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Roadside trash presents dilemmas
By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—I got up very early on a warm Easter Sunday to correct page proofs for a book of “Country Real Estate” columns, titled Land Matters. I need to proofread when my eyes are fresh and my brain is not distracted by telephones or dogs barking at intruders of their own imagination.

I’m always disturbed at the number of errors I miss in earlier editings. If the surgeon who digs around in my cranium is no better than I am, he’s likely to leave something in that should be extracted or take something out that should be left alone. Plumbers are far better at checking their lines than I am at proofing mine—which is a good thing, considering the disparate consequences of failure.

A few hours later, my eyes blurred. So I packed two plastic bags in my pocket and started a four-mile roundtrip walk to the top of Wimer Mountain. I try to do trash patrol once a year, but I often discover excellent excuses for kicking this can down the road.

If I were a good citizen, I would clean the road more often, or at least regularly. But I am no better than a so-so member of my community when it comes to walking trash.

It normally takes about 35 minutes to gain 500 feet in elevation over two miles. But if I stop to fetch and squash aluminum cans and plastic bottles, it’s about an hour. I lose a cardio workout in tidying Virginia’s landscape. I’m being penalized for a good deed.

Over the years, I’ve developed a set of inconsistent trash-collection standards that I apply inconsistently.

I retrieve all aluminum cans, sometimes. I sell them to a recycler for a few pennies a pound. This makes me feel triply virtuous—I’m greening a roadside ditch; I’m earning income; and I’m not being fairly compensated for working in the public interest.

Cans, however, present dilemmas. Some crumpled ones contain little stones. If a pebble won’t shake out, I sell the can “as is,” even though I know I’m guilty of putting my thumb on the recycler’s scale.

Most bottles are plastic. Local donors are remarkably considerate in screwing caps on their empties. Even our litterbugs are getting greener.

I collect most Styrofoam packaging, but I leave more paper than I should because those scraps tend to be icky, particularly pages from unpublished first novels.

On several occasions, I've found neatly wrapped diapers disposed at the gate into our woods. Recycling may develop new capacities in this direction, but it's not there yet.

My aluminum contributors prefer 12-ounce Bud Light and Milwaukee's Best Light. I find no other brands. I figure two guys buy a six pack each at Junior's store in Blue Grass after work, then drain one can apiece before crossing the line into West Virginia about four miles away. Bud drives, and Milwaukee rides shotgun.

I'm willing to do a certain amount of bank work for a can, but not a bottle. I will climb five or six feet on the uphill side and go as much as 10 or even 12 feet downslope.

But I don't hop fences even for a shiny 16-ouncer. Cans that have migrated illegally from the Commonwealth of Virginia's right of way under a fence or through a culvert belong to that landowner.

I've never found much in the way of reading material in our litter. As my wife, Melissa, and I walked near Nassau in the Bahamas some years ago, I stumbled upon a seriously pornographic magazine whose photos I shared with her all the way back to our hotel. She accused me of never having left the eighth grade, despite my framed diploma.

About half way up the mountain, I pass the picked over carcass of a deer, hanging upside down in a fence. Her rear foot was caught between the two top strands of barbed wired. She died struggling for life. I keep meaning to free her remains, but never seem to make the time.

Anyone on this road would have put a mercy bullet into her had we known. I feel sad every time I go by. Neither life nor death is fair.

I have an odd relationship with Bud Light and Milwaukee's Best. Without their steady donations, I would not get bend-over exercise and the few dollars that reward recycling.

Virginia fines those caught littering. If I saw a can coming out of a car window, what should I do? I now have an economic interest in this criminal behavior as well as a literary interest in feeling both self-righteous and conflicted about the situation. Maybe it's better -- all things considered -- to keep curing some problems instead of preventing them.

When I walk up the road on Monday morning, I discover that I've overlooked a couple of Bud empties. I grind my teeth. I'm tired of missing cans in the ditch and typos in a manuscript.

If I concentrate very hard in the future, perhaps I'll get better at catching these mavericks and returning them to the hole heard.

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