



## Recycling old values for a better tomorrow

**L**ong before “biodegradable” and “recycling” became such common words in our modern language, both were happening as a matter of course in our daily living habits. Those of us who lived in a less affluent time saw little waste. When the axiom, “a penny saved is a penny earned” was part of our childhood understanding of life, nothing was discarded.

Milk, for example, came straight from the cow to the table if you lived in rural areas. In the city it came to your doorstep in glass reusable bottles. Plastic hadn’t been invented yet. The backyard garden provided fresh fruit and vegetables in season and our winter supplies were “canned” in glass Mason jars that had been handed down for generations.

Our cellar was a supermarket of food and delicacies just a few metres away from the kitchen. Long shelves bent under the weight of hundreds of jars filled with preserved beans, corn, stewed tomatoes, relish, peaches, plums, pears, jams and several kinds of pickles. There were crocks of homemade butter and cheeses which aged and grew more interesting over the winter months. This was why at an early age all of us kids were taught to whistle.

One of our chores was to “go fetch” from the cellar when it was meal preparation time. The instructions went something like this, “I need a dish of butter, a jar of ginger tomatoes and a basket of potatoes . . . so pucker up.” Our parents knew that as long as they could hear us whistle we weren’t sampling a jar of peaches, stealing a slab of cheese, or, depending on our age, siphoning a fast sip from the cider barrel.

Table scraps were fed to the house pets. If they desired more exotic fare, there were always plenty of mice around. Very few cans of any kind ever entered the house. The ones that did were cleaned and used to store things like nails, bolts, pins or buttons. Clothes were passed

down from parents to children and from one sibling to the next. Holes and rips were patched and mended. Has anyone darned a sock in the last 25 years? Wearing apparel of all kinds eventually ended up in a “rag bag” where much of it was sewn into homemade blankets called “crazy quilts.” It was comforting just before dozing off at night to look at your coverlet and see recognizable scraps of material from your family’s favorite clothing.

Newspapers, magazines and catalogues had two very important functions. One was to start the morning fires in the wood stoves and the other was to stock the outdoor privy. Only the highest quality publications went there.

Potato peelings, lettuce leaves and other residue from meal preparation went on the garden compost heap.

I find it interesting how little we’ve learned over the years. On our farm we delivered our milk to the local cheese factory and we would refill our milk cans with the whey left over from the previous day’s production. This, mixed with ground grain, formed the basis of our pigs’ feeding program.

Two years ago the United States Department of Agriculture, concerned about the large amount of whey dairies and cheese factories were dumping into streams, launched a \$200,000 research project. Guess what? They found that it could be recycled as nutritious feed for farm animals.

No one really wants to go back to those wood-chopping, water-hauling days of yesteryear. Advances in science and technology have provided us with an abundant and enjoyable lifestyle. But we have also developed a throw-away mentality that has buried us in mountains of garbage and a sea of pollution. Perhaps what we should recycle are the old-fashioned ethics of thrift, prudence, and common sense.