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Trash doesn't just disappear

By MIKE CARL

Special to the Battalion

"Mixed municipal refuse, type II" may be what the Environmental Protection Agency call it, but after spending a day as a College Station trash collector, I still call it garbage.

SELDOM IN THE PAST have I questioned the fact that, on the appointed day, my most recent accumulation of empty cans, disposable bottles, potato peelings and last week's noodle casserole would magically disappear from the curbside. Once, my only comment would have been: "Everyone's garbage is out so it must be Tuesday."

I know now that the estimated 2.5 pounds of garbage per person per day generated in College Station finds its way to the dumping grounds without the aid of a magician.

The day of my debut with the College Station garbage department began much like any other Tuesday morning with the exception of donning my oldest pair of blue jeans and boots — the ones that I wouldn't mind parting with. Superintendent Alfred Miller had told me to meet him at the "sheds" on Wellborn Road, north of University Drive. "Don't be late," he warned, "because the trucks roll at eight SHARP."

SEVERAL GROUPS of men were laughing and talking with each other when I arrived at the sheds at 7:40 a.m. They glanced at me, an obvious outsider, then went on with their conversations. A few nodded to acknowledge my presence. I found Miller as he spoke with one of the city's mechanics. He was telling him, "Take the battery out of that truck over there and put it in Houlon's."

Turning from the mechanic to me, Miller asked if I was sure about wanting to try trash collecting. I was.

"Well then, let me show you the truck you'll be working on today," Miller replied as he walked off toward the truck needing a new battery. "Houlon, this man's name is Carl," he said, "and he thinks he wants to try his hand at trash collecting today."

HOULON YOUNG has worked for the College Station garbage department for 31 years, beginning when he was 30 years old. "It's a lot better now than when I started," said Young, a driver for the last 15 years. "We used to collect the trash and haul it in a trailer pulled by an old Ford tractor and it was rough."

Young finally got his truck started and pulled it up to the gas pump to top off the tank. While we talked, two men walked up to us and Young introduced them. Larry Peterson and Michael Harris would work with me on the back of the truck.

Then, with one last check of my back pocket for my work gloves, we were off.

The first part of our route took us to the College Main North area behind Northgate. As the truck slowed and pulled to the curb, I jumped off the back and picked up two of three waiting trash bags. "No," Peterson said, "we don't pick up leaves or brush — only garbage." My first mistake.

THE THIRD BAG was filled with garbage so I threw it on the truck while Peterson explained that another truck picks up leaves, grass clippings and brush. The reasoning is that garbage should be picked up as soon as possible while leaves and brush can be left uncollected for a longer period if necessary without causing health problems.

"Go on!" The truck started rolling again and veered to the opposite side of the street to stop once more. A whistle, and we were off again; up one street and down the next. Four or five stops, then start the compactor.

Gears grind and the massive jaws



Although called "mixed municipal refuse, type II" by the Environmental Protection Agency, it's still garbage. The College Station Sanitation department picks up an estimated

2.5 pounds of refuse per person per day twice a week — and without the aid of a magician.

Battalion photo by Page Benhar

move together. Above the din, garbage bags pop and hiss as they are crushed along with bottles, cans and boxes. The entire mass is forced inside the truck. The jaws re-open with a mechanical whine and we are ready to move on.

WHILE MAKING sure to pick up only the garbage, I thought about how great plastic bags were. So far, my gloves had touched only the smooth, clean, twist-tied containers. Then came a sight all too familiar in many front yards — bags ripped open and their contents strewn about. Free-running dogs had a field day.

Peterson told me not to worry about the refuse on the ground. Just pick up whatever will come with the bag. He explained, "It's not our fault that people let their dogs do this."

Picking up that shredded, dripping, stinking bag of someone else's garbage was anything but pleasant. This scene was to be replayed many more times. My gloves weren't clean any more.

YOUNG TURNS the truck up a gravel driveway and we go behind the Plasma Products building to empty the first container of the day. After the truck backs up, we unhook the heavy lifting arms and try to lock them onto the container's handles. The lifting arms can't be positioned properly so we have to reposition the overflowing con-

tainer. It is on wheels, but pushing it on uneven ground is no easy task.

Finally in position, we open the two lids on the truck side of the container. Peterson warns me to lift the lids carefully. They are heavy and losing your grip could mean losing a finger as well. The lifting arms are locked on the container and one of the lids is latched in position. The latch is missing on the other lid.

Harris pulls the lever which causes the container to lift. As the container rises it begins to tilt and the trash starts to tumble into the truck. He pulls back on the lever to stop the falling trash, then starts the compactor. The process is repeated until the container is empty.

AS WE PULL back out on the street, Peterson tells me there are only a few more containers to empty. Then we go across town to the Post Oak Circle area.

The step bumper on the rear of the truck is starting to get slippery from the drizzle that is starting to fall and the liquids forced through the compactor drain hole, so I decide to ride across town in the cab.

Also, I was already tired — after only an hour and a half.

THE POST OAK Circle neighborhood did go very fast. The two men have a system. One will move ahead of the truck and move all of the trash bags to one side of the

street. The other throws the

into the truck. Many times, Young doesn't have to stop. Shouting, "Move on," Peterson or Harris is out from the truck and grab the trash that are within reach. As the swings behind them, a flick of the wrist sends it behind his back into the truck.

I mastered this technique after misjudging the weight of the bags and ending up on pavement as the truck pulled on.

The truck was full by 11 a.m. we were off to the city landfill of town on U.S. Highway 6.

When the rear of the truck opened and the trash was forced out, I was amazed. I could not believe the amount of garbage that the men could collect in three hours. Literally tons.

And five trucks collect all the bags and refuse of every street and business in College Station twice a week.

WE LEFT THE DUMP turned to the street where we were off. In two more hours we finished. That last hour I was more of a watcher than a worker. I exhausted.

By 2 p.m. I was home. I didn't have any real idea what would be like to make my living way — after all, I was only a garbage collector for a day. Had I been the payroll, I'd have made \$23.

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