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Dump Stories

The Game of Landfill Salvage

Landfill salvage is a contest, where one group of people is trying to dis-
pose of things, and another group of people is trying to save these same
things for future use.

At any dump where salvage is allowed or encouraged, there will be hundreds
of encounters daily where the dynamic of waste becoming wealth works through
its motions by varying paths. Each encounter is potentially rewarding or
not, depending on the specific makeup of the situation.

The scavenger wants to be the first to go through the load, pulling the
surprises, the valuables, the unusual, the immediately useful. The dumper
usually wants to dump and run, but sometimes is caught by the humor, the
incongruity, the sheer fantastic intensity of the disposal scene, and stays
to chat, to help, to ask or answer questions.

A good scavenger looks for the "good loads", which are sometimes iden-
tifiable only by subtle clues: a dull green/blue gleam seen through a
tangle of broken lumber may turn out to be two dozen feet of copper plumbing---
if it can be had before it slides down into the pit. Convincing the driver
that the picker should mount the load and pull the copper is an artful pro-
cess requiring authority, tact, and quick dexterity.

One Person's Trash is Another's Treasure Part I

Here is a story about a good load that almost didn't make it, but did.

Two professional haulers were waiting in the dump line in their pickup
truck. The load was a miscellany, but contained several large metal items,
including a washer and some aluminum engine parts. The picker's first
approach was to ask if it was alright to pull the metal while the driver
was waiting for a dumping slot.

The driver replied: sure, if the picker would pay him a couple of bucks for the metals in the load. Otherwise, forget it. The driver was "dump-wise"; and knew the picker would sell the metals for cash. Moreover, he had just paid several dollars at the gate for his right to dump, and it just didn't make sense to him to give the scavengers yet more money in the form of the metals higrade on his load. That would be paying twice, and paying twice for the same service was stupid, recycling or no recycling. At the same time, the metals were not valuable enough for him to justify a separate trip to the scrap metals buyer, so he had to get them out of his truck, and the sooner the better.

The picker evaluated the situation quickly, decided the dumper was serious, and that argument or clarification was useless given the time crunch. He agreed to pay the \$2.00.

As he went to get the money from his second-hand operation cash-box, the dump manager (who managed the gate fee system) approached to ask what was happening. The picker explained, whereupon the supervisor said that paying for recyclables was not allowable policy at this dump, but since it was dump policy to recycle all metals, the driver should be directed to set the materials aside for recycling rather than dumping them in the pit. He should not be paid, however.

This made the driver quite angry, of course, having been told opposite messages in the space of a few minutes by the same person. (Incidentally, the tactic probably would have worked on an ordinary household trash dumper, who can usually be guilt-tripped into giving things up voluntarily. But drivers who make their livings in the highly competitive world of contract-hauling are a hard-nosed lot, and don't feel guilty since it's not their trash).

Seeing the driver's anger, the supervisor approached and explained politely that the policy at this dump was to recycle as much as possible, and the public was supposed to cooperate.

The driver was by now maneuvering his truck to the edge of the pit. He still hadn't bought the supervisor's explanation, though, and made one last offer to set the materials aside for fifty cents. His compromise offer was refused, on the grounds that it would set a bad precedent for the dump to be paying for loads after being paid to dispose of them.

So the driver and his companion got even angrier, and dumped ^{the} ~~to~~ entire load into the pit, washer, aluminum parts, and all. There was nothing the picker could do to prevent this, but the supervisor ordered a second and a third picker to drive the dump's four-wheel unit into the pit to scavenge the metals. This was done while the driver was still there, as he cleaned the dust and dreck out of his truckbed.

Of course little was gained by anyone in this exchange. The scavengers lost because three people and a piece of equipment were required to do what \$2.00 could have done better. (Or 50¢, if the driver's final proposal had been accepted). The landfill lost the goodwill and cooperation of two driver/operators, who repeated the same dumping performance a few more times before they stopped coming to that particular dump. The drivers lost self-respect, because they were compelled by the logic of their protest against an unfair policy to conspicuously waste materials they knew were valuable, only to see them salvaged anyway. And they still had to pay more than they should have to dump.

On the positive side, materials were reclaimed, but the costs probably exceeded the benefit.

This illustrates how the waste into wealth paradigm can seesaw back and forth due to ^{confusion in} the personalities and policies governing the recycling scene

itself. And it explains how policy should be thought through, understood by workers and management, and put together so it is fair to all concerned. In this way, frictional losses such as these can be avoided.

One Person's Trash is Another's Treasure Part II

My personal I was managing a composition study at a transfer site in Lane County, Oregon. Each hour, I would perform a "level scan", which consisted of noting on a grid the location and name of all large visible objects at the surface of the transfer bin. I carried a clipboard, and frequently worked close to where people were unloading.

This particular transfer site operated according to a county "no salvage" rule, with an operator to enforce the standard. And enforce he did; his territorial defense of the contents of the bins reminded me of some junkyard dogs I had encountered in rambles through ~~the~~ scrapyards *as a boy*.

While I was counting, a man of forty or so came in with a trailer full of household goods, toys, clothing, and a few garbage bags. There was very little trash in comparison with most loads.

I could see several things that were clean and useful just on the surface, so I stopped counting and positioned myself to see what was coming.

The man began throwing things into the transfer bin: stuffed animals, blankets, towels, kitchen tools, clothing, furniture.... I asked him if he was spring cleaning, or what? He said no, he was moving out of the area and getting a divorce. There was anger and frustration in his voice and manner, and suddenly it was clear: here was a person who was essentially dumping his past, cleaning away the things that would most remind him of what he wanted to forget. Dumping these things was a catharsis, a fulfillment, perhaps even a vengeance.

I could see his reality, and understand it, but at the same time it seemed a shame and an affront to good sense to leave the material where it was. I noted the items on my clipboard as they fell. But even this was an irritation to the man who was trashing the stuff of his failed marriage. He clearly wanted to be alone; he certainly didn't want his behavior recorded, or even witnessed.

So I moved away a bit, toward another truck whose driver had also noticed the good articles going into the waste bins. Now there were two of us sneaking looks at the scene.

Enter the caretaker. He had a way of supporting the dumping behavior of the people using the transfer site; he would commiserate with them about how the trash builds up, how you just have to get rid of it from time to time. a necessary bother. He could tell this guy needed a little support. The two exchanged a few words.

Then the dumper brought out the prize: a framed antique art print, medium size, with an ornate frame and intact glass. The image was a classic scene with several beautifully dressed people set in the opulent temples of Greece or Rome. It was beautiful, and valuable. He threw it in.

I moved over to get a better look at the picture. It lay face up on the pile. As I noted "1 picture" on my level scan form, I saw the caretaker whisper something to the dumper while looking at me. The next thing out of the man's trailer was a plastic garbage bag full of paper. The caretaker pointed toward the picture.

The dumper glanced at me, and with perfect and deliberate aim threw the plastic bag down so it completely covered the picture.

I pretended indifference, and moved back to the second dumper's truck.

We talked the situation over, and agreed that the bag, being light, had not damaged the picture. We hatched a plan: he would take his time finishing his load. When the dumper pulled out, I would go ask the caretaker some questions and remove him from the scene. Meanwhile, my ally would pull his truck out, only to pretend discovery of something he had forgotten to dump. He would back into the space just vacated by the first dumper. While the caretaker was occupied with me, he would jump in and rescue the picture.

And that is exactly what happened. While the caretaker explained to me how he kept the place clean and sanitary, the treasure was retrieved from the trash.

As the second driver was leaving, he flashed me the "V" sign and held up the picture behind the caretaker's back. We both smiled. So did the caretaker.

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"It Followed Me Home"

Veteran recycler Ernie Fraim tells this story about how the workers at BRING recycling used to explain the items they took for their own use from the solid waste stream.

BRING shared a wide spot in the road leading to the landfill with Goodwill Industries. BRING collected and processed container aluminum, steel, and glass, while Goodwill collected the more valuable repairables and reusables: appliances, furniture, bicycles, cookware, an endless variety of Useful Stuff.

Goodwill's site was unattended; they provided a couple of covered wooden bins made to look like little houses for the things that should be kept out of the rain and dust. The houses were small, so the reusables would frequently spill out onto the gravel pad area. Goodwill workers came periodically to pick up the "donations"; otherwise, the only people at the site most of the

time were the BRING workers.

Now recycling---especially in the early days---paid poorly, and sometimes not at all. Processing container scrap was boring, repetitious work after awhile, even to the most idealistic and dedicated recycler. So here were the BRING workers, with their barrels and bins and boxes, next door to Goodwill, scene of a hundred donated Christmases a day.

It was only natural that BRING workers talked to the people who stopped by to recycle on their way to the dump. When BRING workers saw something they liked, they found ways to reserve it for later retrieval; some just asked straightaway, and were usually given the things they wanted. Or, when no one was onsite, BRING workers would take breaks by strolling through the Goodwill area, checking out the merchandise.

Of course they would be asked where they got the new things that appeared in their living spaces, and the standard answer BRING workers developed for the situation was "It followed me home".

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The question of personal use of salvaged materials is one that needs some careful thought. Reserving materials for personal use is a universal phenomenon among workers in materials recovery or salvage. There is justice in the salvage worker's claim that things taken represent wages for work, not theft. Being able to select things for personal use is a compensation for the low money wages and high risks of labor-intensive salvage work.

Management tactics designed to repress or eliminate personal salvage are no doubt doomed to failure. People are so ingenious that at best, only a few more materials will be saved out for sale to the public. At worst, a situation of mutual distrust may develop, with the workers feeling used and thwarted at the same time, and management involved in a lot of unproductive policing and snooping.