointed out Carmichael's support for Wilder in 1914,<sup>112</sup> noted both Wilder going from supporting the commission form of government when he played a role in writing the Charter of 1911 and when he was on the Commission to opposing it when defeated for re-election in 1914, and how several businesses had refused to continue

---

<sup>107</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 14, 1917, p.5.

<sup>108</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 14, 1917, p.6.

<sup>109</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 14 and 15, 1917, p.4.

<sup>110</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 16, 1917.

<sup>111</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 17, 1917, p.2.

<sup>112</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 16, 1917, p.2.

conducting business in Sacramento due to his actions as Commissioner.<sup>113</sup> This campaign worked, as Carmichael went from being over two thousand votes behind Wilder in the first round of voting on May 5<sup>th</sup> to winning the run-off on May 19<sup>th</sup>.<sup>114</sup>

The 1919 election was the first of two elections for Commission seats that served as referendums on the practices of the Commissioner who held the seat in question and who was retiring from the Commission. That this would be the case is of no surprise, due to the actions of the Commissioner in question, Commissioner of Public Works Thomas Coulter. During the spring of 1919, Coulter was indicted by the Sacramento County Grand Jury and tried in Superior Court on charges relating to misconduct in office, including such things as stealing city property and misusing city labor, stemming from an apparent tendency to use city property and personnel at his ranch.<sup>115</sup> While he was, at trial, able to avoid criminal conviction either through a hung jury or being acquitted,<sup>116</sup> the charges against him were regarded as being serious enough by his fellow Commissioners that he lost his authority to engage in the day-to-day operations of the Public Works Department and was limited to voting as a Commissioner.<sup>117</sup> In addition to personal misdeeds, there were problems within the Department of Public Works as a whole, with records in some areas being missing and evidence that spending had occurred

---

<sup>113</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 18, 1917.

<sup>114</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 21, 1917, p.1.

<sup>115</sup> One such trial is recorded in *Sacramento Bee*, April 8, 1919, p.5.

<sup>116</sup> For an acquittal, see *Sacramento Bee*, April 18, 1919, p.1.

<sup>117</sup> The *Sacramento Official Gazette* references Commissioner Turner as being acting Commissioner of Public Works on several occasions, making this the logical conjecture.

without the proper authorization.<sup>118</sup> In these deeds, two officials in Public Works who had owed their position to Coulter were especially in trouble. Thomas James, who as Water Works Superintendent had been the top appointed official over city water, had been accused of authorizing Coulter's use of public employees for his ranch, while Roy Nichols, who as City Tapper was in charge of water mains, had admitted to destroying part of his records.<sup>119</sup>

Needless to say, Coulter did not bother running for re-election, and seven different candidates ran to replace him. Of these, the four candidates with the greatest chance of winning the office were Lee Gebhart, who had been elected three times (as a Progressive and as a Republican) to the State Assembly from a Sacramento seat,<sup>120</sup> Civil Service Board Chairman John Q. Brown, who had come close to being elected the year earlier, W. F. Purnell, a bookstore owner who had been Chairman of the Board of Freeholders that had proposed the failed Charter (on which more later) in 1916-1917,<sup>121</sup> and Ed L. Head, who had served as deputy Secretary of State of California and had been a water company executive.<sup>122</sup> Of these candidates, Gebhart, Brown, and Purnell seem to have done the largest amount of campaigning early on. Brown ran in the same way he had run in 1918, basing his campaign on his career.<sup>123</sup> Gebhart used his experience as a

---

<sup>118</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, April 15, 1919, p.5.

<sup>119</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, April 19, 1919, p.1.

<sup>120</sup> *California Blue Book*, 1915-1919 inclusive.

<sup>121</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 24, 1916, p.2.

<sup>122</sup> Head's service as a water company official is mentioned in *Sacramento Bee*, April 29, 1919, p.3, and his service as deputy Secretary of State is listed in the 1912 *Sacramento City Directory*.

<sup>123</sup> An example of this can be found at *Sacramento Bee*, May 10, 1919, p.3.

State Assemblyman (including his backing by the Assembly as a body)<sup>124</sup> as his main claim for the post, while Purnell used a combination of personal experience, plans for the city, and campaigns against Commission practices at various points in his campaign.<sup>125</sup> Quite usefully, the candidates were invited to a joint forum by the Sacramento Women's Council on April 28<sup>th</sup>, less than a week before the first round of voting.<sup>126</sup> In this forum (which appears to have operated in the now-standard format of stump speeches and audience questions), Gebhart promised to support a wage increase for teachers, Head proposed extending municipal ownership to streetcar operations,<sup>127</sup> minor candidate J. Allen Harvey suggested that the chief difficulty with solving the problem of illicit activities in Chinatown was due to the abilities of the Chinese at running and hiding, Purnell wanted improvements to the waterfront, and Brown refused to make any commitments. That national issues could be seen as locally important also is clear looking at this forum, as both Brown and Gebhart were criticized by questioners for engaging in anti-Prohibition activities.<sup>128</sup>

In the first election, Brown and Gebhart qualified for a run-off, somewhat narrowly outpolling Purnell (who carried the annexed district over resident Gebhart) and

---

<sup>124</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, April 28, 1919, p.5.

<sup>125</sup> Purnell's personal experience figures in *Sacramento Bee*, May 2, 1919, p.17, his plans in *Sacramento Bee*, April 29, 1919, p.5, and his opposition to Commission practices at *Sacramento Bee*, April 26, 1919, p.5.

<sup>126</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, April 29, 1919, p. 3, for this and all other materials on this event, unless cited otherwise.

<sup>127</sup> Interestingly, the most consistent defender of municipal ownership in Sacramento politics, Dr. E. M. Wilder, backed Purnell instead (*Sacramento Bee*, May 1, 1919, p.6).

<sup>128</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, April 29, 1919, p.3.

significantly outpolling all other candidates.<sup>129</sup> In the run-off, two issues appear to have become dominant. The first of these related directly to the scandals in the Public Works Department. Brown (and, before they were eliminated, Purnell and Head)<sup>130</sup> had campaigned on a promise to fire James and Nichols (who, due to their positions, were exempt from civil-service rules)<sup>131</sup> from their positions. Gebhart, on the other hand, refused to commit to any plans involving these officials unless either of them was convicted of criminal activity.<sup>132</sup> The second issue involves the subject of the Teachers Union. In the Assembly, Gebhart had been an opponent of pay raises to teachers, but, as a candidate for Commission, was a supporter of these raises.<sup>133</sup> This shift in position seems to have utterly alienated the Teachers Union, which, while not able due to internal rules to campaign directly against him, and for purely negative reasons (Brown made no comments on this subject), made its opposition clear. Meanwhile, Gebhart's refusal to commit to the firings seems to have won him support from officials in the Public Works (including James and Nichols) and Streets Departments,<sup>134</sup> as well as that of Commissioners Coulter and Carmichael,<sup>135</sup> but resulted in him being actively opposed by both the defeated Purnell and Head<sup>136</sup> and by the *Sacramento Bee*, which published a

---

<sup>129</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 5, 1919, p.1.

<sup>130</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 30, 1919, p.24.

<sup>131</sup> Ordinance 262, Third Series, (*Official Gazette*) specifically identifies their posts as not being covered under civil service, allowing them to be dismissed at the wish of the Commissioner in charge.

<sup>132</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, April 30, 1919, p.24

<sup>133</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 1, 1919, p.13.

<sup>134</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 15, 1919, p.1.

<sup>135</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 5, 1919, p.6.

<sup>136</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 13, 1919, p.1.

string of front-page articles of a critical nature towards his candidacy.<sup>137</sup> As a result of these issues, Brown defeated Gebhart by a 3-2 margin in the run-off election, and, in doing so, ended in one swoop the employment of James and Nichols (the latter deciding to resign immediately shortly after the election),<sup>138</sup> the political career of Gebhart (who did not run for re-election to the Assembly in 1920, in all likelihood directly due to this rebuff), and the tenure of D. W. Carmichael as President of the Sacramento City Commission, with Brown being elected himself by the rest of the Commission to that position upon his formal swearing-in as a Commissioner.

The 1920 Commissioner race, which became the last one due to the decision to switch to the city manager form of government that fall, is notable as being an election that, compared to most, was fairly low-key in the way it was conducted. This seems to have been for two reasons. First, on the same day that the Commission election was held, the California Presidential primary was held. On the Republican side of the ticket, there was a strongly-pitched race between Hiram Johnson and Herbert Hoover, both of whom were residents of California, and a race of high importance for both of their campaigns. Both of the major Sacramento newspapers had a favorite (the *Bee* supporting Johnson and the *Union* supporting Hoover),<sup>139</sup> and the Commission race was largely ignored, with the focus being on the Presidential race. The other issue is that it appears that the common expectation was that the Commission would not last much longer, and that, as a

---

<sup>137</sup> One of these articles can be found at *Sacramento Bee*, May 12, 1919, p.1.

<sup>138</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 27, 1919, p.12.

<sup>139</sup> This is made clear in looking at any issue of the *Sacramento Bee* or *Sacramento Union* during the first week of May.

result, it was hard to get too excited compared to previous races.<sup>140</sup> As in 1919, the chief issue in the campaign centered around the conduct of the retiring Commissioner, Commissioner of Public Health and Safety Dr. G. C. Simmons. For much of his tenure, Simmons had been charged in the press and by various reform groups with being a failure at solving the crime issues of Sacramento, most of which involved various illicit activities (especially gambling) in the downtown section of the city. Unlike the case of Coulter, the charges against Simmons never resulted in criminal proceedings, loss of control over his departments, or the accusation of personal corruption. Rather, the charges against his service were ones accusing him of having no interest in handling these issues or in appointing a Chief of Police who did. This disinterest seems to have become an embarrassment with the establishment of military camps outside Sacramento as part of World War One deployments in early 1918, leading to at least two attempts to recall Simmons, in 1917 and in 1918, in both cases on the recommendation of investigative authorities who noted his failures.<sup>141</sup> Simmons survived these efforts, and even tried to defend his record,<sup>142</sup> but it comes as no surprise that he decided not to seek another term in 1920.

In the race, three major candidates campaigned: Former Commissioner of Public Health and Safety Charles A. Bliss, who had spent the years following his defeat for re-

---

<sup>140</sup> Bliss mentions that he expects it to be abolished in *Sacramento Union*, May 14, 1920, p.3.

<sup>141</sup> Coverage of these attempts occurs in *Sacramento Bee*, May 11, 1917, p.1 (at which point in time the recommendations are coming from the Sacramento County Grand Jury) and *Sacramento Union*, May 21, 1918, p.1 (requested in that case by a private Public Welfare Committee).

<sup>142</sup> Attempts at defenses occur in *Sacramento Union*, May 12, 1918, p. 2, and *Sacramento Bee*, May 31, 1918, p. 1.

election in 1915 in the private practice of law,<sup>143</sup> and 1919 Commission candidates W. F. Purnell and Ed L. Head. Purnell and Head focused their campaigns on their opposition to political bosses and on engaging in general good government activities.<sup>144</sup> Bliss, meanwhile, pledged the same things, but had as the main focus of his campaign issues involving crime. He pledged to suppress various forms of vice, including gambling, prostitution, and drug dealing.<sup>145</sup> Interestingly, while this pledge seems to have been a direct slap at Simmons, who was seen as having done nothing about these issues and who had beaten Bliss in 1915, Simmons was not mentioned by name, and Bliss avoided directly blaming these problems on either him or anyone in positions of authority. This campaign of his failed to earn himself the support of his prior associate and ally, Dr. E. M. Wilder (who endorsed Purnell),<sup>146</sup> or of the *Bee* (which noted that Bliss as a Commissioner had failed to suppress the activities he was pledging to suppress now),<sup>147</sup> but it seems to have won him the support of a public that had rebuked him in three consecutive elections,<sup>148</sup> as he narrowly led in the first round of voting, and won a solid victory in the run-off over Purnell, who, in spite of some reform proposals of his own

---

<sup>143</sup> Bliss appears several times in the Sacramento *Official Gazette* as arguing a position for a client to the Commission.

<sup>144</sup> *Sacramento Union*, May 1, 1920 (Head ad), *Sacramento Union*, May 14, 1920, p.2 (Purnell ad).

<sup>145</sup> Examples of this campaigning are found in *Sacramento Union*, May 11, 1920, p.6 and *Sacramento Union*, May 12, 1920, p.14. In addition, Bliss gave an interview to the *Sacramento Bee* on May 13, 1920 (p.1) saying substantially the same thing.

<sup>146</sup> *Sacramento Union*, May 8, 1920, p.2.

<sup>147</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 8, 1920, p.18.

<sup>148</sup> The *California Blue Book* for 1916 shows Bliss as having lost a race for Superior Court Judge in 1915, and he had lost bids for the Commission in 1915 (*Sacramento Bee*, May 17, 1915, p.1) and 1917 (*Sacramento Bee*, May 7, 1917, p.1).

(including granting the position of Chief of Police to a military veteran unassociated with prior operations),<sup>149</sup> seems to have failed at gaining personal momentum.

Over the years, several proposals to alter the Commission, to the point of abolishing it, were proposed, with varying degrees of seriousness. Of these proposals, two of them, ultimately, faced the voters of Sacramento for their approval. The first of these came about from a Board of Freeholders elected in May 1916, and which faced the voters on January 9<sup>th</sup>, 1917. The chief feature of this proposal was the abolition of the Commission, and restoration of the mayor-council system used prior to 1912.<sup>150</sup> Notably, this was not a particularly popular proposal with the major players in Sacramento politics, as the *Sacramento Bee*,<sup>151</sup> three of the five Commissioners,<sup>152</sup> the directors of the Chamber of Commerce,<sup>153</sup> and seven of the fifteen members of the Board of Freeholders<sup>154</sup> all came out in opposition of this charter for various reasons (such as the powers of the City Council, the treatment of franchise holders being too favorable, and the possible deterioration of the civil service),<sup>155</sup> with no similar groups being in favor of it. In spite of this organization opposition, however, this charter only failed to gain enactment by a relatively small percentage of the vote, and, contrary to concerns about

---

<sup>149</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 6, 1920, p.6.

<sup>150</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, January 1, 1917, p.1.

<sup>151</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, January 5, 1917, p.6.

<sup>152</sup> Simmons, Carraghar, and Turner are mentioned as opposing it in the *Sacramento Bee*, January 6, 1917, p.10.

<sup>153</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, January 5, 1917, p.1. Rice, p.62, suggests that the opposition by business was key, which is questionable.

<sup>154</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, January 5, 1917, p.1.

<sup>155</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, January 1, 1917, p.1; *Sacramento Bee*, January 3, 1917, p.1.

increased bossism, the downtown areas were the ones most against this charter, with the annexed district supporting it.<sup>156</sup>

The second, and ultimately successful, proposal came from a Board of Freeholders elected in May 1920. Their main proposal was to change the system, not to the old mayor-council system, but to the city manager system, which had been (like the commission system) a product of the 1900s, but one which at this point starting to rise in popularity. Compared to the election that brought the Charter of 1911, it was a fairly boring election, in that many of the groups that could have been of interest stayed out of the election. For example, organized labor, while having some elements express issues with the charter,<sup>157</sup> did not play a role in either the supportive or oppositional campaigns around the proposed charter. The City Commission, while proposing amendments of their own in the event that the proposed charter failed to pass (most notably cutting the Commission to three members by abolishing the Commissioners of Streets and Finance),<sup>158</sup> likewise did not campaign much either for or against the charter, either as a body or as individuals. The actual campaigning involving the charter ended up being two groups against one another. The organizer of the campaign for the charter was the Sacramento Chamber of Commerce. In its' advertising, the Chamber focused on the actual position of City Manager, and claimed that having a City Manager would save money,<sup>159</sup> and that it was better to have one expert running Sacramento than five

---

<sup>156</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, January 10, 1917, p.1.

<sup>157</sup> The Building Trades Council mentions doubts in *Sacramento Bee*,

<sup>158</sup> A complete list is in *Sacramento Bee*, October 19, 1920, p.12.

<sup>159</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, November 25, 1920, p.16.

politicians.<sup>160</sup> Opposed to the charter, meanwhile, was the *Sacramento Bee*. While the *Bee* did have some objections to the main sections of the proposed charter (such as confusion over how Civil Service would work, and problems with the possibility of unlimited business licensing),<sup>161</sup> the *Bee*, for the most part, ignored these. Rather, the *Bee*'s chief complaint, one that was repeated daily for the two weeks before the election, was the fact that the City Council to replace the City Commission was to be elected by a form of proportional representation. At various points, the *Bee* claimed that proportional representation was illegal in California (bringing in, at one point, the opinion of a former California Chief Justice),<sup>162</sup> that it would cause the rise of factionalism along various ethnic, religious, and economic lines,<sup>163</sup> that residents of the areas with it had grown to hate it,<sup>164</sup> and that large numbers of votes would be voided due to the complexity of the system. In the end, however, this campaigning was in vain: The Charter of 1920 passed overwhelmingly, with all parts of the city supporting it.<sup>165</sup>

When comparing the Charter of 1920 to the Charter of 1911, it is notable that several major concerns in 1911 are gone in 1920. One of these is the fear of the power of the franchise holders: Franchise holders, under the Charter of 1920, were given longer

---

<sup>160</sup> An example of this is *Sacramento Bee*, November 24, 1920, p.4.

<sup>161</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, November 20, 1920, p.1.

<sup>162</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, November 23, 1920, p.1. The *Bee*, for what it is worth, was right: Proportional representation was thrown out by the Supreme Court of California in 1922 (Overstamp found in copy of *Charter of 1920*).

<sup>163</sup> An example of this is *Sacramento Bee*, November 11, 1920, p.1.

<sup>164</sup> An example of this is *Sacramento Bee*, November 17, 1920, p.1.

<sup>165</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, December 1, 1920, p.1.

leases,<sup>166</sup> paid less of their revenues into the city treasury,<sup>167</sup> and were able to consolidate their holdings into one franchise,<sup>168</sup> with the only added requirement of note for them being an obligation to repair any damage they caused.<sup>169</sup> Another concern that disappears is that of the consolidation of power, as the office of the City Manager holds the singular executive authority that the Mayors had held, including the ability to make appointments (such as City Engineer)<sup>170</sup> and engage in actions (such as setting the budget)<sup>171</sup> that had previously been given to the Commission as a whole, as well as the powers held by the five individual Commissioners. This consolidation was not limited merely to the establishment of the City Manager. The mixture of independent authorities that held control over various elements of city finances during the Commission (and previous) eras was ended with the establishment of the office of City Controller,<sup>172</sup> who held authority over duties previously controlled by the City Auditor, City Collector, City Assessor, and City Purchasing Agent, all offices abolished under this charter. Likewise, the separate Streets and Water Works Departments were consolidated under one body, controlled by the City Engineer.<sup>173</sup> Professionalism in running departments was also of note; the Police

---

<sup>166</sup> *Charter of 1911*, Article XXIII, Section 230, gives a maximum of twenty-five years, while City of Sacramento Board of Freeholders, *Charter of the City of Sacramento 1920*, Article XXII, Section 207, gives them thirty-five years.

<sup>167</sup> *Charter of 1911*, Article XXIII, Section 229, uses a sliding scale, while *Charter of 1920*, Article XXII, Section 209, has a 2% flat rate, which is only mandatory after five years.

<sup>168</sup> *Charter of 1920*, Article XXII, Section 206.

<sup>169</sup> *Charter of 1920*, Article XXII, Section 221.

<sup>170</sup> *Charter of 1911*, Article II, Section 10; *Charter of 1920*, Article X, Section 59.

<sup>171</sup> *Charter of 1911*, Article X, Section 129; *Charter of 1920*, Article X, Section 74.

<sup>172</sup> *Charter of 1920*, Article XI, Section 66.

<sup>173</sup> *Charter of 1920*, Article X, Section 61.

Judge (who handled the trial of minor crimes) was required to be a full-time judge,<sup>174</sup> and the city's parks and playground went from being run by part-time boards in the Board of Park Directors and the Board of Playground Directors<sup>175</sup> to full-time administrators in the Departments of Parks and Recreation.<sup>176</sup> The City Council created to replace the City Commission, on the other hand, regressed, going back to the part-time status it had held in the pre-Commission era.<sup>177</sup> Interestingly, criminal conviction, which had not disqualified office-holding in the Commission era, became an automatic disqualifier in the Charter of 1920, possibly as a reaction to the Coulter scandals.<sup>178</sup> Some of the reforms added in 1911 receive alterations: a probationary period,<sup>179</sup> limits to the speed of promotion of police and fire personnel,<sup>180</sup> records of employee efficiency,<sup>181</sup> and a preference to World War I veterans and their widows<sup>182</sup> (and, interestingly, an elimination of racial discrimination in hiring)<sup>183</sup> are added to the Civil Service, while signatures to get referendums and initiatives both become hard to get (as they can only be

---

<sup>174</sup> *Charter of 1920*, Article XVII, Section 141.

<sup>175</sup> *Charter of 1911*, Articles XVI and XVII, Sections 197 and 206.

<sup>176</sup> *Charter of 1920*, Articles XVI and XIX, Sections 137 and 162.

<sup>177</sup> *Charter of 1920*, Article XI, Section 71.

<sup>178</sup> *Charter of 1920*, Article IV, Section 20.

<sup>179</sup> *Charter of 1920*, Article VIII, Section 49.

<sup>180</sup> *Charter of 1920*, Article VIII, Section 43.

<sup>181</sup> *Charter of 1920*, Article VIII, Section 46.

<sup>182</sup> *Charter of 1920*, Article VIII, Section 45.

<sup>183</sup> *Charter of 1920*, Article VIII, Section 47.

received at City Hall)<sup>184</sup> and fewer in number (only five hundred needed to appear on the ballot).<sup>185</sup>

Having looked at all of these elements of the Sacramento City Commission, from why it came to be to what replaced it, it is safe to say that the last question left is that of why the system was abolished in Sacramento. The one secondary source to discuss this (albeit very briefly) suggests that it came about due to a combination of high costs, delayed decision-making, and internal bickering.<sup>186</sup> Of these reasons, high cost is a relative thing, not fully determinate with the available evidence, though certain cases of financial miscalculation (such as the realization that the city had miscalculated the cost of water filtration)<sup>187</sup> could not have helped in voter approval. The second suggestion, problems with speed in decision-making, is a problem that has been suggested with the commission system overall,<sup>188</sup> and that is a place where some problems are apparent: Water filtration was being discussed as an issue to be put to the voters as early as 1916<sup>189</sup> before it finally was in 1920, and there are quite a few cases when the Commission would push back discussion of issues for weeks at a time.<sup>190</sup> The third issue, in-fighting, is also

---

<sup>184</sup> *Charter of 1920*, Article XXIII, Section 239.

<sup>185</sup> *Charter of 1920*, Article XXIII, Section 239. The *Charter of 1911* requires signatures equal to 5% or 15% of the vote at the last election for an initiative (Article XVI, Section 197) and signatures equal to 10% of the vote for a referendum (Article XVII, Section 206).

<sup>186</sup> John Constantinus Bollens, *Appointed Executive Local Government* (Los Angeles, Haynes Foundation, 1952): pgs.24-25.

<sup>187</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, November 2, 1920, p.4.

<sup>188</sup> Robert L. Lineberry and Ira Sharkansky, *Urban Politics and Public Policy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p.167.

<sup>189</sup> *Sacramento Official Gazette*, November 27, 1916.

<sup>190</sup> *Sacramento Official Gazette*, especially in late 1916 and early 1917.

something suggested about the system in general,<sup>191</sup> and is something that is very clear looking at the records. While the first Commissioners had been on the same slate, they came from power bases that differed significantly with each other. As early as 1913, factionalism is clearly apparent, with discussions taking place about changes in control.<sup>192</sup> This factionalism, moreover, could get really bitter: When Dr. F. E. Shaw died in November of 1914, the Commission was split into factions of Carraghar-Coulter and Burke-Bliss, and, with neither faction being willing to support a member proposed by the other and with three votes needed for a replacement, the term was not able to be filled before a May special election, even when they grew desperate enough to nominate people at City Hall for business before the Commission.<sup>193</sup> This managed to grow even worse later on, as the factions went from being based on the pro/anti reform divides of 1911 to every man for himself: The last three times a new Commissioner was elected to the City Commission (1917, 1919, and 1920) resulted in said Commissioner become Commission President, showing instability in administrative cooperation.

In addition to these points, there are several others that merit consideration. The most valuable of these is the suggestion, again one used on the commission system in general, that the problems that the commission system was meant to fight did not go

---

<sup>191</sup> Amy Bridges, *Morning Glories: Municipal Reform in the Southwest* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997): p.20; David N. Ammons and Charledean Newell, *City Executives: Leadership Roles, Work Characteristics, and Time Managements* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), p.130.

<sup>192</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, May 5, 1913, p.1, suggests Burke as being the possible swing between Bliss and Wilder and Filcher and (then-Commissioner-elect) Carraghar.

<sup>193</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, January 1, 1915, p.3; *Sacramento Bee*, January 22, 1915, p.4; *Sacramento Bee*, February 17, 1915, p.14. (The latter being the time when the man present for business was nominated).

away.<sup>194</sup> This explanation is one with merit, in that it is something in place with Sacramento. One of the major selling points for the commission system in Sacramento was that it would end the corruption found in Sacramento government. This did not occur, as demonstrated by the scandal around Coulter in 1919 and the continued problems with franchise holders and illicit activities. Still another idea proposed is that the competence of the officials was lacking. Again, this idea has merit: The ads for the Charter of 1920 bill the idea of expert government, and the problems Simmons had as Commissioner of Public Health and Safety might be understood best as what happens when a man with no experience with law is responsible for enforcing it. A final issue, and one that might be most relevant of all, is that of popularity. The commission barely came into being in 1911, and was still opposed by a very large minority in 1917 even as no one of importance was campaigning against it. When the Charter of 1920 was proposed, even the *Bee*, in its' countless denunciations of the charter, admitted the current system to be flawed, and failed to bring up a point in favor of the Commission. A final, relevant point is that, just Sacramento was following a trend by converting to the commission system, it had followed one in abandoning the system: Fifty other cities abandoned the commission system by 1920,<sup>195</sup> and the number of cities with commission systems continued to deteriorate, going from eighty-one cities with over 30,000 residents in 1934 to fifty-two cities with over 25,000 residents by 1970.<sup>196</sup> In this respect, than, Sacramento was following a path similar to that other cities had taken.

---

<sup>194</sup> Bridges, p.104.

<sup>195</sup> Rice, p.113-125.

<sup>196</sup> Clarence Eugene Ridley and Orin Frederyc Nolting, editors, *The Municipal Year Book* (Washington: International City Managers Association), 1934-1970 inclusive (1934 statistics from p.101, 1970 statistics from pgs. 187, 193, 198, and 204).