

One Trashy Life

By Lolly Merrell

As a member of the Brady Bunch generation, I'm also part of the first wave of kids impacted by the Keep America Beautiful campaign. Besides the misty lessons from Iron Eyes Cody commercials, we got exposed to the anti-litter ads now rooted in the American lexicon: Give a Hoot, Don't Pollute! Don't Be A Litterbug! Keep America Beautiful! By the late '70s, signs warning of littering fines popped up on rural highways across the Bible Belt, and littering became a felony in most Southern states. What used to be regarded in the South as plain bad manners was suddenly illegal and stated, unequivocally, as reprehensible.

In the South that I knew, this had unintended results. Criminalizing the act of littering created an opportunity for rebellion out of what had previously been just a lazy indiscretion. Soon after those "fine for littering" signs appeared on the highways near our home in rural Raleigh, a thicker stream of pop tops and Styrofoam burger clamshells appeared on once-clean gravel roads. Teenagers in their Plymouths and RX-7s dumped beer cans and Virginia Slims boxes with wild abandon. In the woods off a Jeep road near a friend's house, we (giddily) discovered a muddy, water-logged pile of *Hustlers* and *Penthouse* magazines, along with a few crushed Mountain Dew cans.

But littering as anarchy was short-lived in my rural youth. More neighborhoods were developed on former farm land, an influx of construction trucks emblazoned with Dixie flags zoomed down the red-mud roads. And soon the flotsam followed. This new class of litterers seemed to have a deeper resentment, some innate disregard for us, the landscape, the state of things in general. These people, our community surmised, were one heartbeat away from some larger crime and had basically been brought up wrong.

Then the adopt-a-highway trend appeared in our town and took advantage of this moral division. By cleaning up a stretch of road, you—your family, your school's cheerleading squad—could get what was essentially a moral billboard announcing that not only did you rep-

resent not littering, but you were willing to pick up after those who were not so evolved. I remember when folks would honk and wave supportively at the cheerleading squad as they happily plucked roadside trash in their reflector vests on a Saturday morning.

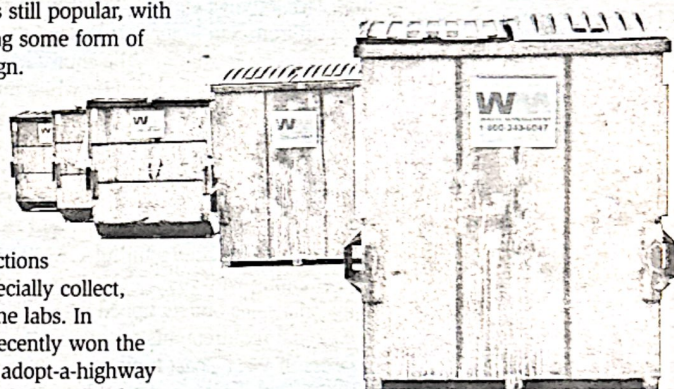
Even today the program is still popular, with every state in the nation using some form of the adopt-a-highway campaign.

But its moral message has been somewhat lost. Folks in Colorado volunteering to clean up roads in the rural segments of the state are now equipped with special instructions on how to recognize, and specially collect, evidence of methamphetamine labs. In Missouri, the Ku Klux Klan recently won the right to have its name on an adopt-a-highway sign. And the latest trend has been toward something called "corporate adopt-a-highway," which involves hiring a contractor to pick up trash to satisfy the requirements of having your name on a sign.

While adopt-a-highway is working in many respects—more roads are voluntarily cleaned than ever before—they also reflect part of a great failure. The Keep America Beautiful campaign reported that more than 150 billion pounds of trash was collected in last year's cleanup effort.

What could be simpler than choosing not to litter? It seems one of the last non-partisan environmental acts left in this country, and yet the problem prevails. The near extinction of the South's once-marked social pressure to refrain from littering has inspired a constant reinvention of littering controls here. Georgia, my new home, has recently decriminalized littering from a felony to a misdemeanor—too many police overlooked littering because a felony required their appearance in court. The department of transportation in North Carolina supplies motorists with "tattler postcards" so they can report littering offenses anonymously with a license plate number.

I may be romanticizing my old life out West, but I can't imagine the same scene out there. I have a memory of a candy wrapper floating out of my pocket while I was hiking in New Mexico, and three other hikers scrambled with me over a steep talus slope to retrieve it. I saw more carcasses along the rural roads in western Colorado than soda cans. I think any litter I saw on Vashon Island, Washington, was actually roadside sculpture. Maybe the presence of so



much natural beauty in those particular places keeps people on their toes. Or perhaps what I'm really experiencing is the South's growing pains, away from open spaces and shared landscapes to anonymity and insulation—a situation shared by burgeoning cities across the country. Maybe we've stopped trying to instill the guilt behind picking up after yourself.

Wading through the flotsam of a holiday weekend's highway trash (it tends to blow my neighborhood's way in Atlanta), a conversation with a friend inspired a little hope that littering is still considered bad behavior. My friend is an unlucky dater—she's resorted to online matchmaking and suffered many scary setups—but thought she had finally found a great guy. Tall, smart, arty and funny, this guy seemed the cat's meow and she trusted it. Then, on their way to a movie, she noticed he slipped a foil gum wrapper out the window. It wasn't much, but she never went out with him again.

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