A Dollar A Foot, Free If You Take A Puppy

E. Jane Luzar

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In the early 1950's in rural Indiana, waste management began the transformations into what today would be recognized as recycling and landfills. In small towns like Greencastle, Indiana, waste was separated into garbage (food waste) and rubbish (everything else.) Plastic did not exist in packaging and households did not have garbage disposals. There was an opportunity for a win-win solution to the problem of garbage waste disposal that involved feeding it to hogs.

My Dad was one of the early innovators in this area as he secured the contract with Greencastle to feed its garbage to his hogs. I remember Purdue University being involved in the development of our garbage operation. My Dad graduated from Purdue and worked there after WW II. He stayed in touch when the family moved to our rough hill farm near Greencastle where he adopted a number of Purdue's programs.

Feeding garbage to hogs involved some major construction on our farm. A large iron "cooker" had to be built. I remember it being a drum shape of about twenty by fifteen feet with a large lid. It was wired and programmed to heat the garbage to 212˚ to prevent trichinosis. Large rotors agitated the garbage to ensure a thorough cooking process. A road with a ramp the width of the cooker was built to enable the single axel garbage truck to back up to the cooker and dump the garbage. Once cooked and cooled, a trap door at the bottom of the cooker was opened and the garbage poured out along a long trough in the center of a concrete feeding floor.

Garbage arrived three times a week. The driver of the garbage truck was a Black man named Louis Williams. He was one of only a handful of Black families in Greencastle. We called him Colored Louie to differentiate him from our Dad, Louie, and our older brother, Little Louie. He always honked the horn as he went by the house on the way to the cooker. That alerted my younger brother Pat and me to follow it to watch it dump its load. Sometimes, he would stop so that we could hop onto the running board and catch a ride to the cooker.

We were always amazed at the kinds of garbage that would come rolling out of the truck, often in its original form. I remember seeing whole hams, assortments of meat, fruits, and vegetables. Hogs are true omnivores and will eat about anything. About anything. After a feeding, there were often grapefruit littered on the feeding floor. I remember at that early age recognizing the irony of a hog enjoying a large, cooked ham.

Greencastle households were very conscientious about not mixing non-edible trash with their garbage. However, the fraternities at DePauw University in Greencastle were less careful. They may not have realized that hogs would consume the garbage. Pat and I

would often walk through the feeding floor and collect spoons and small wooden salad bowls. They were usually imprinted with the Greek letters of the De Pauw fraternities. Those little bowls became valuable to us as our Beagle Empire took shape.

We always had a few dogs on the farm. My Dad said he chose Beagles because they were so gentle with children. As the garbage program grew, we discovered it as a free source of dog food. After the garbage was cooked, it had to cool. We figured out how to drop a Beagle onto the top of the cooled garbage and let it forage for food. They often became so full that we worried they would burst when we extracted them. And, they smelled like garbage.

A few Beagles quickly multiplied and soon each of us kids had our own litter of puppies. Eventually, the five of us had about forty Beagles. We would also claim the runt of any litter of pigs and raise it like a dog. Our favorite was Pepper the Pig who thought she was a dog. She tried to hunt with the Beagles which had a high entertainment value for us. As an adult, Pepper would break out of the hog pen and show up on the back porch, hoping for entry into the house. Once, she showed up and smelled the chocolate chip cookies my Mom was serving to guests. She broke through the screen door and ended up in the living room in the middle of the party. Pepper was soon butchered and became dinner.

My Dad realized that the Beagle Empire was not sustainable. As the Christmas season approached, we set out to cut pine trees for sale. We were miles out of town, but we had a loyal customer base seeking larger trees. The family that owned the farm before us had planted lots of red and white pines. By the time we bought the farm, they were much too big for the typical household. However, the sororities and fraternities at DePauw University wanted large trees for their houses.

We enjoyed seeing these people come to buy their Christmas trees. We especially enjoyed seeing the DePauw students whom we believed were city slickers from Chicago. We would often test that theory when our Beagles ran by chasing a rabbit, enthusiastically howling and barking. Often, mixed into the pack was Pepper the Pig, doing her best to keep up with her canine friends. We would point to Pepper the Pig and casually remark that we just couldn't get that one to open up on the trail. The look of the college students (many of whom had never seen a pig) was priceless.

As the Beagle Empire peaked, my Dad realized that he had to do something. Many of our Beagles were adorable puppies at Christmas time. Early in the season, a new pricing sign appeared by the Christmas trees lined up on the white wooden fence: *A Dollar a Foot, Free If You Take a Puppy*. It worked, as the demand for free, cute puppies and free trees at Christmas was strong.

About the time that we reduced our supply of Beagles, changes were coming to the garbage fed hog program. The public was historically a bit nervous about consuming

garbage fed hogs. A earlier swine flu epidemic in Indiana had been linked to feeding garbage to hogs. Jasper, a small town in southern Indiana, pioneered the use of garbage disposals for health reasons at a record level. We were also starting to experience increased mortality among the hogs from consuming shards of glass and plastic.

As food packaging changed in the 1950's to include plastic, the volume of solid waste increased. Households increasingly mixed plastic waste into their food garbage, creating a deadly situation for hogs. Cities like Greencastle had a growing demand for combined solid waste pickup and disposal. Most rubbish had previously been burned at the county dump. With these changes, coupled with the growing use of garbage disposals, Greencastle and many other rural communities stopped collecting garbage separately. Instead, the era of solid waste management began. Instead of separate, multiple garbage collection days each week, household waste including garbage and trash, was combined into one solid waste pickup.

This required a new approach to waste disposal which was found in open pit, sanitary landfills on farms. Farmers abandoned the garbage fed hog programs and created large, unlined, open trenches on their farms for the newly combined solid waste. As they filled the open pits, they were covered with dirt and another was created. Initially without liners, these pits undoubtedly leached materials into the soil and water. Early sanitary landfills in Indiana were unregulated until 1953.

After that transition, the cooker sat unused for years on our farm and was eventually scrapped for metal. The concrete feeding floor gradually cracked and filled with weeds. Wandering around that area, we could often still find a fraternity spoon or little wooden bowl. For us as kids, it was an exciting adventure. As an adult, I now realize we were part of waste management history. What I remember most now is all those puppies (and Pepper the Pig) and that sign: *A Dollar a Foot, Free if You Take a Puppy*.