

Worthless Junk

Way back when every house had some sort of attic and a fairly large collection of “worthless junk” (WJ). I can well remember going up to the attic of our old farm house in Nebraska and digging through all the WJ trying to find something worth playing with. It didn’t take much, an old Army hat, an old appliance of some sort – I had a fairly vivid imagination and could play for hours with objects that once had some other purpose.



Unfortunately, homes no longer have attic spaces. In modern homes, the area under the roof is still there but now it’s packed solid with high-R-value insulation, plumbing, wiring and ducting for the forced-air heating unit. There is no room for WJ in the attic.

Today, instead of an attic, almost every house is equipped with a two-car garage which is a space that was originally

intended, believe it or not, to park two cars. However, many homeowners find it shameful to waste this 400 square feet of under-roof space on the protection of their expensive automobiles when it can be used instead as a substitute attic to protect all their WJ.

What exactly is WJ composed of? Basically, it’s anything that no longer has any value for anybody on the face of the earth. For example, a worn, flea-bitten roll of thirty-year old carpet would be an excellent candidate as WJ compost. It would take up lots of space, has a fairly high level of combustibility, and is utterly valueless. Another great candidate, and one which is found in almost all collections of WJ, is old baby furniture. If all the old baby furniture cluttering up the garages of America could be salvaged, the baby furniture industry would go out of business for thirty years.

The thing that renders most of the WJ stuff worthless is our “designed obsolescence” (DO) economic policy. Baby furniture, for example, might be perfectly serviceable but, if it doesn’t have all the latest gimmicks and safety features, it’s just a worthless pile of baby-chewed particle board. In fact, when you think about it, WJ is almost always a product of DO. DO makes you want to get rid of something but since you paid big bucks for it, you can’t stand to part with it so it becomes WJ in your garage.

The growing use of garages as storage places for WJ is a highly desired trend as far as the automobile industry is concerned because it has the effect of providing accelerated DO. With the normal DO created by automobile manufacturers, people get tired of their cars

after a few years and start shopping for a new and “better” car. But, as a result of having their garages filled with WJ and therefore having to leave their car out in the weather and sun, DO sets in much earlier than intended. That “showroom” newness fades in a hurry after hundreds of days of full exposure to sunlight and weather. So I suppose we should celebrate the garage-full-of-WJ movement as something that is acting to accelerate our economy by bringing about the early demise of the nation’s stock of automobiles. In fact, perhaps the car companies should begin to encourage this movement by starting a nationwide, “save the WJ” campaign.



There is another noble purpose for WJ which we should not forget and that is its historical value. If you want to know what has happened in American society in the last twenty to thirty years, do an anthropological dig in someone's garage. Bring in the diggers and carefully remove and document each layer of WJ. Make photos to show the exact location of each piece of WJ and document how it relates to any nearby pieces of WJ. For example, it should be noted that the forty-year-old wood tennis racket with the cat-gut strings was found stuffed inside the forty-five-year old washing machine, along with three rag

dolls of unknown vintage and six Mason jars with blackish, unidentified contents.

Unfortunately, all garages have a WJ limit. When WJ garage overload is finally reached, the first overflow location is the backyard. When the backyard is filled to capacity, WJ begins to encroach on the front yard and will eventually force the automobiles in the driveway to park on the street. Of course, sometimes one or more autos will be

reclassified as WJ and thus achieve a more prestigious location. A real WJ auto will probably be -- you guessed it -- parked in the garage. WJ autos with somewhat greater value will be parked on the front yard. It is usually easy to spot a WJ auto on the front yard, as opposed to a working auto parked on the front yard, by its border of high grass and weeds. However, to avoid the weed border and conceal the auto’s status as WJ, some clever homeowners never mow their front yards.





When un-mowed front yards combine with many years of non-maintenance of the house itself, it is possible to achieve the ultimate junk lovers triumph by turning the entire property, house and all, into WJ. It may take decades of junk collecting and non-maintenance to do this, but with perseverance, just about anyone can reach this highest level of WJ involvement. But few do. Most people are fully content to devote their garages to WJ while doing a fair job of

keeping the remainder of their property WJ free. This is probably a natural phenomena which could be called “WJ equilibrium.”

As for me, I would love to make one of those garage digs. Every time I pass a garage packed with WJ I want to wade in and dig through the layers to find those worthless reminders of yesteryear. Just like when I was a little kid, I’m bound to find things that can be entertaining. For example, can you imagine how much fun it would be to read a fifty-year old collection of National Geographics, or better yet, a forty-year old Sears catalog. Just seeing the prices in the catalog would be enough to make you feel a lot better. And by the way, there is usually no mystery as to which garages are full of WJ because their doors are open at all times of the day. Apparently, most WJ lovers are so proud of their collections that want everyone to be able to see them.

Now for confession time. I hate to admit it but I’m an anti-WJ guy (you would never have guessed that). As my wife can attest, nothing in our garage, or our house for that matter, has any chance of surviving for more than a year unless it is in constant use. However, now that I’m retired I’m not quite so ready to toss things in the trash. Partly that’s because I’ve come to see myself as being potential WJ. In fact, maybe I’m already WJ and just can’t admit it.