

TRASHED

Canadians haven't always created so much garbage. And they haven't always had a good way to get rid of it.



The First Peoples of the territory we now call Canada hunted and trapped animals, and fished and gathered food from the wild. Those who lived in the same area for a longer time planted crops. People carefully harvested what they needed and made use of everything they possibly could. Take a seal caught in Arctic waters. It provided meat, oil for lamps and skins for clothing or to stretch over a kayak frame. Anything that couldn't be eaten or used would simply rot back into the soil. The same was true with animals from deer and bison to rabbits and ducks. Feathers, furs, skins, bones and more were important to make clothes, as decorations, for ceremonies and more.

Early settlers couldn't just buy everything they needed. The few items in the few stores mostly came from Europe, making them expensive and rare. So people patched clothes until they were falling apart, and then used the rags to make rugs or blankets. They repaired tools over and over again. Nails were straightened and reused. Everything from plates to harnesses was fixed as many times as possible.

REUSE AND RUBBISH

The first paper was made from cloth rags, so it wasn't common until cheaper paper made from trees came along in the late 1800s. Glass bottles and jars have been used since the 1500s. When they were empty, they'd be used to hold other food or liquids. Flour, seeds and other things came in big fabric bags, which were then used to make clothes or torn into rags for cleaning. Boxes were first made of wood. Those were replaced in the early 1900s by the brown corrugated cardboard still used today. Paper bags started to become common in the mid-1850s, around the same time as printed tin cans. The bags could be reused and then burned, while the empty tins were great for holding anything from nails to buttons.

Eventually, though, there were bits and pieces that just weren't good for anything anymore, so people burned or buried them. In cities, they often just tossed their trash in the street. People who didn't have much money sent their kids out to look in this icky mess for things they could sell or reuse. These piles of rotting rubbish made the streets unpleasant and sickened people, leading cities to start regular garbage pickup.



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ON THE ROAD

Horses and buggies didn't create a lot of garbage. But when cars and trucks came along, there was a whole new kind of trash. Sure, some parts could be salvaged and reused. But over time, cars contained more and more parts that just went to the dump.



GARBAGE GALORE

Before the Second World War, people mostly dealt with their own trash. (Not that burning it or chucking it in a lake or forest was great for the environment.) Afterward, businesses built on wartime inventions to make all kinds of new goods and packaging. By the 1950s, we had squeezable plastic bottles, aluminum foil and cans, foam cups and meat trays, and plastic wrap. Plastic bags, pouches and packages took off, especially for food.

With garbage being collected every week in most towns and cities, people quickly got used to putting out bags of trash that simply disappeared from in front of their homes. Except, of course, it didn't disappear. It went to the dump, or, if you want it to sound nicer, the landfill. By the 1960s, most communities had so-called sanitary landfills where trash was dumped, packed down and covered over. The garbage still existed, but people couldn't see it.



IN THE 1950S, THE CITY OF HALIFAX CHOSE A SPOT JUST 350 METRES FROM THE BLACK COMMUNITY OF AFRICVILLE FOR AN OPEN DUMP BECAUSE OTHER NEIGHBOURHOODS DIDN'T WANT GARBAGE NEAR THEM.





MILK IT

At first, people milked their own cows and carried the milk in pails. Then they bought it in glass bottles that were returned to be washed and reused. Next it came in cardboard cartons and large plastic jugs that you can still get in Alberta, B.C., Manitoba and some stores in eastern Canada. But since the 1960s, in much of the country milk has, weirdly, been sold in three plastic bags inside another plastic bag.



BUILT FROM WASTE

You'll find places all over Canada where garbage has been used for construction. Starting in 1937, more than 150,000 dump trucks' worth of landfill went into building the runways for Toronto's Billy Bishop Airport (above) in Lake Ontario. From the 1930s through the 1950s, the city of Montreal dumped garbage into a walled-off section of the St. Lawrence River in what is now the Pointe-Saint-Charles neighbourhood. Many of the first houses around Happy Valley in Labrador were actually built from stuff the military dumped in nearby landfills after the Second World War.

Alamy, iStockphoto






This 1938 photo shows homes made from things pitched into Edmonton's Grierson Dump.

TAKE A SEAT

What are the biggest things in the room where you're sitting? Yep — furniture. Early wooden chairs, tables and straw mattresses could just be thrown in the fire when they wore out. But as people could afford couches, mattresses with springs and foam stuffing, and other big, bulky furniture, they were also buying a big disposal problem. And then there's the arrival of fridges, gas or electric stoves and freezers along with small household machines from vacuums to blenders. Usually these went into the landfill, but people also illegally dumped big items wherever they could get rid of them. In Edmonton, people often pushed them off the heights near the Hotel Macdonald into the river valley below, creating what came to be known as the Grierson Dump.



The newest, and one of the trickiest, kinds of waste is electronics. Home computers didn't exist until about 40 years ago. They were soon followed by laptops, cellphones, tablets and other devices. We're still trying to figure out how to dispose of them safely.