Part I: What's in Truax Landfill?

The Truax Landfill saga was based on reviews of old newspaper stories (from NewspaperArchive.com), publicly available government reports, and hundreds of government reports and communications obtained through open records requests. Given the many missing, withheld and/or incomplete public records–and numerous internal communications that were not written and therefore off the public record– there are a variety of unknowns and gaps in this story, and uncertainties about the accuracy of various details. Citations are removed. If you have questions about this history, know about details I didn't include, and/or are interested in sources for any of specific points in the story, please email mariapowell@mejo.us.

Before it was an official landfill: free-for-all dumping, burning and a "piggery" farm

In the early 1900s, as Madison grew rapidly, the city, businesses, industries and residents filled a large wetland area along Starkweather Creek (in what is now the Eken Park and Emerson neighborhoods) with garbage, industrial, and commercial wastes. Beginning in 1920, newspapers reported "bog fires" there that burned for several days—which the fire department said were caused by "burning rubbish." Some of this area eventually became the Demetral Landfill (called the Pennsylvania landfill for some time). When this area was too full to accept more refuse, and residential areas were being built over it, some dumping shifted to the area around the Burke sewage plant to the northwest. From the teens through World War II, this area was a public garbage dump and burning area, and as it grew exponentially, Oscar Mayer and other industries also dumped growing amounts of industrial wastes there. The area later became the Truax Landfill.

In the early 1900s, the city debated where to locate an incinerator to burn its burgeoning wastes. The city first proposed locating it on the east side (near Madison Kipp and the city bus barns), but residents "bitterly protested" locating it there or anywhere within city limits. Not long after the city built the Burke sewage plant northeast of the Farmer's Meat Packing Cooperative in 1914 (Oscar Mayer bought it in 1919), it built an incinerator adjacent to it to the northeast, just outside city limits.[1] Madison veterinarian Dr. J.P. West was contracted to operate a "piggery" farm there so that some of the garbage "might be fed to hogs instead of consumed by flames." This was a common practice in growing U.S. cities in the 1800s and into the early 1900s." Also, according to one reporter, during WWI it was "deemed a sin to destroy hog food by burning it."[2,3,4]

As might be expected, the pig farm emanated foul stenches far and wide into surrounding neighborhoods. The people living closest to it (and the sewage plant and garbage dumps) were low income industrial workers, including many immigrants. Some lived in slum shacks along the nearby

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[1] The incinerator was on what is now the northeast corner of the Oscar Mayer property.

[2] When they reached the end of their garbage quaffing lives, pigs were likely sold to Oscar Mayer.

[3] The city apparently briefly considered a west side incinerator, but alders "saved themselves lots of headaches" by giving up on this plan. It's not clear if the incinerator was actually abandoned during WWI; other sources suggest that it continued operating even after the pig farm was created there.

[4] Dr. West, a wealthy Madisonian, was the president of the state board of veterinary examiners for some time and performed pharmaceutical experiments at the piggery in attempt to create a "hog serum" for cholera. He later bought an expensive home on Lake Monona.

railroad tracks. They had no political wherewithal to complain to city leaders about their horrible living conditions.

However, in the early 1920s, privileged Maple Bluff residents, including Senator Robert La Follette —who lived much further away but could still smell the piggery—petitioned the city to shut it down. City council rebuffed this demand, voting to continue West's city contract and also to provide funding so he could hire state penitentiary parolees to "unwrap" the garbage for low wages.

In June 1927, Governor Zimmerman, who presumably lived at the governor's mansion in Maple Bluff, personally toured the piggery, and following this a top state official issued an order that reformatory parolees no longer do this work. The State Board of Health declared Dr. West's "so-called piggery garbage farm" a "menace to public health…a cause of discomfort and suffering of citizens of the state, especially of those residing in the vicinity of said piggery garbage farm." This method of garbage disposal, he said, belonged to a "past age" and the city should expand the incinerator already at the site to take care of all of its garbage.

After an all-day meeting, the Board issued a resolution demanding that the piggery be shut down, and served notice to Dr. West. It wasn't shut down. According to the Wisconsin State Journal, city officials "saw the necessity of doing away with the present method of garbage disposal," but said the city could not afford the costs to improve the incinerator at West's farm to handle extra garbage it would need to handle without the pigs. West's piggery was licensed by the city through the 1940s, when the Department of Defense took over the Burke sewage plant during World War II.

Who owned and operated the landfill? A messy, complicated history

The ownership and use history of the Truax Landfill is complicated and confusing, with conflicting details in news articles, government documents, formal leases and informal agreements over many decades. A wide variety of entities—residents, industries, private waste haulers, the University of Wisconsin, the city, the military, and more—dumped and burned a plethora of wastes there before it was finally closed in 1972.

In the 1920s and 1930s Dr. West's piggery overlapped somewhat with the garbage dumping and burning areas that eventually became the Truax landfill (though government documents do not mention the pre-World War II open burning and piggery farm).[5] During WWII (1942-1946) the Department of Defense acquired most of Truax Field and purportedly excavated a sand and gravel pit there to use in creating Air Force runways, and then used the site for burning and disposing of construction debris while building the base.

In 1948, the DoD quit-claimed Truax Field to the city, and the area south of the base was again used as an open dumping and burning site. The city officially opened the Truax Landfill there (also known as the Packers Avenue Dump) in the early 1950s. In 1955 the city and Oscar Mayer agreed to jointly operate the landfill, and in the late 1958s the city gave Oscar Mayer permission to use and operate it. In 1961 the city assumed all operating responsibilities for the site. In the early

[5] In 1990 when DNR issued its first consent order to the city and county regarding the landfill, the city told the agency (incorrectly) that the Truax landfill "originally was excavated by the United States Department of Defense (DOD) in the 1930's or 1940's" and do not mention the piggery.

1960s the Department of Defense constructed munitions bunkers in a 25-acre area called "Camp Woodchuck" in middle of the landfill and the city piled wastes around it (see more below). In 1967 the Demetral landfill closed and wastes that had been sent there were re-routed to the nearby Truax site.

The landfill never had a legal plan of operation, but in 1972—its last year of operation—it was licensed by DNR after receiving a surprisingly glowing inspection report from the agency.[6] Apparently having concluded that there was no hazardous waste at the landfill, DNR did not require any groundwater monitoring. In 1973, the city transferred the landfill to Dane County, along with many acres of surrounding land and the airport. At that time, DNR's policy for "grandfathered' landfills such as Truax that "do not contain hazardous wastes" was to monitor groundwater quality "when signs of harmful groundwater contamination are evident."

What was dumped in the landfill?

By 1973 when it transferred the land to the county, the landfill had accepted a plethora of known hazardous wastes and countless tons of chemical substances that were never characterized but were likely very toxic. It isn't clear whether the city informed the county of what was dumped there when it was handed over to them.

Official records with details on what was brought to the old city dump and "piggery farm" from the 1920s to the 1940s are lacking, and there's only minimal information about what the military contributed during World War II and afterwards. Oscar Mayer & Company was clearly among the biggest users of the dump all along; it was a very practical waste disposal option given its proximity to the factory.[7] Records on early Oscar Mayer dumping are nonexistent, but a 1955 Oscar Mayer memo to the city said the company dumped 50 loads a day into the landfill, but it also claimed others dumped as much or more (clearly in an attempt to attribute as much of the wastes to others as possible).[8] The city, according to the company, brought about 50 loads a day "on alternate weeks when the Street Department is hauling from the East Side of Madison," and the Truax Field air base brought 10 dumpsters per day. The largest number of loads, Oscar Mayer claimed, originated from "groups classified as Industrial and Commercial such as Garages, Filling Stations, Florists, Stores, smaller industries as Ray-O-Vac and others." The company memo included a graph showing the amounts dumped by these entities.

Records indicate that a variety of hazardous and explosive materials were brought to the landfill for years. A 1988 city memo written by Bernard Saley, an "environmental technologist" with the Madison Public Health Department for over 40 years, said: "During my employment with the City of Madison I recall the dumping of various chemical substances in the Truax Landfill." His department sprayed pesticides at the dump once a week and "it was not uncommon to see containers and barrels of unknown materials" during those visits.

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[6] DNR didn't approve any plans for the landfill before 1990.

[7] Oscar Mayer also brought wastes to the Sycamore Landfill (and later, after Truax closed, to Refuse Hideaway)

[8] The 1990.5.30 interviews with waste dumpers says OM just started using the LF this year, but this is probably false.

City staff interviews in 1990 with past operators of the landfill, as well as city, Oscar Mayer, and military officials, revealed more disturbing details about what went into the dump.[9] One landfill operator said the military had a large burning area there in the early 1940s. Another said he remembered "someone brought in some 55 gallon drums"—he "did not know who brought them or what was in them" – that exploded "when he pushed them too close to the burning area." A man who worked for Oscar Mayer from 1945 to 1961 said the company dumped "sawdust ash, packing house waste consisting of brine-saturated paper, cardboard and office waste"—at a volume of 2 loads per hour, 8 hours a day, 5 days a week. Oscar Mayer, he reported, brought in *truckloads* of plastic packaging (likely discards from their plastics manufacturing).

Robert Skuldt, who became the airport director in 1946, said a part of the site was used as a military firing range and he "contracted with an individual to mine the lead" there. When he first started the job, he remembered it being an "open dump…Anybody who wanted to could dump there." The Air Force, he said, disposed of "materials from buildings that they were vacating." In the landfill's last two years of operation, according to another operator, the military brought 500 to 1000 pounds of refuse once or twice a month, including paints, construction materials, wire, garbage and other odd objects to the landfill—on one occasion, a 1000-lb cable.

One operator who'd done the job for longer than others--from 1964 to 1972—said Rayovac came once a week to the site, bringing 20-25 fifty-five gallon drums containing "dented batteries, battery insides, caps from batteries, and black dust which was a by-product of battery production." City Disposal (later called Waste Management) came once a week with a Levitaner (compactor) full of black dust and cardboard from Rayovac. "Working with the dust was very difficult" and he was "covered with it after working with it," he told the interviewer. A later internal government document notes that Madison Kipp, Gisholt and Cooper Foundaries (sic) also probably sent wastes to the landfill via private waste haulers.

The long-term operator also said Goodwill brought old stoves and refrigerators that were crushed and buried. Oscar Mayer came throughout the day and night, dumping plastic, cardboard barrels, metal barrels, pallets, dented cans of ham, waste from weiner and cold meat production and raw meat. Mautz paint would come every other week with a semi-trailer of 55 gallon drums with paints and thinners in them. Mack's ash line and other septic haulers dumped septic tank contents from a variety of sources.[10] The University of Wisconsin came every day with residence hall garbage, and private haulers brought "1/2 dumpsters" of UW hospital waste "at least once a week, sometimes more." He recalled seeing "needles and blood soaked bed sheets" in these loads. The university also sent power plant ash and lab wastes, including toxic chemicals and solvents, to the landfill. Bernard Saley's 1988 memo noted that he once "had the task of hauling a caldron of about 100 pounds of potassium cyanide from the University of Wisconsin to the site for disposal."

In September 1960 the Madison Department of Public Health issued a report based on a landfill inspection. "An unknown quantity of chemicals harmful to health of our citizens is thrown into the air" by "continual burning of miscellaneous materials" the report said. The Department

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[9] These interviews were done after the DNR ordered the city to investigate the groundwater contamination

[10] Mack's ash line took Madison Kipp-Corp.'s solvent wastes for some time and may have brought Kipp's wastes to the Truax Landfill during its operation. Some government documents mention Kipp as a potential waste source there.

received regular reports from citizens nearby of "irritation of nose and throat and eyes." The dump was treated with poison bait for rats three times a year but "it is evident that the rat control program is ineffective;" photos of large rats and burrows were included. The Health Department's Rivers and Lakes Section "routinely sprays the dump area with an insecticide on a once a week basis," but mosquitoes and flies remained a big problem. "A rubbish burning operation of the magnitude necessary to dispose of rubbish from a city the size of Madison," the Department concluded, "cannot be operated in such a manner as to not become a public nuisance" (also noting that a 1955 report by Chicago engineers had recommended that burning be discontinued).

City made token efforts to protect Starkweather Creek and shallow groundwater

The city apparently made some minimal, token efforts to prevent pollution to groundwater and Starkweather Creek, which ran along the eastern edge of the landfill. A 1968 city memo from a city engineer to the health department said the streets division approved the disposal of "materials that are unusual," including oil, fertilizers, and "exotic wastes," as long as they were placed in a special area that was "the furthest from the ditches leading to the Starkweather Creek"—and advised that it was "unlikely that any deep aquifer pollution could occur if liquids or exotic wastes were deposited in this area." The streets division requested a 48-hour notice before "exotic materials" were brought to the landfill so that operators could be informed and the wastes could be placed in the designated area, because solid waste officials in other parts of the country had advised that "there have been several instances of explosions and personal injuries to operating personnel by disposal of exotic wastes that were volatile and flammable."

The landfill operator from 1964 and 1972 said his family moved to Packers Avenue in 1937, when he was a child, and at that time he recalled Dr. West's piggery near the landfill. For some time, according to the airport director, "the Air Force sold their garbage to West's hog farm" until an incident "when the acid used to clean the floors was mixed in with the garbage and it killed the hogs—after which the acid was dumped "separately, possibly at Truax." Oscar Mayer "both burned and dumped" next to the Burke sewage site, and "hauled ashes from coal burning to that site until 15 years ago" (which would have been around 1975).

The groundwater, he recalled, was very shallow under the landfill. Once when they were digging to place garbage in it, he reminisced, "they dug down too far" and hit water so they filled it in with dirt before continuing.

Military munitions bunkers in the middle of the landfill

One thing notably missing from the landfill interview documents is any mention of the fact that the city leased a portion of the landfill to the U.S. Air Force, which built munitions bunkers there in the early 1960s in an area that was eventually dubbed "Camp Woodchuck." The bunkers were built during the height of the Cold War, when President John F. Kennedy ramped up military spending and increased the numbers of anti-ballistic nuclear missile systems in the country (see more details here).

During the mid-1970s, when Madison residents and elected leaders began raising questions about loud military helicopter flights carrying "radioactive materials" over the city, the airport

director said it was "common knowledge" among city officials that nuclear weapons were stored at Truax Field. The bunkers in the landfill, built with special reinforced concrete, were "designed to protect missiles and munitions against enemy bombardment," and "missile assembly" was done in buildings adjacent to them. Given this, it is nearly certain that this is where the nuclear missiles were stored.

In the mid-1960s, the city was rapidly running out of landfill space, so it asked the military if it could pile up refuse closer to the bunkers, within an area designated as the "blast zone." In June 1967, when the city was desperately looking for more places to put garbage, because its existing landfills were nearly full, it asked the military if it could use the blast area. The military told the city that "Congregations of people (such as an office building, etc.) are not permitted in blast areas. Golf courses, landfill operations and parking lots, are all examples of permitted "open" uses that avoid congregations of people and that would be permitted in the blast area…" So the city was allowed to pile up berms of wastes within the blast area.

Continued in Part II…