

A Brief History of Trash in the USA

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Recycling: A Background Story

The Transfer Station and Recycling Committee is planning a drive to increase recycling in Waterboro during the 2007-2008 fiscal year. An extensive community education and communication process is in the planning to get townspeople, businesses, organizations, and the schools on board by this coming July 1. So as a member of the committee who has been asked to do Community Education related to recycling, I found myself wondering how we had gotten to where we are in terms of Municipal Solid Waste generation and disposal today. I set out to do some research, and in the hope that others might find this informative as well, I offer a short summary of the historic changes that have occurred in the generation and disposal of trash in the United States over the past two centuries.

The Age of the Peddler

Trash has always been a product of sorting, and what counts as trash depends on who is doing the counting.ⁱ Before the Industrial Revolution, until the end of the nineteenth century, there was little or no concept of “trash” in the United States. In a children’s book, when the word wastebasket was used, the author made sure to define it, because many readers had never seen one. Every bit of house, kitchen, shop, or farm scrap was reused, remade, or traded with the peddlers who traveled the nation with backpacks or wagons. Containers that purchased goods came in, and that were not returnable for reuse by the manufacturer of the product, had many reuses in the home. Barrels became upholstered chairs, their hoops used as toys to roll with a stick. Packing crates became furniture – tables, footstools, bookshelves and more. Grain sacks became clothing, towels, and curtains. Purple paper, in which certain soap was wrapped, was used for its dye to color the sacks. When an item was of no further use, Yankee and Jewish peddlers collected paper, rags, rubber, bones, hides, and metal from households, in trade for needed sale items. They sent the bags of materials to central collection points where they were sold to paper mills and other industries that depended on them for the creation

of new products. There was a consciousness of “objects” rather than trash, and every item had a destination and use. ⁱⁱ

In the cities, wastewater and other materials were often thrown out windows, and goats, pigs, and dogs roamed, feeding on the scraps. Poor children called “swill children” also roamed the streets and garbage dumps, searching for items to be eaten or sold.

Trash: The Early Days

With the advent of the Industrial Revolution came the concept of “consumer” as more middle-class households began to buy goods that had new kinds of packaging. The concept of “trash” grew with the development of municipal waste collection and disposal. The rationality of “hygiene” was created in the field of home economics, and unwanted or unused items were deemed not healthy to keep around, especially in the cities.

Throwing packaging away became seen as more sanitary than storing and reusing it. Municipalities were faced with increasing amounts of waste, and “sanitary reform” became a political, economic, and public health issue for those who governed. It took longer in rural areas and among older generations for such changes to come about, but more and more trash was being generated.

My Trash/Your Treasure

During the first few decades of the twentieth century, a new kind of institution was created, and through it unwanted goods from the middle and upper classes were transformed into materials for job training and livelihood of poor and disabled citizens, and inexpensive goods for the poorer classes. The Salvation Army came from England, Goodwill Industries developed in Boston and both spread throughout the nation. The St. Vincent de Paul Society was created in the Catholic Church, and it sought clothing and shoes for those who could not afford them, many of whom were new immigrants.

During US involvement in W.W.I, conservation measures concerning food, clothing, and other consumables were encouraged, but not required. After Armistice Day, restraints were dropped, and spending and acquiring increased until the fall of the Stock Market in 1929. Throughout the Depression, people who had money were encouraged to spend it, to create a need for products, which in turn created jobs. In the words of a top advertising agent, “Wearing things out does not produce prosperity but buying things does. Thrift in the industrialized society we now live in consists of keeping all of the

factories busy.”ⁱⁱⁱ Home renovation was encouraged by low interest loans, and people were encouraged to spend as a patriotic duty to end the Depression. Radios replaced expensive nightlife and refrigerators allowed for buying food in bulk. The theme was “Saving by Buying.” At the same time goods were bought in cotton bags, printed with patterns, to be sewed into clothing, pillowcases, tablecloths, towels, and scarves. Worn clothing was made into quilts and rugs,

The concept of obsolescence developed early and continued throughout the century. Stylistic obsolescence was fostered by development of new and better models of cars, radios and appliances, leading those who could to buy new items before the end of the former one’s use-life. Functional obsolescence had to do with products breaking down and encouragement was fostered through marketing to replace rather than repair. Mountains of trash appeared across the nation’s landscape, most often located in areas where the lowest income populations lived.

There was little respite from the Depression before the attacks at Pearl Harbor led the country into war. Householders were pressed into the war effort and encouraged to save all useful scraps as organizations and governments mounted “drives” for metal, rubber, aluminum, cooking fats and other materials. Cooking fats were collected for their glycerine content, used in making explosives, especially nitroglycerine. Children were taught how to join in drives for the various needed items, and rationing became institutionalized. Gasoline, meat, and butter were rationed and rationing stamps were allotted to each household. In contrast with the Depression, industry re-fitted itself for wartime production, and many domestic products disappeared from shops and stores “for the duration.” Marketing campaigns were mounted to help people repair, reuse, and reduce what they had earlier become accustomed to replace. But this did not signal a return to pre-industrial practices of frugality, as industries mobilized for battle, employment and wage earning increased, and consumerism rose steadily from the beginning of the US entry into the war. In fact the propaganda encouraging scrap drives did not encourage a return to the traditional stewardship of objects, but fit well with the new consumer attitude of throwing things away.

Rampant Consumerism to Early Recycling

During the fifties, new models of appliances and changing styles continued to increase rampant consumerism, and a throwaway culture. From garbage disposals to trash compactors, from disposable paper products, plastic ware, and even paper dresses and later hospital gowns, trash accumulated.

It was not until the counter-culture of the sixties that values and practices harkening back to pre-industrial life were resurrected. In addition, the “back to the land” movement renewed pre-industrial practices of production, with handcraft skills valued, and food grown in organic fashion. Anything that held the worth of the natural environment to be of value was considered counter-cultural.

Therefore much of early recycling was a counter-cultural activity. Along with food co-ops and composting, early recycling efforts were small and grassroots. Paper, glass and cans were gathered and sold not as small business transactions, but as the practices of social and cultural movements. About three thousand small recycling centers were set up before and after the first Earth Day, April 22, 1970.

Another “institution” that later rose in the disposal of unwanted items was that of the thrift shop, the white elephant sales, and flea markets. This became personalized in the development of individual household yard or garage sales.

Trash Becomes Big Business

By the late 1980s the small recycling and other small trash operations could not compete with the large consolidated companies. The field of municipal solid waste management that had previously been handled by 10 -12,000 independent operators was now dominated by four huge firms. The use of highly developed technologies allowed them to handle mountains of waste and also to meet Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) regulations. As recycling became a more mainstream activity, it was taken over by these companies who also managed landfills and high-tech incinerators.

Like giving items to Goodwill, the Salvation Army, or a local church thrift shop, recycling became a means of getting rid of goods with a clear conscience. By the 25th anniversary of the first Earth Day, In 1995, the EPA announced the nation was approaching its late seventies goal of recycling at a 25% rate of waste disposal.

The Regional and the Personal

Today, recycling on a small scale is not feasible. The tonnage that is required to make materials marketable is too prohibitive. At the minimum, only regional centers can accumulate and process the amounts needed to make recycling effective. At the same time, it is in the privacy of one's own home, business, or school that decisions are made about where particular items are placed when they are no longer needed, desired, or perceived to have any inherent usefulness. We are not likely to rekindle the attitudes and values of pre-industrial America in order to accomplish the goal of increasing recycling, reuse, and proper disposal of hazardous home waste.

“Sorting trash for recycling -- which people used to do for money -- has become a moral act . . . Recycling and reuse -- however limited their contributions to long-term environmental solutions -- remind us of the threads that bind our individual households to the planet and the activities of our daily lives to its future.”^{iv}

This way of understanding ourselves as part of the larger community may be what will be required to replace the values of that time past, and in this age of global warming every segment of the population is called to do its part.

Regional waste systems, such as Eco-Maine, in which Waterboro has an owner's interest, can only succeed in increasing recycling and reducing greenhouse gas emissions when we as citizens decide to make these right choices.

Our Transfer Station and Recycling Committee is beginning a campaign to increase our community's recycling tonnage from the 5-600 tons of the past year to 1000 tons for the 2007-2008 fiscal year. As this article began, “Trash has always been a product of sorting, and what counts as trash depends on who is doing the counting.”

We ask that every citizen sort carefully and significantly reduce what is considered to be trash, and increase what is recycled. We hope you will join in this pursuit to do the best we can to foster local economic benefit and environmental accountability.

ⁱ Lars Eighner, *Travels with Lizbeth* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1993), pp. 18-19

ⁱⁱ The material in this piece draws on the work of Susan Strasser in *Waste and Want: a Social History of Trash* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 1999).

ⁱⁱⁱ Earnest Elmo Calkins, “What Consumer Engineering Really Is,” introd., *Consumer Engineering: A New Technique for Prosperity*, by Roy Sheldon and Egmont Arens (New York- Harper, 1932), pp.1-2, 7.

^{iv} Strasser, 1999, p. 293.