

Steve Kent
335 N. 400 W.
Smithfield, UT
84335

(435) 563-9311

An Unwanted Cache

By Steve Kent

It had been *weeks* since I worked up a good sweat. For entire weeks, I led a sedentary lifestyle, slumping in my desk for century-long school “hours,” and it almost killed me. I had been pent up, irritable and restless like a caged wolf. I tried not to reflect on my captivity as I leapt from boulder to boulder in a vast talus field, because it would only remind me that I was going back the next day. Instead, the scattered thoughts and daydreams I had produced while looking out the classroom window coalesced into a familiar hope: *This place is well off the beaten path. What if I’m the first human to set foot here?*

Disappointment.

There in the wilderness, nestled in among the limestone was a crushed and twisted aluminum beer can, a lasting monument to apathy. Take a look outside, and you will see such monuments. A bright yellow conveyer of Wendy’s French fries that has served his purpose continues the good fight as a tiny billboard in the parking lot. A tattered white shopping bag sails through the wind like the ghost of yesteryear’s tidy, clean Cache Valley. Countless cigarette butts pepper the side of the highway like spent rifle shells.

Sometimes, when I find myself in the grips of wild irrationality, I wonder how long it will take us to pile up sand dunes made entirely of cigarette butts. Maybe I’ll be telling stories to my grandchildren about entire cities swallowed by the desert, buried

under a thousand million cigarette butts. This image, of course, misrepresents the issue of litter entirely. Before my fantastic tobacco desert could form, it would rain and all the butts would float into storm drains, problem solved. If fish get addicted to nicotine, it's no skin off *my* back. I don't eat fish that often.

I have no idea where all the junk in Cache Valley comes from. Nobody I've asked has confessed to being a serial litter-er. Maybe there's a mental disorder or a special brand of schizophrenia that causes a deathly, insurmountable fear of trash cans. Maybe the "Visit Scenic Idaho" campaign is sending covert agents to spread Butterfinger wrappers and Mountain Dew cans all over Cache Valley. Perhaps some of our more rustic citizens think that there are automatic garbage disintegrators built into their pickup beds—you just toss your trash in the back, drive around for a few hours, and POOF! Your trash is gone, reduced to harmless, invisible atoms by the same tiny scientists that turn on the little light bulb in your refrigerator.

One thing I *do* know about our litter is that it sticks around. On a calm day, if you drop a beer can in the front yard and go to the backyard to shoot the truck rusting on cinder blocks for a while, when you go back to the front yard, the beer can will still be there. Even on a windy day, litter is only blown around until it gets pinned to a chain link fence, finds shelter from the wind in the depression of a gutter or becomes trapped in the eddies behind a building. Once, a few miles downriver of Flaming Gorge Dam, I found a beer can with the teardrop shaped tab that hasn't been used for twenty-five years.

Unfortunately, the examples I have given so far are not the worst. Pass the word along: WD-40 does NOT belong in the river, and the same goes for any type of aerosol insecticide.

Litter is easy to ignore, because our culture no longer needs to find beauty in its everyday surroundings—we can just turn on the T.V. and everything we see will be meticulously designed to appeal to our eyes. Littering is easy to rationalize; just one little gum wrapper won't throw the planet out of orbit, will it? Of course not, but if you're littering gum wrappers today, tomorrow you'll be throwing a Coke bottle out your car window, then you'll be tossing your old mattress in your backyard instead of taking it to the dump. *When did this happen to me?* You'll think to yourself as you stare at a stranger's face in the mirror. *I was a good kid. I always got good grades in high school. My parents raised me well. When did I become a litter-er?* But it's too late. You're hooked and soon you'll be a fugitive from the law, orchestrating oil spills and nuclear meltdowns.

“Here comes the airplane!” you'll say in a cutesy voice as you spoon-feed toxic waste to an endangered spotted owl. “Brrrrrrrooom!” *I hate myself! I hate myself!*

Perhaps in the future we'll read an expose in the “Herald-Journal” about our spudly northern neighbor's diabolical plot to sabotage Cache Valley's appeal, but until then somebody needs to do something about our homeless garbage, and I don't think Alec Baldwin doing the Charleston is going to cut it. If you want something done, you've got to do it yourself.

“But I'm only one person. What can I do?” You may be asking yourself at this very moment. Luckily, I have an answer that will renew your faith in the power of an individual to make a difference. You can pick up garbage. Next chance you get, grab a trash bag and fill it up with litter. If someone screws up their face and says, “What are you *doing?*” you look them straight in the eye and tell them, “I'm picking up trash so

imbeciles like you won't have to live in their own filth!" with so much self-confidence that they go home and drown their guilt in a quart of quadruple chocolate ice cream.

If a few brave souls just stand up for the environment and basic human decency, someone with just a little less courage will say, "You know what? You're right," and then they'll stand up right next to you. That person's stand will impress their friends and associates, and pretty soon the timid people who sit in the corner and don't talk loud enough for you to hear them will come along.

Then, with a little grit and some hard work, maybe Cache Valley will be beautiful again. It's probably not realistic for me to believe that I can find a place in our mountains where no man has set foot, but if we can change Cache Valley's attitude about litter, then at least we won't be able to tell where man has been by the beer cans he left among the rocks or the poison he put in the streams.