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Throwaway society needs to chuck litter habit

By Carol Bodensteiner

My aunt tells the story of living along the Mississippi in the 1940s. Shortly after she married, she burned a pot of prunes beyond the point of cleaning. She tossed the pot into the river, disposing of her garbage as most people did in those days. Sometime later, when her husband was out fishing, his boat sprang a leak. Needing something with which to bail, he grabbed the first container he saw floating by. It turned out to be the burned pot of prunes.

If all litter could save a life, maybe we could view it more kindly. But it can't, and our over-packaged, throwaway society has accelerated the problem of litter.

I thought about my aunt's prune pan when I joined nearly 150 volunteers last month for the Iowa Department of Natural Resources' annual river cleanup project. During the week, volunteers pulled 24 tons of garbage out of the Iowa River.

We can tell a lot about ourselves as a society by looking at what we throw away, and it is clear we are capable of throwing away anything and everything.

Forty pair of thong underwear. One pair of platform shoes. Most of a 1956 Oldsmobile. Appliances. Motors. A virtually new moped. Thousands of beer cans, pop bottles, juice containers. Tires of all sizes. A picnic table. A portion of a roof. Six 50-gallon chemical drums. This is a short list of what we retrieved.

If we give ourselves the benefit of the doubt and say that some, even half, of that trash wound up in the river as a result of the Flood of 1993 and the tornadoes this spring, it still leaves 12 tons of garbage put into the river willfully by humans.

Young people who worked on the river cleanup project acknowledged that they are taught in school at the youngest ages not to litter, yet they do. We've probably all seen it.

I watched as a young woman walking down a Des Moines street drained the last drops of water from a plastic bottle and casually tossed the bottle on the ground. She didn't even look around first to note if anyone would see her do it. I wanted to yell at her to pick up after herself. I wanted to ask just who she thought was going to pick up that bottle. I wanted to point out that if she threw down a bottle every day as she walked by that spot, soon she would have to climb over or around a mountain of plastic. But I didn't. And worse, I didn't pick up the bottle myself.

It was a matter of great speculation among the volunteers how 40 pair of thong underwear and a pair of platform shoes wound up in the river. An angry boyfriend? A hooker abandoning her vocation? Some weird fraternity ritual? It's grist for a novel, or at least an essay.

Of course, there are people who do care, and attitudes toward litter change over time. My aunt - the one of the burned prune pot - was a fifth-grade teacher who came to include the "don't litter" message in her lessons each year. Now she lives what she taught, taking an empty grocery bag with her every morning on her walk. At age 88, she picks up all the trash she sees in her neighborhood. It is sad that she never comes back with an empty bag.

One morning she left the house without a sack. Seeing her, a neighbor ran out of her house and gave my aunt a bag. I think she would have been happier to have the neighbor join her in cleaning up the neighborhood or in making sure it never got littered in the first place.

CAROL BODENSTEINER lives in Des Moines.

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