



PEOPLE

# SCHNABEL A LEADER IN CLEANING UP CITY

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Known as 'Old Pushbroom,' he spent 40 years on his crusade

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During a 1947 trip to Switzerland, Otto Philip "O.P." Schnabel wrote a much-quoted letter to a friend back in San Antonio that would alter the way residents of this city and across the state viewed beautification, littering and personal responsibility.

"You do not see a lot of trash or papers on the Swiss streets and roads," wrote Schnabel, a life insurance salesman. "They have neat containers in every block, and around the grounds of hotels everything is so clean that you would feel like a 'dirty dog' to drop any litter. If God gives me enough time and strength, I resolve to dedicate myself to work towards making San Antonio the cleanest and most beautiful city in America."

For the next 40 years, Schnabel did just that, changing fundamentally how San Antonio addressed public sanitation. Schnabel saw an opportunity for San Antonio as a tourist destination, but the city faced a lack of municipal services and an attitude of many residents that they weren't responsible for the cleanliness of public spaces and their own property.

Schnabel was born in 1896 in Ottine, near Gonzales. He picked cotton as a child, worked for the Customs Service and served in the Army before opening a branch of the Jefferson Standard Life Insurance Co. in San Antonio, which he managed for 43 years.

In a strange twist, Schnabel was tragically connected to a famous bit of South Texas lore. His father, Henry Schnabel, was part of the posse that went to hunt down Gregorio Cortez, a tenant farmer who was acquitted in the killing of one lawman and pardoned in the killing of another. Henry Schnabel was killed during a chaotic



O.P. Schnabel, a local businessman and community leader, is shown with his trademark lapel button and push broom in the 1960s. Schnabel won national awards for his efforts to beautify San Antonio. He died in 1987.



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attempt to apprehend Cortez in 1901, according to a story in the San Antonio Express-News.

O.P. Schnabel married Lillian Butler Findlay in 1937. According to Express-News articles, she embraced her husband's causes and continued promoting them after his death.

In 1948, Schnabel organized his first cleanup, encouraging business-

men around his office on Auditorium Circle to clean up a five-block radius. The next year, he started the Cleanliness Committee at the chamber of commerce and organized a citywide cleanup. Local businesses donated trucks and the time of their employees to drive them. At the time, the city was desperately in need of better waste disposal and

sanitation, according to a 1966 pamphlet by James Beck titled "The Beautify San Antonio Story."

"Prior to this, little had been done by the city officials to make San Antonio presentable," Beck wrote of Schnabel's beautification efforts. "The street sweepers were broken down; no trash receptacles were on the streets and in spite of the work of the 'White

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Wings' with push brooms, the litter problem was a great nuisance because people had a negative attitude towards a clean city and the morale of the Sanitation Department was very low."

In 1950, city officials were shamed into action and hired sanitation workers to drive garbage trucks donated by local businesses. The next year, Schnabel raised money to buy 510 trash cans to be placed around downtown and hundreds more to go across the city. The municipal government agreed to empty them. That same year, San Antonio won third place in its division in the National Cleanest Town contest. By 1952, San Antonio won first place.

"Downtown was getting very littered, and he took it upon himself to do something about it," said Lionel Sosa, the San Antonio marketing guru who's worked on presidential campaigns. "I don't know if he helped create tourism or not, but he sure helped clean up downtown, because those receptacles were on every corner downtown."

Sosa said his first job was for Schnabel, painting the famous trash receptacles for \$1.75 an hour when Sosa was still a teenager.

Even as the beautification activism that Schnabel began grew, he remained involved at the ground level. In "The Beautify San Antonio Story," Beck described a contemporary citywide cleanup.

"Despite the fact that more than 7,000 loads of trash were hauled away during the recent pickup, some houses were missed, and Schnabel, feeling a personal responsibility for this, climbed into his iris and white air-conditioned Cadillac, drove to these homes and personally loaded the trash into his car and drove off to the dump. He made a total of 10 trips to the dump in this fashion."

In a column shortly after Schnabel's 1987 death, Express-News writer Paul Thompson described a recent dinner

he'd had with Schnabel at a fancy downtown restaurant. On the way there, Thompson wrote, Schnabel stopped on the side of the road to throw a rotting log into "a large metal container on the front of his car."

Schnabel wasn't above using gimmicks to promote his cleanliness crusade. A newspaper columnist dubbed him "Old Pushbroom," and Schnabel embraced it, even hanging a miniature gold broom embedded with diamonds from his tie chain. He would ask crowds, "Do you want to be a dirty, stinking, contemptible litterbug, or do you want to be a beauty bug?"

"Schnabel was so well-known he received letters simply addressed to 'O.P.,' 'Old Pushbroom,' 'Mr. Cleanup,' 'Mr. Beautify' or 'Mr. Clean' — without any street address," according to his obituary in the Express-News.

Schnabel had a sense of humor about his image, telling a reporter: "I'm just a dumb do-gooder. At first, everyone thought I was nuts. Now that I have some prestige, they just say I'm eccentric."

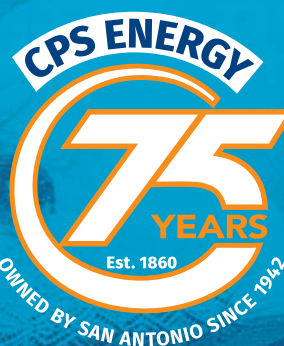
His legacy extended well beyond San Antonio. Schnabel became the founding president of the Beautify Texas Council, created to prepare the state for 1968's HemisFair in San Antonio. The council eventually became Keep Texas Beautiful, an affiliate of Keep America Beautiful. Today, Keep Texas Beautiful holds trash cleanups and is deeply involved with educational programs at the grass-roots level that promote litter prevention, beautification and waste reduction.

Schnabel "was the driving force and one of the founding fathers of the Beautify Texas Council," said Stan Weik, a San Antonio native who's now the city manager of San Saba and an emeritus member of the Keep Texas Beautiful board. "He has a massive legacy in San Antonio, but also throughout the state of Texas. And other states have tried to emulate what Texas did."

Today, Schnabel's legacy lives on in a 200-acre park named after him on the Northwest Side.

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