

Excerpt from Statement from Dan Knapp and Neil Seldman on the US Recycling Archive Project, 2015

The US Recycling Movement is perhaps the greatest environmental success story of the 20th century.

It began with the near-simultaneous opening of thousands of tiny recycling depots collecting and selling discarded materials that up to then were routinely being wasted. “Just Do It!”, not yet trademarked by Nike, was a slogan roiling the collective consciousness to the point of epiphany. “Just do it” became “just do recycling!” The slogan became a command: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle. Everything. The fruit was countless recycling startups and a shakeout into a constellation of viable businesses.

The first international Earth Day, in April of 1970, was the creative spark. The newly energized recycling stations¹ networked, grew, and diversified within the existing disposal marketplace. They built new supply chains connected to manufacturing, and substantial income streams that paid all or part of their own operational costs from service fees and product sales²

Although those who made it happen often complained that this practical and mostly peaceful revolution was taking a long time, in hindsight it’s clear that the new recycling industry grew very fast. Just 34 years later, in 2004, the USEPA reported from federal census data that 56,000 individual materials recovery businesses were working to harvest a broad range of discarded resources. 1.1 million people were employed. Revenue that year was about the same as the U.S. auto industry, at \$228 billion.

Thousands of government programs sprang up to guide, regulate, finance, tax, and sometimes even own these efforts. “Recycling Coordinator” became a job title nearly everywhere, almost overnight. Thousands were hired into the civil service. Salaries kept rising as the value of knowing how to keep material out of the waste stream as demand for these officials increased.

¹ Some of which predated the first Earth Day. Most early drop-offs were in college towns, often behind or in gas stations, many others were in people’s backyards and front porches.

² Alice Soderwall’s Glass Station was a pun on the juxtaposition of early recycling with small neighborhood gas stations. Alice’s Glass Station famously extended recycling’s reach to embrace community-based reuse, with reclaimed bottles as the medium of exchange. Alice was in her seventies and eighties when she became a recycling entrepreneur, but she is also one of many recycling pioneers who died before the Recycling Archives Project began.

One thing this project will do is to collect as many stories from still-living people like Alice as possible. The need for this is urgent: the people who started today’s recycling as thirty-somethings are now in their seventies and eighties.

Materials conservation by recycling, reusing, and composting proved to be a collection of winning business models that were conservative in the truest sense, because to recycle and reuse conserved both materials and value. Virtually all of the potential structures for organizing a trading venture were tried. For-profits, nonprofits, government owned entities, and sole proprietors jostled for a place in the recovered resource market. A diverse mixture of people kept it going 24-7: a cross-gender, racially inclusive, class leveling, age-bending phenomenon, still growing vigorously among our youth while its earliest pioneers age out as gracefully as they can.

The conservation ethic turned traditional solid waste thinking inside out and upside down. It did this by maximizing the discard supply's income potential using better sorting and handling, often with more labor. It was all about multiplying categories, not eliminating them.

The movement showed that discarding is not wasting. Wasting was kept as a discard handling option useful only as a last resort, and temporarily. Reuse is preferable to recycling, and reuse, recycling and composting are far better than wasting.

Design facilities for reuse, recycling, and composting, in that order, and Zero Waste will follow.

Today, in 2015, dozens of communities have declared Zero Waste is a goal that they can reach sometime between now and 2025 for the leaders, and extending as late as 2040 for the laggards. Diversion from landfilling with no burning has already reached the 75% level in leading communities, such as the California cities of San Francisco and Berkeley. California has a state goal of 75%. State solid waste management officials in Michigan seek to increase the current 40% goal set in 1990 to 75%.

Change hasn't come easy, and there was lots of drama.

In the USA, localities are given broad powers to control the disposal of discarded materials, but disposal can mean many things, including resource destruction either by burial or by burning. A cultural clash ensued.

Over the years, citizen groups have had to fight hard to advance their preference for conserving materials. Well-financed competitors selling machinery that would burn or bury the same discards those recyclers wanted and were already roaming the hallways of city and county buildings. So activists had often to force transparency upon governments where before, decisions were mostly made behind closed doors. The struggle was for hearts and minds of the public and their representatives, managers, and staffs. The people selling systems to burn discards said they wanted to produce power. The landfill people discovered that they could produce power too, from methane. So the competition could get technical fast.

Destructive disposal has not fared well.

The result after three and a half decades: siting new landfills has become difficult to impossible in many localities. And around three hundred planned incinerators have been defeated by political and economic alliances forged in America's cities and counties.

This struggle between wasting and conservation is still headline news in many places. Local opposition just in 2014 defeated 14 garbage incinerators, and the first defeat of a garbage burner in 2015 happened in January.

So dramatic and fascinating stories abound, and citizens have successfully championed recycling and economic development in places as diverse as Los Angeles, California; Austin, Texas; Alachua County, Florida; King County, Washington; and San Diego County, California. New concepts such as building deconstruction and extended producer responsibility, have jostled their way into recycling toolkit. Repair enterprises have re-emerged as the collection and processing businesses and programs were implemented. Hundreds of new building deconstruction businesses popped up in the US and Canada. Electronic scrap repair and recycling did not exist in 1990. Today, business and programs abound in every city and county. Most recently, composting food discards with plant debris, community scale gardening, and urban food production have emerged as viable business niches. These operations bolster local and regional economies through value added processing and manufacturing. They also serve social needs as participants gain access to computer equipment, acquire skills and work experience suitable for the local, often neighborhood, based jobs. These businesses covet over 50% of the materials currently wasted in each city and county, about 250 million tons of the total 500 million ton of annual municipal wasting in the US.

Each new sub industry launches a new wave of technology development, labor organization, and equipment manufacturing. Recycling is bigger than ever, and continues to take market share from wasting.

Every community is on a journey toward Zero Waste.

Every community is partway to Zero Waste already. No community wastes all its discards. Every community has its own story!

The USA Recycling Archives Project at University of Illinois, Springfield is creating a place where these diverse stories are welcomed, collected, curate and made available for review by students, teachers, scholars, businesspeople, journalists, economic development and real estate professionals, and environmentalists, to name just some of the potential user base that will grow as this collection expands and diversifies.

The UIS Recycling Archives Project began in 2012 with an agreement to receive and store the electronic and paper records from a seminal gathering of two dozen recycling pioneers at the beautiful Blue Mountain Center in upstate New York. This meeting was held in August ?, 201?. It included government recycling managers and entrepreneurs, consultants and activist NGOs. Each person that came was paired with another participant. Then each interviewed one another with digital recorders while asking a common set of 22 questions. In between were discussion groups organized around historically significant topics, all of which were recorded.³

The Institute for Self-Reliance and Urban Ore, Inc. were the two original co-sponsors. The Blue Mountain Center generously provided food and shelter for the three-day meeting.

The collection is growing. In the past 4 years documents critical to the understanding of the US Recycling Movement after World War II have been donated by living individuals and by people entrusted with collections by deceased recyclers. Some were part of the original group; others not. Records and interviews have been received dating from the late 1960's to the present. We think that growth from this source will accelerate now that the bulk of the original movement founders are nearing the top of what these days is still called middle age.
