

Junk

You'll never convince me that junk is worthless. There is a definite quality to old stuff, even that found in junk yards, that can't be approached by newly manufactured goods. Two favorite places in my old corner of the Catskills were Stan's Used Junk and Lewis Lumber. The Lewis were a black family who simply collected and unloaded parts of buildings all over their treed lot along the side of the Ashokan Reservoir. The old grandfather sat by an oil drum nursing a fire day after day. When you found something you wanted ... for me it was doors and windows for my old house and barn you dragged it to him and he announced a price. I learned after a while to ignore what he asked and instead pass him cash without a word. If he refused, I kept adding a few bucks until he smiled. One of us had the other conned. I think I won sometimes.

Stan was a piece of work and a former baker who said he prayed one night for God to send him a fortune. His request was granted the next morning when he realized he could make a fortune collecting junk and re-selling it. That was probably the last prayer Stan ever said. He couldn't believe what people threw away.

And he was a master of reading the price right off your face. One winter afternoon in 1976 I found a wooden nutcracker in one of his bins and realized it solved the problem of creating a "screw" for a 12 inch model of an old hand printing press (think Ben Franklin) I was building. I could use the 3/4 inch diameter wood screw from the nutcracker and not have to laboriously carve one. I offered Stan fifty cents.

"Seven dollars," he said.

"You're crazy!" I replied. He opened the door to the woodstove in his shop and made as if to throw it on the fire.

"OK, OK, Eight!" I said, reaching for my wallet.

"I'll even gift wrap it for ya," he said, smiling and reaching for a sheet of newspaper he used instead of paper bags.

"How did you know I wanted it that bad?" I asked. "Uh uh," he said, shaking his head no. "Secrets of the trade."

Of course, I've also availed myself of the same junk resources I'm sure Stan and the Lewis family have tapped from time to time ... the town dump.

I cannot resist myself when I go to the metal section of the dump here in our little town. I often take a sort of Junk Addiction Sponsor with me, who hovers behind me saying, "No, Dave, you don't need it, probably can't fix it and don't have room for it." I've been pretty good lately, especially after my affair with the roto-tiller I thought I could fix and have running in no time. I got it to run for about five minutes at a time. That was long enough to burn out one part or another while I spent over \$300 dollars on wrist pins and compression rings and connecting rods and ignition parts before finally giving up and admitting I'd been defeated by the Junk Devil Who Made Me Do It.

But my addiction is cunning. Now I see things at the dump that I know my fellow Junk Specialists would want, so I bring the item to their house and leave it outside the garage door. Like last week, I found a great looking kerosene heater that I just knew my friend Jim would love to fix up and use in his back shed.

Funny, no one ever calls to thank me. But oh, the thrill of the chase across the dump, pouncing on the roto tiller or lawn mower or grill or grinding wheel as if it were a stag, and then bringing it back along the trail in my truck like a lordly hunter.

Add to this feeling of mastery the self-righteousness of returning to my home empty-handed, like a St. Francis who refused the kill, and knowing that all the frustration of working on a piece of crap will be left for Jim in his driveway.

Eventually, Jim will hate me. His wife does already.

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