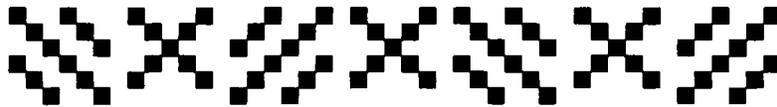


## Public Health and Sanitation in an Indiana Community: The Garbage Disposer and Jasper

*Suellen Hoy\**



On February 15, 1950, a banner headline on the front page of the Dubois County *Daily Herald*—"Garbage Man Gets Walking Papers in Jasper"—announced the beginning of a startling and pioneering plan undertaken by a small town in southwestern Indiana. The newspaper reported that on the previous evening the city council of Jasper, Indiana, had voted unanimously to enter into a contractual arrangement with the General Electric Company "for the installation of its Disposall in any and all Jasper homes" and to discontinue the public collection of garbage "on and after August 1, 1950."<sup>1</sup> This unique public health and sanitation experiment was the community's solution to several problems that had threatened its sense of order and well-being. Beginning in 1945 the state's stream pollution control board had instructed the town to cease sewage disposal practices that were contributing to the pollution of the Patoka River; two years later cholera broke out among garbage-fed hogs in the vicinity of Jasper; and in 1949 a polio epidemic frightened families with children. In the end these developments, combined with the availability of a modern but mundane household appliance and the innovative efforts of a vigorous mayor and a persuasive

---

\* Suellen Hoy, assistant director of the North Carolina Division of Archives and History, wishes to acknowledge financial assistance from the American Historical Association through its Albert J. Beveridge Grant for Research in American History. The author thanks Robert D. Bugher, American Public Works Association; Jeffrey J. Crow and William S. Price, Jr., North Carolina Division of Archives and History; and Walter Nugent, University of Notre Dame, for their valuable assistance. She also appreciates the information provided by Victor Bohnert, Jack T. Brandt, Jack Rumbach, and Herbert E. Thyen, who were interviewed at the Jasper Public Library on June 26, 1984.

<sup>1</sup> Dubois County *Daily Herald*, February 15, 1950; City of Jasper, Indiana, "Ordinance Number 356," February 14, 1950.

newspaper editor, contributed to the banishment of the garbage man and his unsavory can.

Jasper, the county seat of Dubois County, is situated on the Patoka River about 120 miles southwest of Indianapolis. In 1950 it had a population of 6,800. The community was largely rural and was made up of predominantly German-Catholic families. Although most arable land was under cultivation, the major portion of Jasper's income was derived from a concentration of small, corporately owned woodworking factories. Thus, the percentage of families who depended entirely on agriculture for their livelihood was small; a much larger number engaged in part-time farming and factory work. In 1950 Jasper residents owned most local factories, and over 90 percent owned their homes as well.

The Catholic religion and German heritage had traditionally been the most important forces in forming the values, attitudes, and habits of the people who lived in Jasper. The range of kinship was wide, and family name often determined whether an individual was an "insider" or not. Besides name residents of Jasper frequently identified themselves by the parish church to which they belonged rather than by what they did professionally or to whom they were married. While most men worked on farms or in factories, most women were housewives. Those who were not solely housewives were usually engaged in the work of the family farm or business or found employment as teachers, nurses, or librarians.<sup>2</sup>

In Jasper "work" was more than an occupation. Through farming, keeping house, gardening, clearing land, and other activities, people remained productive, gained self-esteem, and earned the respect of their neighbors. Besides their reputation for hard work, Jasper residents were known for their thrift, frugality, and independence. They were, for example, fiercely committed to providing for their families; although they possessed a strong sense of community, only in desperate circumstances did they call on civic or religious organizations to assist them. They also prided themselves on their cleanliness. Not surprisingly, they saw "the neatness of their church" not only as "a reflection of their piety" but also as a mark of dedication to their religion and community.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Juliet Anne Niehaus, "Ethnic Formation and Transformation: The German-Catholics of Dubois County, Indiana, 1838-1979" (Ph.D. dissertation, Graduate Faculty of Political and Social Science, New School for Social Research, 1981), 29-31, 38-41. See also the Jasper Centennial Corporation's "Official Historical Souvenir Program," *This, Our Town: 100th Anniversary of the Incorporation of Jasper* (Jasper, Ind., 1966).

<sup>3</sup> Niehaus, "Ethnic Formation and Transformation," 15-16, 31.

In many respects Jasper was singular. In others, it was not. Like most Americans who had survived years of wartime scarcity, Jasper's population was in search of a "greater ease of living," particularly through goods and amenities that offered more cleanliness, convenience, and comfort.<sup>4</sup> The garbage disposer, which became popular in the years following World War II, appealed to these impulses. After years of debate the "simple, safe and sanitary" disposer had won the approval of most public health officers, sanitary engineers, and municipal officials for its ability to improve community sanitary practices and to relieve women and their families of the unpleasant task of handling and storing putrescible food wastes.<sup>5</sup>

In the 1920s and early 1930s several municipalities began grinding large solids into pulp, discharging it into the sewers, and disposing of it at sewage plants.<sup>6</sup> Morris M. Cohn, a sanitary engineer in Schenectady, New York, who edited *Wastes Engineering*, was the individual most convinced that the results of these experiments with large solids held the solution to home waste disposal problems. Working closely with engineers in General Electric's Schenectady laboratory, Cohn helped them build a kitchen grinding machine which was "ready for test" in 1933. Two years later the company began producing and marketing a primitive "Disposall."<sup>7</sup>

Throughout the late 1930s and early 1940s Cohn argued the benefits of what he and others were calling "dual disposal."<sup>8</sup> If sewage could be removed from homes by modern plumbing, Cohn contended that shredded garbage which resembled sewage in character and composition could also be eliminated through sewer lines. The garbage can, like the backhouse, would then disap-

---

<sup>4</sup> The reference to "greater ease of living" can be found in "The House for Modern Living," *Architectural Forum*, LXII (April, 1935), 275. For a general review of Americans' search for a "better quality of life" during the postwar period, see Samuel P. Hays, "From Conservation to Environmental Politics in the United States Since World War II," *Environmental Review*, VI (Fall, 1982), 19-24.

<sup>5</sup> For a fuller discussion of the origins and national impact of the garbage disposer, see Suellen Hoy, "The Garbage Disposer, the Public Health, and the Good Life," *Technology and Culture*, XXVI (October, 1985), 758-784.

<sup>6</sup> In 1923 C. R. Fox and W. S. Davis conducted the first municipal grinding experiment. From 1929 through 1935 similar experiments were initiated in Schenectady, New York; Baltimore, Maryland; Durham, North Carolina; St. Louis, Missouri; and Indianapolis, Indiana. See Morris M. Cohn, "Recent Developments in Dual Disposal," *Sewage & Industrial Wastes*, XXIII (January, 1951), 55; J. H. Powers, "The Disposall . . . Now in Military Service on Land and Also at Sea," *General Electric Review*, XLVI (March, 1943), 175-77.

<sup>7</sup> Cohn, "Recent Developments in Dual Disposal," 54-55.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

pear.<sup>9</sup> But the idea of mixing sewage and garbage met with some resistance, mostly from sanitary engineers and public works officials who feared that existing sewers would be clogged or overloaded. Cohn demonstrated time and again that total sewage flow increased only 1 to 2 percent when shredded garbage was added. Since most sewers and treatment plants could handle such a nominal increase, his position was eventually accepted.<sup>10</sup>

Disposers were not produced during World War II except under contract for the armed forces. In manufacturing a larger disposal unit for the navy, General Electric improved and simplified the home appliance. At the war's end the company had ready for sale a more efficient and less noisy product.<sup>11</sup> In 1948 the American Public Health Association endorsed dual disposal and even suggested that the garbage can would "ultimately follow the privy" and become an "anachronism."<sup>12</sup>

In Jasper, meanwhile, the citizenry were not unaware of the threat to the public health posed by garbage. In an attempt to control the spread of disease from flies and rodents and to improve the community's appearance, the city council had passed an ordinance in 1928 requiring residents to keep garbage cans and containers "closed at all times with a tight lid." In October, 1945, one month after becoming mayor, Herbert E. Thyen reminded the community of the 1928 ordinance and explained that improperly kept garbage cans were "a great contributing factor to the present rat nuisance." Since "more than half the garbage cans" in Jasper did not have covers, the mayor, who was the youngest in the city's history, found himself confronted by an age-old municipal problem and perhaps his greatest challenge.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Morris M. Cohn, "Eliminating Waste Food Electrically—A Fact, Not a Fad," *Plumbing and Heating Journal*, CXIX (September, 1948), 46.

<sup>10</sup> Morris M. Cohn, *Sewers for Growing America* (Valley Forge, Pa., 1966), 54; *idem.*, "Kitchen Waste Grinders—In the Specification Stage . . . An Editorial," *Sewage Works Engineering and Municipal Sanitation*, XX (January, 1949), editorial page; "Dual Disposal of Garbage and Sewage Poses Problems for Treatment Plants," *Engineering News-Record*, CXXXVI (March 28, 1946), 12; and "Dual Disposal of Garbage and Sewage," *Water & Sewage Works*, XCIII (April, 1946), 157-58.

<sup>11</sup> Powers, "The Disposall," 175-77; R. N. Clark and Arthur Heifetz, "The Army Tries Garbage Disposal by Grinding," *Public Works*, LXXIV (March, 1943), 21, 38; "Thorough Redesign Job Eliminates 61 Parts," *Product Engineering*, XII (November, 1941), 580-81.

<sup>12</sup> "The Kitchen Garbage Grinder," *American Journal of Public Health*, XXXVII (May, 1947), 574.

<sup>13</sup> Jasper *Herald*, October 5, 1945. Herbert E. Thyen became mayor in September, 1945, upon the death of Mayor Charles Bartley. The local newspaper reported that Thyen was "the youngest man in the history of the city to hold the office" and "one of the youngest mayors in the state." Jasper *Herald*, September 7, 1945. Thyen attended St. Joseph Grade School in Jasper and later the Jasper Academy, where he completed a two-year commercial program. He worked in a

But uncovered garbage cans proved to be only part of a much larger environmental and health issue. In December, 1945, the Indiana Stream Pollution Control Board ordered Jasper to stop dumping raw sewage into the Patoka River. During a summer dry spell downstream cities had complained that their waterway was filled with Jasper's sewage. In response to this order the city council hired the Indianapolis engineering firm of Couch and Kulin, Inc., to study the town's sewage treatment needs. The firm recommended a million-gallon-per-day activated sludge plant and a new system of main, relief, and lateral sewers to handle loads beyond the capacity of the existing system. This solution was approved by the state board of health and the stream pollution control board in September, 1948.<sup>14</sup>

While the sewage treatment project was under consideration, another dimension of Jasper's problem with waste disposal revealed itself. In the late summer of 1947 an epidemic of cholera swept through several hog pens outside the city, and the cause of the outbreak was traced to Jasper's garbage. During the first half of the twentieth century the feeding of garbage to swine was a common and acceptable practice for medium- and small-sized cities surrounded by isolated farms. In Jasper local farmers under contract with the city had for years collected the garbage for their hogs several times during each week. Following the cholera outbreak, however, farmers were less willing to enter an agreement unless they were paid for possible losses. The mayor and city council found the farmer's demands extravagant, and the mayor resolved to seek a new solution to Jasper's garbage problem.<sup>15</sup>

Thyen has not forgotten how Jasper's experiment—the "Jasper Plan," as it came to be called—began. He remembers that he was "aggravated with the farmers" not only for their excessive demands but also for the unreliable way in which they had been

---

local grocery store and in several banks while continuing his education through night and correspondence courses. In 1935 he went to work at the Jasper Wood Products Company. He later served as mayor while continuing to work for this company. In 1956 he resigned as assistant manager of Jasper Wood Products and began full-time employment as corporate secretary with what is now Kimball International (formerly Jasper Corporation). H. E. Thyen to the author, September 11, 1984.

<sup>14</sup> L. I. Couch and H. J. Kulin, "Municipal Garbage Disposal by Household Grinders at Jasper, Indiana," *Sewage and Industrial Wastes*, XXII (September, 1950), 1138-46.

<sup>15</sup> Costs for the contractors' services had risen from \$1,300 in 1942 to \$6,000 in 1948. "Garbage Disposal Units for City Wide Use," *American Builder*, LXXII (April, 1950), 101. See also *Dubois County Daily Herald*, December 29, 1948; and *Chicago Tribune*, August 4, 1974.

providing the garbage collection service. He recalls, too, that he had friends in downstream Winsome, Indiana, who complained to him about the polluted condition of the Patoka River when it reached them. Thyen, who had grown up in Jasper and was proud of the community, believed his town was "too good" to engage in such an "unfair practice."<sup>16</sup>

Thyen considered himself an "original thinker" and believed that "necessity is the mother of invention."<sup>17</sup> Thus it was while shopping one day with his wife in Evansville, Indiana, Thyen took particular notice of a window display at Sears. On exhibit was a Hotpoint garbage disposal unit that offered an eye-catching promise: "Say Good-bye to Your Garbage Can." He recollects that the thought immediately occurred to him that this appliance could be the answer to Jasper's garbage problem; in fact, he says that he knew "it was a natural" if the unit would live up to its promise and the people of Jasper would accept it. A week after seeing Sears's display Thyen bought a Hotpoint disposer and had it installed for \$125. He conducted his own experiments by throwing "everything down it" and was not disappointed. Indeed he remembers that he was "real positive" and "confident" that he had found the solution he had been seeking.<sup>18</sup>

Before discussing his novel idea in public Thyen went "into a huddle . . . with his city council" and began to examine the feasibility of "installing a garbage disposal unit in every kitchen sink in the city" at public expense.<sup>19</sup> They found out from professional engineering and health organizations that no other city in the United States had ever attempted to implement a plan similar to that under consideration in Jasper. Thyen and his council also learned the specific benefits and possible complications of "dual disposal" as well as the advances made by manufacturers of disposal units during the past decade. Encouraged by these discoveries the mayor and city council asked the engineering firm of Couch and Kulin, already in their employ, to investigate alternative disposal methods—individual kitchen disposers, central grinding station, and sanitary landfill—and to prepare cost data for each of them.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Victor Bohnert, Jack T. Brant, Jack Rumbach, and Herbert E. Thyen, interview with author, Jasper, Indiana, June 26, 1984; cited hereafter as interview with Thyen *et al.*

<sup>17</sup> *Chicago Tribune*, August 4, 1974.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Thyen *et al.*

<sup>19</sup> *Dubois County Daily Herald*, December 29, 1948.

<sup>20</sup> Couch and Kulin, "Municipal Garbage Disposal," 1139; interview with Thyen *et al.* During this interview Thyen also mentioned having visited Dearborn, Michigan, where houses with disposers were built for some employees of the Ford Motor Company.



MAYOR HERBERT E. THYEN, THE INITIATOR OF THE JASPER PLAN

Courtesy of General Electric.

There was little doubt that Thyen favored adoption of the garbage disposer. He wanted, however, to be certain that Jasper's kitchen drains, sewers, and new treatment plant could handle the ground garbage and that the cost of installing the device would not be exorbitant. Albert T. Rumbach, editor of the Dubois County *Daily Herald*, shared Thyen's interests and concerns. Following the mayor's early discussion of the plan with the city council, a Rumbach editorial hailed the idea as "a boon to city sanitation." He contended that the disposer would remove "health hazards" such as open garbage pails from which "flies and rats and other vermin and scavengers often carry disease germs resulting in epidemics of various kinds, from poliomyelitis to common colds." Rumbach argued that the plan was "worthy of the best efforts of sanitary engineers" and deserved the community's "most serious consideration." He also insisted that the "apparent obstacles" could be overcome and that the results would signal "the beginning of a great national movement." In conclusion he applauded Thyen's efforts as "the originator of the idea" and stated that he deserved "the widest acclaim."<sup>21</sup>

Rumbach's advocacy of improved sanitation can be traced directly to his son's struggle against polio. As county chairman of the March of Dimes and as editor of the *Daily Herald*, he regularly campaigned against polluted waters and garbage-strewn alleys and streets. Born to German immigrants on a farm

---

<sup>21</sup> Dubois County *Daily Herald*, December 29, 1948.



ALBERT T. RUMBACH (LEFT), EDITOR OF THE DUBOIS COUNTY *DAILY HERALD* AND A LEADING PROPONENT OF THE JASPER PLAN, READS AN EDITORIAL TO JERRY SCHNEIDER, HEAD OF THE JASPER JUNIOR CHAMBER OF COMMERCE.

Courtesy of General Electric.

outside Jasper in 1895, he taught school as a young adult and worked for a newspaper in Chicago before entering Marquette University, where he earned a degree in journalism. In 1919 he acquired an interest in the Jasper Herald Company and became editor of its weekly newspaper (it became a daily in 1946).<sup>22</sup> Serving in that position until his death in 1956, Rumbach habitually promoted projects and programs that he considered beneficial to the community. From December, 1948, until the Jasper Plan—a term that he coined—was implemented, Rumbach hammered together a local network of support through his “Hark the Herald” column.<sup>23</sup>

With enthusiastic and sustained endorsements from the local press, it is perhaps not surprising that the mayor and city council decided in favor of the home disposal unit even after reviewing estimates that indicated the device was slightly more costly than other alternatives. Couch and Kulin’s final estimates on the disposer’s total annual cost included the original investment and interest on the investment as well as depreciation, maintenance, and operation. The engineering firm’s projections were: \$11,805, home grinders (66 cents per family per month);

---

<sup>22</sup> Jasper Centennial Corporation, *This, Our Town*, 119, 140-41.

<sup>23</sup> Sylvia Wright, “No More Garbage in This Town,” *McCall’s*, LXXVII (August, 1950), 87.

\$11,742, central grinding station (65 cents per family per month); and \$10,930, sanitary landfill (61 cents per family per month). In selecting the garbage disposer over the grinding station and the sanitary landfill, the mayor once again emphasized the household appliance's health and aesthetic benefits.<sup>24</sup>

By the time Jasper officials had decided to adopt the disposer, plans had been approved for the new sewage treatment plant, but ground had not yet been broken. It was, therefore, relatively simple for the consulting engineers to include the capability, as the mayor asked, of handling all ground garbage from the city's homes. They added 12,000 square feet of sludge-drying beds, two sludge digestion tanks, and an aeration unit to the original design. State authorities gave their approval to the alterations on March 10, 1949, and in May work began.<sup>25</sup>

The mayor and the city council initially intended to finance the purchase and installation of garbage disposers through self-liquidating revenue bonds. In this way Jasper residents would simply apply for a unit and be charged a rental fee by the council. The bonds would subsequently be retired by these rental charges. With this objective in mind, Thyen and City Attorney Arthur Nordhoff secured the assistance of two fellow townsmen, State Senator Leo Stemle and State Representative Frank Seng, as well as the staff of the state board of health in their attempt to obtain the necessary enabling authority from the state legislature.<sup>26</sup>

This well-orchestrated effort bore fruit. On March 7, 1949, the Indiana General Assembly unanimously passed a bill which empowered any municipality with an adequate sewage treatment plant "to acquire, install, equip, own, operate and maintain . . . a garbage disposal system consisting of garbage grinders to be installed in private residences, business places or any other building within or without the city or town, with the consent of the owners."<sup>27</sup> It also authorized municipalities to issue bonds to pay for purchasing and installing the disposers in private homes, to set rates and charges for the equipment, and to cease collecting and disposing of garbage by other means.<sup>28</sup> Cohn himself approved. In an editorial in *Sewage Works Engineering* headed

---

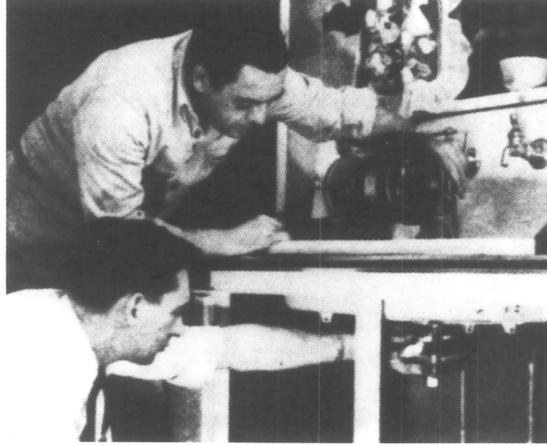
<sup>24</sup> Cost estimates appear in a chart in Couch and Kulin, "Municipal Garbage Disposal," 1139.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Dubois County *Daily Herald*, February 2, 7, 1949; *Indianapolis Star*, February 2, 1949; *Yearbook of the State of Indiana for the Year 1949* (Indianapolis, 1950), 803.

<sup>27</sup> Indiana, *Laws* (1949), 221.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 221-29.



GENERAL ELECTRIC ENGINEER GORDON RONEY (BOTTOM) SUPERVISES THE INSTALLATION OF ONE OF HIS COMPANY'S GARBAGE DISPOSERS.

Courtesy of General Electric.

"Home Grinders Become a Public Utility," he accorded to Jasper and the state of Indiana "the applause of the sanitary engineering profession for . . . approving a new health and comfort achievement and setting up sound fiscal practices for making this dual disposal process of a self-liquidating utility."<sup>29</sup> The *American Journal of Public Health* also applauded this "courageous and imaginative step . . . to advance . . . scientific sanitation."<sup>30</sup>

With the legal authority in place the city set the bidding date for December 6, 1949, and asked engineers Couch and Kulin to prepare specifications and proposal forms. When drafting the specifications, the engineers indicated some of the difficulties that would be encountered in installing the disposal units. They had previously surveyed potential users (about fourteen hundred) and discovered that approximately 60 percent of the city's sinks had drain openings of less than three and one-half inches. These openings would have to be widened at the expense and risk of whomever contracted to provide Jasper's homes with disposers. It would not be an easy task since four out of five sinks were porcelain enamel cast-iron; most of the others were either

---

<sup>29</sup> Morris M. Cohn, "Home Grinders Become a Public Utility," *Sewage Works Engineering and Municipal Sanitation*, XX (May, 1949), editorial page.

<sup>30</sup> "Garbage Grinders—A Public Utility," *American Journal of Public Health*, XXXIX (September, 1949), 1180.

porcelain enamel steel, vitreous china, or stainless steel. The engineers' specifications also informed interested parties that they would be required to demonstrate how their appliances operated at the bidding.<sup>31</sup>

About eighteen manufacturers asked for the proposal packets when they became available, but only six actually submitted bids. From these bidders the city selected the General Electric Company, which agreed to sell and install its device for \$75 instead of the normal unit price of \$125. The city then notified residents that following August 1, 1950, garbage collection by private scavengers under municipal contract would end. The electric "Disposal" would subsequently provide the service.<sup>32</sup>

Under the terms of the agreement with General Electric the installation of disposers was not scheduled to begin until 700 households had applied for the service. The city administration had previously decided that it would not finance this public improvement through revenue bonds but would require householders to buy disposers. According to an informal survey by the mayor most Jasper residents believed that the issuance of bonds was unnecessary if low-interest loans were available so that individual units could be bought on installment. The Dubois County State Bank and German American Bank agreed immediately to help finance such purchases for "as little as \$1.00 a month."<sup>33</sup>

Following these assurances Thyen asked that at least half of the homeowners file applications with the Board of Public Works and Safety signifying their intention to install disposers. They were also requested to make a deposit of \$2.00 on the cost of the unit and to pay the remainder prior to installation. The city, the mayor explained, would place the money collected into a trust fund from which it would pay General Electric for its work as it progressed. In this way Jasper would incur no financial obligations.<sup>34</sup>

Once these procedures had been established the mayor and city council initiated a vigorous campaign to persuade home-

---

<sup>31</sup> B. A. Poole and G. K. Erganian, "Public Health Benefits from the Disposal of Garbage in Sewers," *American Journal of Public Health*, XLI (September, 1951), 1108; L. I. Couch, "A Kitchen Grinder in Every Home," *American City*, LXV (May, 1950), 114; and Couch and Kulin, "Municipal Garbage Disposal," 1142-43.

<sup>32</sup> Couch and Kulin, "Municipal Garbage Disposal," 1142-43. General Electric agreed to furnish disposers at a unit price of \$36.69 each; it would furnish and install units at a cost of \$74.17 per disposer, including the water-flow interlock device.

<sup>33</sup> Dubois County *Daily Herald*, December 14, 1949; "Garbage Disposal Units for City Wide Use," 264.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Thyen *et al.*; Couch and Kulin, "Municipal Garbage Disposal," 1140-41; Poole and Erganian, "Public Health Benefits," 1108.



A GARBAGE DISPOSER DISPLAY IN THE JASPER CITY  
CLERK'S OFFICE

Courtesy of General Electric.

owners to make application for the disposer so that Jasper would be “on the way to taking garbage trucks off its streets.”<sup>35</sup> No one invested more time and energy in this effort than the mayor. He did so because he thought the disposer was “a good thing” and that Jasper was on the verge of “doing something which the majority of cities . . . [would] be doing in 10 to 15 years.”<sup>36</sup> Eager “to sell the plan to the people,” Thyen appeared regularly on radio programs that would allow listeners to call in questions and comments, and he addressed the meetings of every civic and religious organization that would give him time to explain the Jasper Plan. Following these gatherings he frequently visited the homes of individuals who had seemed strongly opposed to the plan in an attempt to explain the appliance’s benefits and assuage their fears. These individuals were usually apprehensive about how they would pay for the unit or how they would operate it once it was installed. Thyen had little difficulty in handling their concerns because, as he recently recalled, “I was not only sure of myself; I had all the answers.”<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Indianapolis *Star*, March 12, 1949.

<sup>36</sup> Dubois County *Daily Herald*, March 12, 1949.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Thyen *et al.*; Dubois County *Daily Herald*, January 4, 1950; General Electric, *Monogram: Garbage Is Illegal in Jasper* (n.p., 1950), 4-5. The latter is a promotional pamphlet; it gives a brief description of the experiment and includes numerous photographs illustrating the communal nature of the project.

Rumbach and the *Daily Herald* became the mayor's strongest allies in this crusade. In editorial after editorial Rumbach addressed the community's waste disposal concerns. For example, in one "Hark the Herald" column, he asked (and answered): "Just what can the appliance digest in the line of waste material?"<sup>38</sup> In another, he inquired: "Is the operation of a Disposall expensive?"<sup>39</sup> He also reviewed the history of modern sewage disposal in the United States and explained how sewer pipe is "helped by the garbage device."<sup>40</sup> And in terms that could be understood by nearly all his readers, he argued that the Jasper Plan and the efforts to ensure its adoption were not "regimentation" but rather "a mass movement of an intelligent, enlightened community, toward a better way of life."<sup>41</sup>

While admitting that there were "some dissenters" Rumbach maintained that "no compulsion was involved" in the efforts to implement the plan. No one was being "forced to purchase and install the device," he said; an individual was "free to stick with the old way, unless his neighbors objected too much to the maintenance of a nuisance in the neighborhood." Comparing "a citizenry that is cooperative in everything that makes for better living" to one that "insists on living in the past," Rumbach contended that the attitude of the latter was "not the spirit of his community."<sup>42</sup> While Thyen must certainly have agreed, he later described Jasper's "custom" somewhat differently. He stated that he always believed that "if 95 percent of the people wanted something," it was his "job to make the other 5 percent do it."<sup>43</sup> And Rumbach was willing to use the pages of the *Daily Herald* to get the job done.

In an early 1950 column the editor encouraged homeowners to "Be One of the 400" participating in "this sanitary pioneering project" and contributing to "the health and welfare of the entire community." He reported that there was "hardly a block in Jasper in which one or more citizens" had not "signed up" and that "some blocks" were cooperating "one-hundred per cent."<sup>44</sup> Besides printing regularly the names of individuals who had ap-

---

<sup>38</sup> Dubois County *Daily Herald*, February 6, 1950.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, February 7, 1950.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, February 2, 3, 1950.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, December 9, 1949.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, January 19, 1950. There was a large map of Jasper in the city's administrative office on which pins were inserted to show the location of houses for which disposal units had been ordered or in which they were already installed. *Ibid.*, January 11, 1950.

plied for a disposer, almost every issue of the newspaper contained testimonials from members of the health community. For example, Jasper's city health officer, Lee Salb, observed that the disposal plan would make the city "a much more beautiful city in which to live";<sup>45</sup> State Health Commissioner L. E. Burney, for his part, commended Jasper for its innovative spirit and noted that "the reduction of flies and rats" would be "the chief benefit from the public health standpoint";<sup>46</sup> and B. A. Poole, secretary of the Indiana Stream Pollution Control Board, noted that "people all over the country are interested in the Jasper Plan for garbage disposal" because they "realize the tremendous improvement in sanitation that will result" and are "anxious to benefit from the knowledge that will be gained."<sup>47</sup>

Rumbach and his son Jack were daily reminders of the public health aspects of the Jasper Plan. Most local residents knew that years before Jack had been left crippled following a serious bout with polio and that since that time the senior Rumbach had become a fierce advocate of a clean and healthy community as well as an enthusiastic and faithful March of Dimes leader in the state. If some members of the community were unaware of these facts or had forgotten them, the summer of 1949 placed them center stage once again. For during those summer months the state of Indiana and the nation experienced one of the worst polio epidemics since 1916.<sup>48</sup>

In late May the *Daily Herald* reprinted suggestions offered by Basil O'Connor, president of the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis, on how to guard against polio. Besides warning of "over-fatigue" and "sudden chilling," he encouraged the country's young people to "avoid swimming in polluted water"; and he reminded their elders to "keep food and garbage tightly covered and safe from flies."<sup>49</sup> Although prescriptions such as these had been issued on many previous occasions, they had special relevance in Jasper at a time when a sewage treatment plant was under construction in an attempt to clean up the polluted waters of the Patoka River and when a plan to install garbage disposers in every home was the most discussed civic issue.

By July and August Jasper felt particularly threatened by polio as the number of cases in the state continued to rise (141

---

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, December 17, 1949.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, December 20, 1949.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, December 21, 1949.

<sup>48</sup> Wright, "No More Garbage in This Town," 87; *Yearbook of the State of Indiana for the Year 1950* (Indianapolis, 1951), 898.

<sup>49</sup> Dubois County *Daily Herald*, May 28, 1949.

cases since January). In a "Hark the Herald" column on July 18, 1949, Rumbach urged the city to take every precaution against the onslaught. He even suggested following the example of those cities that had begun "spraying breeding places of flies and mosquitoes with DDT. . . . as a preventative measure."<sup>50</sup> And four days later in his front-page column he summarized the Indiana Polio Committee's beliefs "concerning swimming pools and flies in connection with the spread of poliomyelitis."<sup>51</sup>

Since Jasper citizens were in the process of deciding whether or not to install disposal units in their kitchens, they were especially eager to learn the relationship of flies to polio infection. Rumbach told them that "flies can transmit poliomyelitis," and he called upon the studied opinions of various state boards of health, the United States Public Health Service, and the Medical Advisory Committee of the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis to support his conviction. He argued logically that this fact did "not exclude other means of transmission" nor did it indicate how important fly transmission was when compared to other possible carriers. But, as a safety measure, he encouraged householders not only to maintain "absolute cleanliness of garbage cans and disposal areas" but also to keep "yards clean and free of refuse" and "privies . . . sanitary and fly proof."<sup>52</sup>

On August 4, 1949, Dubois County publicly reported its first polio victim, a nine-year-old girl who lived in Jasper. On that same day the city's health officer and the mayor met to discuss spraying the community with DDT. What they had hoped to prevent had occurred, and they were fearful. While health officer Salb did not "advise the postponement of public gatherings or the closing of the swimming pool, movie theaters, and other places of entertainment," he urged parents to see that their children did not become "overly tired and overheated" and encouraged city officials to begin spraying Jasper with DDT.<sup>53</sup>

Approximately one week following this incident the city received ten 53-gallon drums of DDT from the Sherwin-Williams Company in Evansville. Ruxer Brothers, a local firm, donated the use of a tractor and spraying equipment, and employees of the street department carried out the work. As a kind of bonus the Sherwin-Williams Company contributed "enough DDT for [the] spraying of individual premises" to all who requested it.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, July 18, 1949.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, July 22, 1949.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, August 4, 1949.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, August 10, 17, 1949.

Since the *Daily Herald's* editor and the city's health official had recommended DDT's use, particularly around garbage cans, it is assumed that many homeowners accepted the Sherwin-Williams offer. In a column entitled "An Ounce of Polio Prevention," Rumbach complimented the mayor and city council for their "promptness" despite the fact that no funds had been set aside for such an emergency.<sup>55</sup>

By late summer the nation's polio epidemic had subsided. But the United States Public Health Service reported that, with a total of 17,323 new cases since January 1, the year had been the most difficult since "the extensive and disastrous epidemic of the summer of 1916."<sup>56</sup> With the cause still unknown most health officials and sanitary engineers continued to see polio as a "filth disease." In an editorial in *Sewage Works Engineering and Municipal Sanitation* that was reprinted in the *Daily Herald*, Morris Cohn explained that if current research findings were correct in concluding that "the virus is carried by polluted waters and spread by the fly," local communities must "prevent pollution and stamp out the fly." Conceding that "the fly is not the only means of transmission of polio," he nevertheless concluded that "the elimination of the garbage can" should "aid in lowering the incidence of the disease."<sup>57</sup>

In *A History of Poliomyelitis* John R. Paul, a member of the Yale Poliomyelitis Study Unit, shows that following the 1916 epidemic most public health officials came to believe in the efficacy of "cooperative sanitation" at the local level.<sup>58</sup> And once the polio virus was found easily and regularly in the feces of its victims, the associated theory that the disease was a waterborne one became prevalent.<sup>59</sup> Thus, it is not surprising that communities with inadequate sewage treatment facilities became increasingly concerned about their safety.

---

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, August 11, 1949. Several local organizations made donations to the city treasury to assist in this emergency. The Jasper Manufacturers Association and the Knights of Columbus, for example, gave \$200 and \$500 respectively. *Ibid.*, August 16, 1949.

<sup>56</sup> Dubois County *Daily Herald*, August 24, 1949; John R. Paul, *A History of Poliomyelitis* (New Haven, Conn., 1971), 145. In Indiana during the same period 500 new cases had been recorded. At the end of the year 1,147 cases (old and new) were reported. The highest year in the previous decade was 1940 with 682 cases. Dubois County *Daily Herald*, August 22, 1949; *Yearbook, 1950*, 902.

<sup>57</sup> Morris M. Cohn, "The Vicious Virus," *Sewage Works Engineering and Municipal Sanitation*, XVII (March, 1946), editorial page. This piece was reprinted in the Dubois County *Daily Herald*, November 3, 1949.

<sup>58</sup> Paul, *History of Poliomyelitis*, 157.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 282-87. Polio is "a common, contagious, epidemic viral infection, not wholly confined to infants but also affecting children, adolescents, and occasionally young adults." *Ibid.*, 1.

The notion that the fly transmitted the polio virus was also a commonly held impression since it would explain the disease's "striking summer incidence in temperate climates."<sup>60</sup> It seemed logical, therefore, to recommend fly control as a preventive measure. Because DDT had had "almost miraculous results" in the mosquito-infested malarious areas of the South Pacific during World War II, it also seemed reasonable to think that insect pests could be controlled by small doses of this powerful chemical.<sup>61</sup> Following several experiments with DDT the Public Health Service conclusively demonstrated the ineffectiveness of the chemical in controlling flies and checking epidemics in 1953. Yet, until a cure for polio was discovered, investigators continued to be intrigued by the possible involvement of flies in the disease's transmission.<sup>62</sup>

It was in this context that Jasper's local organizations, both civic and religious, passed resolutions encouraging each citizen "to cooperate fully and immediately" with the Jasper Plan since it would "eliminate the largest source of disease carriers." These resolutions also emphasized the disposer's economic benefits "over . . . the present system of waste collection" and testified to the appliance's "safety, convenience, and sanitation."<sup>63</sup> Individuals who still had doubts about the disposer visited the city's administrative offices during a full week in early January, 1950, to see the device in operation and have their questions answered by a General Electric representative. At the same time they read personal testimonials, mostly from housewives who were "100% satisfied," in the *Daily Herald*.<sup>64</sup>

On February 14, 1950, with over 800 orders on file, the city council gave the "garbage men . . . walking papers," asked Gen-

---

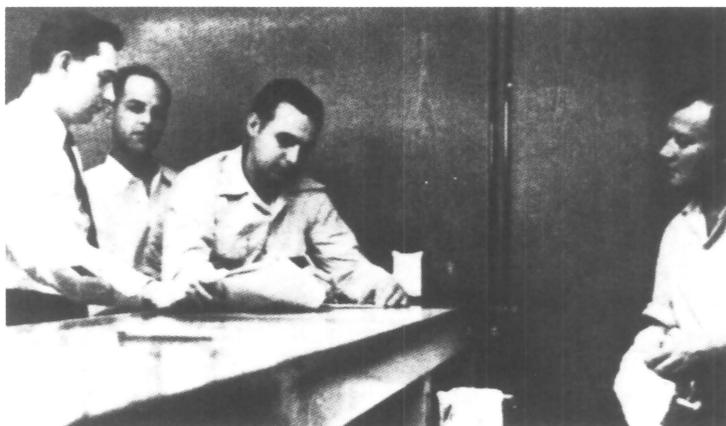
<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 291.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 293-94.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 295-99.

<sup>63</sup> Dubois County *Daily Herald*, January 11, 1950. It reports that the Daughters of Isabella endorsed the food waste disposal plan at its evening meeting on January 9. Other organizations that passed similar resolutions were: VFW Auxiliary; Kappa Kappa Kappa Sorority; Post 147 of the American Legion; Jaycees; and Knights of Columbus.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, January 6, 1950. Mrs. Ray Tucker of New Albany Road described her complete satisfaction and that of her neighbors. General Electric frequently incorporated endorsements by Jasper residents in its disposer advertisements. See, for example, the Dubois County *Daily Herald*, June 29, 1950, where five women reported that they would "never be without one again." Thyen recalled that his "best backers were women." He said that when he spoke to women's groups he would always deliver his "key punch line": "Helen, wouldn't you feel a lot better to spend about a dollar or two a month and not have to ask your husband to take the garbage out anymore." Thyen insisted that these women went home with this message and that their husbands became immediate supporters of the Jasper Plan. Interview with Thyen *et al.*



SIGNATURES ARE GATHERED AT THE KNIGHTS OF COLUMBUS CLUBROOM FOR A PETITION ASKING THE CITY COUNCIL TO OUT-LAW GARBAGE COLLECTION.

Courtesy of General Electric.

eral Electric to begin its work, and set August 1 as the date on which the collection of garbage by the city would end.<sup>65</sup> A month later the mayor and officials from General Electric signed a formal contract, and four plumbing and two electrical teams began installing the "Disposall" in the sinks of most Jasper kitchens.<sup>66</sup> Gordon H. Roney, commercial engineer for General Electric and developer of an effective sink-boring tool, supervised the project. He reported that the numerous instances of amateur or defective wiring proved the major problem. But, by the end of October, 1950, nearly 800 disposers had been installed in Jasper, a community of approximately 1,200 homes of which 90 percent were connected to municipal sewers.<sup>67</sup>

Both the United States Public Health Service and the Indiana State Board of Health were eager to examine "the effects of these installations on the environmental sanitation" of Jasper

---

<sup>65</sup> Dubois County *Daily Herald*, February 15, 1950.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, March 16, 1950; "Garbage Disposal Units for City Wide Use," 266; General Electric, *Monogram*, 4.

<sup>67</sup> Poole and Erganian, "Public Health Benefits," 1109. By October, 1951, over 900 household garbage grinders were in use, "serving 75% of the community's population." "Jasper, Ind., Measures Its Garbage-Grinder Sanitation Progress," *American City*, LXVIII (February, 1953), 108; Dubois County *Daily Herald*, April 14, 1950; and August Eckel, "Installing 1,300 Food Waste Disposers," *Electrical Construction and Maintenance*, IL (November, 1950), 58-60.

and they conducted an investigation from March, 1950, to October, 1951.<sup>68</sup> No doubt to everyone's relief, they found that the disposers had caused "no noticeable per capita increase in residential water consumption," and that ground garbage created "no deleterious effect on the sewers."<sup>69</sup> They also determined that the sewage treatment plant had experienced no difficulty in treating the effluent despite the fact that the raw sewage was stronger in suspended solids and demanded more biochemical oxygen.<sup>70</sup>

The investigators also learned that Jasper enjoyed a "lower average number of flies per grill count" than the city used as a basis of comparison (Huntingburg, about seven miles away). This factor, they concluded, resulted directly from Jasper's unique way of disposing of its garbage.<sup>71</sup> The local dump, however, remained infested with flies and rodents since it continued to receive rubbish collected by the city and garbage deposited by homeowners and merchants who did not own disposers. Although city administrators did not deny the problem, they explained that it would disappear once disposers became almost universal and the ordinance was rigidly enforced.<sup>72</sup>

The national response to the Jasper Plan was cautious despite local and state approval.<sup>73</sup> The engineering community in particular noticed certain elements in Jasper's situation which were scarcely present everywhere: utilities were publicly owned; the economy was stable and diverse; the community was middle-class and home-owning; no public funds had been invested in collection trucks and equipment since private scavengers had removed garbage prior to the cholera outbreak; and Jasper had constructed a sewage treatment plant suited precisely to its needs.<sup>74</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> Walter G. Belter, George K. Erganian, and Ralph C. Graber, *Effects of Community-Wide Installation of Household Garbage-Grinders on Environmental Sanitation*, United States Public Health Service Publication Series, no. 224 (Washington, D.C., 1952), v. Belter and Erganian were sanitary engineers on the staff of the Indiana State Board of Health, and Graber was a senior sanitary engineer at the United States Public Health Service.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-35.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.* See also Poole and Erganian, "Public Health Benefits," 1110.

<sup>73</sup> Frank D. Wraight, "Community-Wide Installation of Household Garbage Grinders a Success at Jasper, Indiana" (Paper delivered at the Local Government Conference on Refuse Disposal Methods, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, April 22-23, 1954, in Garbage Grinders File (American Public Works Association, Chicago, Illinois). Wraight was the chief of the Sewage Disposal Section of the Indiana State Board of Health.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.* See also Dubois County *Daily Herald*, June 12, 1950. The plant was completed in June at a cost of approximately \$400,000.



PLUMBER ED SCHROEDER PREPARES FOR A DAY'S WORK.

Courtesy of General Electric.

But Jasper, along with General Electric, was a pioneer and can be credited with initiating and successfully completing an experiment that subsequently provided a model for many American homes and cities.<sup>75</sup> Although the garbage disposer never became a standard home appliance and was never listed among the “glamour products” for the “modern living kitchen” of the 1960s, it did become a “must” for the “complete kitchen” of post-war America and it reached a level of consumption in the 1960s that few would have imagined two decades earlier.<sup>76</sup> And in Jasper, where the population has nearly doubled in the past thirty

---

<sup>75</sup> Several older and larger northeastern cities (e.g., New York, Boston, and Philadelphia) forbade installation of disposers because they feared the consequences of an increased load on their sewer systems. But for the greater part of the nation the consumer could make a choice. And in some cities (e.g., Detroit, Denver, and many California municipalities) food waste disposers were required in all new residences. For a fuller discussion of the impact of the disposer on other American cities, see Hoy, “The Garbage Disposer, the Public Health, and the Good Life.”

<sup>76</sup> The “complete kitchen” was sometimes referred to as the “packaged kitchen” or the “unit kitchen.” Helen E. McCullough, “The Kitchen of Tomorrow,” *Journal of Home Economics*, XXXVII (January, 1945), 8-10. See also “She’ll Buy This Dream!” *Domestic Engineering*, CLXXXI (February, 1953), 106-107; “Mrs. Smith (82 of ‘em) Goes to Washington,” *ibid.*, CXCII (November, 1958), 110-12; and “80,000 Tell What They Want in Home Improvements . . .,” *ibid.*, CXCIII (May, 1959), 123.

years, almost every kitchen contains a disposer. As Thyen recently noted, "You couldn't sell a house without one!"<sup>77</sup>

The city of Jasper has taken great pride in its achievement. In 1950 it thought of itself as "the world's most sanitary city" and believed it had achieved the distinction at a reasonable cost.<sup>78</sup> In the year prior to the one in which the disposers were installed, the city council had paid \$6,000 to local scavengers to collect and dispose of Jasper's garbage. The mayor had estimated that if the city's street department were to assume responsibility for this service the annual cost would rise to \$13,000.<sup>79</sup> By shifting primary responsibility for garbage disposal to individual homeowners and by asking them to participate in a community-wide effort, the city convinced most of its citizens that besides a reduction in taxes they would receive tangible health and environmental benefits. And in large measure they have.

For this reason few adjustments have been made in the Jasper Plan since it was implemented. The alterations that have been made since 1950 have only served to strengthen it. In 1964 an ordinance was passed requiring garbage disposers to be installed in all new dwellings as well as in remodeled homes and apartments.<sup>80</sup> In that same year large public institutions and commercial establishments, such as hospitals and restaurants, were made responsible for installing grease, oil, and sand interceptors "when, in the opinion of the said Inspector, they are necessary for the proper handling of liquid wastes containing grease in excessive amount, or any flammable wastes . . . and other harmful ingredients."<sup>81</sup> In 1964 and again in 1973, Jasper's sewage treatment plant was enlarged to serve better the city's expanding population.<sup>82</sup> And each week, while there is no collection of garbage, public employees pick up trash—tin cans, paper cartons, newspapers, glass—in city-owned trucks.<sup>83</sup>

While a small segment of Jasper's homeowners (two hundred out of fourteen hundred) chose to burn or bury their garbage following the August 1 deadline, a large majority agreed to

---

<sup>77</sup> Interview with Thyen *et al.*

<sup>78</sup> Dubois County *Daily Herald*, August 14, 1950.

<sup>79</sup> "Garbage Disposal Units for City Wide Use," 101.

<sup>80</sup> City of Jasper, Indiana, "Ordinance Number 563," August 19, 1964.

<sup>81</sup> City of Jasper, Indiana, "Ordinance Number 557," May 28, 1964.

<sup>82</sup> Albert F. Reinsch, "Plant History," section in *Annual Report of Jasper Wastewater Facilities, 1980*, files of the Jasper Wastewater Facilities (Jasper, Indiana).

<sup>83</sup> Robert E. Parker to Edwana Tibbs, September 30, 1974, form letter in file t:e (Office of the Mayor, Jasper, Indiana).

participate in a plan designed “to serve the best interests of the entire community.”<sup>84</sup> Although German-Americans have on occasion resisted public policies that “seemed to invade their private lives,”<sup>85</sup> they have at other times been willing to put aside their suspicions and to sacrifice their individualism for the common good. Particularly among German-American Catholics self-reliance and independence have often been complemented by strong strains of voluntary mutual assistance and respect.<sup>86</sup>

In the case of the Jasper Plan collective action came with relative ease and for good reason. Faced with several environmental and public health hazards—pollution of the Patoka River, cholera among garbage-fed hogs, and a polio epidemic—the community knew full well that all it held dear was in danger. When it was demonstrated that these problems could in large part be solved by a unique household appliance that was not only “simple, safe, and sanitary” but also economical, most households fell “in line with Jasper’s revolutionary installation plan.”<sup>87</sup> However, without the tireless efforts and persuasive arguments of Mayor Thyen and Editor Rumbach, Jasper may not have become “the town that made garbage illegal.”<sup>88</sup>

groups he would always deliver his “key punch line”: “Helen, wouldn’t you feel a lot better to spend about a dollar or two a month and not have to ask your husband to take the garbage out anymore.” Thyen insisted that these women went home with this message and that their husbands became immediate supporters of the Jasper Plan. Interview with Thyen *et al.*

---

<sup>84</sup> General Electric, *Dad—What Was Garbage?* pamphlet (Jasper Public Library, Jasper, Indiana).

<sup>85</sup> See, for example, Judith Walzer Leavitt, *The Healthiest City: Milwaukee and the Politics of Health Reform* (Princeton, N.J., 1982), 82-83. Threatened by a smallpox epidemic, many German-Americans in Milwaukee resisted a board of health vaccination policy because they did not want “their personal liberty” diminished. They had come to the United States in search of political freedoms and were not willing to “support a government policy that seemed to invade their private lives.”

<sup>86</sup> See especially Philip Gleason, *The Conservative Reformers: German-American Catholics and the Social Order* (Notre Dame, Ind., 1968), 201-202.

<sup>87</sup> Dubois County *Daily Herald*, August 11, 1950.

<sup>88</sup> From a popular General Electric advertisement that read: “Jasper, Indiana. The town that made garbage illegal.”