Speaker 1:

Introduction to people who lived in the house, public advocacy and clean water. Who built this big, beautiful house? Where did the water that runs through its pipes come from? How do we know that water is safe to drink? The answers to these questions interconnect and illustrate how Eugene has been a leader in environmental and public health for over 100 years. Leah Murray, executive director of the Shelton McMurphey Johnson House tells the story of how Mr. Thomas Winthrop Shelton co-founded Eugene's first water company the same year that he broke ground for his castle on the hill.

Leah Murray:

The records indicate that on February 10th, 1886, the city council granted its first water franchise to some local residents, including TW Shelton, Charles Lawler and Associates. The first source of this water system came from wells that were near the University of Oregon by the Willamette River. On November 18th, 1905, the Eugene Water Company, as it was called at that point, was sold to the same East Coast funded syndicate that had purchased the Eugene Electric System in 1887. The water company built the first reservoir in 1905, and then the second reservoir was built around 1908.

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They located the reservoirs on Skinner Butte to hold the water from the river and wells. Then it was distributed to the surrounding neighborhoods, but the new water company did not maintain the water system, sickening hundreds of people.

Leah Murray:

In January 1906, there was the beginning of a typhoid outbreak. By February, an estimated 400 Eugene residents were placed on quarantine for the disease. The epidemic was so widespread, the State Board of Health was like, "Yeah, we're going to get involved with this," and they conducted an extensive investigation. On May 19th, they revealed the source to be contamination of the water supply, especially around the powerhouse near the main sewer line. There was a sewer line, and there was a well right by there by sixth and seventh near High Street, so not too far from us. The Board of Health felt like the contamination was caused by the seepage from the sewers. They also asserted that the mill race was really, really nasty. There was lots of stuff going into from the University of Oregon. There were gardens, there were pigpens, cow stables all along the river because everybody built right by the river, and that was where the water was coming from.

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In response to the epidemic, citizens demanded action and transformed how Eugene managed its water. This activism led to safeguards and structures that we continue to use today.

Leah Murray:

There was a large public outcry because this was a private company that couldn't... There was no regulations at that point. There was nothing that could be done, and so there was a lot of people who started championing that the city should own this. It should be a public facility. So there was a very quick turnaround as far as it went to ballot, people voted on it. And November 18th, 1908, the city council acquired the water properties, the whole thing from the Willamette Valley Company, which is what its new name was at that point for 140,000.

Eugene is actually believed to be one of the first cities west of Chicago to chlorinate our water. It was a steep public opinion, but demanded it in 1911. It had only been started just about 10 years before that, east of Chicago. We were pretty high up on the early acquiring that technology to do that, and that's the technology that we still use today, of course.

The Oregon State Health Board called the Typhoid Epidemic in Eugene, the worst in Oregon's history, and we must be doing something right because we haven't had one since. And the impact that it has on us today is that EWEB has some of the best water in the nation. So it is a very important key thing that they continue to test the quality of water and continue to find new ways to make sure our water is as clean as it can be.

Speaker 1:

Learn more on Shelton McMurphey Johnson House history and EWEB history through their websites. This project was created by the Shelton McMurphey Johnson House Museum and was made possible in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities.