

(5)TB, Michael, Barb, Michael G,
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Letters from MRFy- The Las Vegas Edition

Its the opening night of the Institute of Scrap Recycling Industry (ISRI) 2022 convention here in Las Vegas and Im sitting on a small couch about to enter the main exhibition hall. In it, are monoliths of steel and wire that are the tools of an industry that executives and layman alike are using to refine a circular marketplace of the recycling economy. Im 1400 miles away from our small island in Lake Superior Wisconsin and the environment here is as foreign to me as some of the very nice suits that the vendors are wearing. It was the beginning of a conference that I was sure would be a repetitive discourse on plastic frustrations, the hope for the continuation of the COVID surge in prices and demand as well as sharing stories of "dumping a barrel of stale beer cans into a hopper to bale" and the ensuing frustration at people not knowing the difference between an aluminum can and a green bean can.

I was wrong. It was so much more erudite and it made me more a recycling junkie than I could ever imagine. And as usual there is always more to the story.

A little over a week ago I boarded an Amtrak in Milwaukee to make the trek out here to see how our little MRF fits into the larger recycling industry. The rails that transport much of the steel, plastic and cardboard were now transporting families, students and solo travelers across the United States. I sat across the aisle from an Amish community from Kalamazoo who were making a pilgrimage to the Grand Canyon; excited to get to the bottom of the great chasm. As we passed through northern Chicago, I commented that I thought that there would be more snow. A very nice Amish man named Johnathan laughed and replied "Seriously!? Snow? Do you have snow where you're from?"

'Yeah. Two and a half feet of snow and still about three feet of ice on the big lake!"

"Big lake? How big is that?"

"Oh about 11 quadrillion gallons of water."

He turned in his seat toward me and I could see an interested shift in his posture as well as the posture several other members of his community; some of them leaning forward in their seats in a nonchalant way to listen.

"Where are you from?" he asked, his bonnet clad wife staring intently at me from behind wire rim spectacles.

Over the next three hours, I told him about our small island community complete with ferries, windsleds, ice roads, pigs, chickens and tourists. We traded stories. Talked local farming, soil quality (or lack thereof), pandemics, and water.

"Well the upside of pandemic, people really got into growing food, canning, We couldnt find canning jars. Apparently people were future planning and worrying about their next meals" I said, taking a small sip from my Amtrak coffee beverage (disclaimer-the validity of whether this was actually coffee was highly disputed among Amtrak travelers and will require further research)

"Its about time." he replied with a smile and slight chuckle, "We've been doing that for a while now. Its important work" his beard shining in late evening Iowa light. His wife laughed softly and Im pretty sure I heard mild laughter from the others; indicative of consensus among the Amish community. A few seats back there was a frantic discussion going on in a mish mash of german/dutch and english. I can only imagine the topic but I picked out the word "Superior" and "Madeline". Thats enough.

People arrived. People Left. Our little Amtrak car was one of many that people wandered through in various states of travel. Some carried small children or had their young brood in tow, eyes wide with wonder and fear at the strangers they passed on the way to their seats. People carried large suit cases that were hastily stowed in the over head compartment. The train rocked. The train rolled. The steady beat of the wheels on the tracks passed itself off as a metronome that was hypnotic and monotonous. Time passing. Daylight slowly faded into the night and brown barren fields gave way to the passing

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and distant lights of nameless towns and freeways loaded with night time transit; truckers on to the next stop. This was the Economy of America at work. The observation car that was packed during the daytime with gawking adults and screaming kids, was now filled with muted conversation and individuals watching movies and playing games on handheld devices. Even the Amish community packed the tables and benches and played cards well into the evening, with occasional outbursts of laughter and disbelief at the end of each hand. Eventually the night life of the world calmed down and at about 9:00pm Central Time, the local sport of train travelers kicked into high gear.

Snoring is very popular nighttime activity in most corners of the world. Yoga is also a very popular past-time. On trains (and buses) the combination of the two can best be described as SNORGA. It is a sport that is reviled among the locals and leads to frequent and often uncomfortable altercations. Only the most stalwart, dedicated and nimble of public transit denizens compete. The rules of the game are simple; place yourself in the most god awful awkward and painfully contorted position and try to sleep for a period of an hour or more with out pissing your neighbor off. There were several games of this being played on our little Amtrak car and with varying degrees of success. Someone had a rough round on the front of our car with the phrase "COME OoooN MAaaN!!" being uttered very loudly several times in the thick of the night before the Snorga contestant gave up and wandered into the observation car to try his luck there. My own seat companion gave the contestant ahead of me a mild seat kick in the midst of competition which prompted an abrupt silence followed by mildly shifting. Soon competition resumed which led to a more than common stalemate and the ever popular ear plugs made of dining car napkins. It is truly a spectacle.

Johnathan and his community disembarked in Flagstaff. We shook hands and he sent me well wishes. "Good luck in all you do" he said matter of factly.

"You too. I hope get to the bottom of it all." I replied, referring to his wish to get to the bottom of the Grand Canyon. "Remember, getting down is half the journey. Take lots of water. Be Well."

He smiled and trudged down the aisle with his belongings.

"It was nice talking" his wife added quickly, following close behind her bonnet fixed firmly on her greyed head of hair. Very nice folks and a nice moment that was short lived. I gazed out the window They were all congregated on the platform under the yellowed lights of the evening, hats pulled down low, numerous canvas bags piled in a central location with a flurry of hand geastures and conversations. I smiled. I watched as we slowly pull out of the station and soon they were another memory lost in the darkness. My journey continued.

I arrived in Kingman Arizona at 2:00 am approximately 1.5 hours behind schedule due to rail traffic and a small maintenance stop. The night was still except for the distant highway sounds. The streets were empty of foot traffic, save for the flurry of activity at the train station. In the parking lot, a lone bus waited in the bottom of the ramp and a tired and mildly gruff driver stood outside. He was not pleased. I loaded up my bags into the back, he scanned my ticket and gave silent furrowed brows of frustration, muttering something about wanting to be home and trains are unreliable. It took another 15 minutes of waiting for various passengers to extract their luggage from the train and transfer it to the bus; each minute more painful than the last. I was tired. I tried to snorga on the train and failed, instead relying on spotty wifi service to get me through the news and a couple episodes of Ancient Aliens. I asked the driver (we will call him Bill) how long it would be to Vegas and he said it would take 2 hours: although he did say had done it before in 90 minutes. This was "the warning" that I missed. This was the red flag. The was the utterance that portends chaos.

For those of you who haven't experienced a cab ride in NYC. It is fraught with white knuckling, stomach churning and the need to grab on to either the seat ahead you, the passenger next to you or the O.S.H. (ask me about this) located above each door. As we left Kingman Arizona in our "gently used"

hospitality service van, complete with dancing hula girl on the dash, I longed for the calm of NYC cabs.

It should be noted that a man behind schedule is a man possessed with the need to make up for lost time and we were getting it in spades. The stretch between Kingman and Vegas was posted at 70 mph, which for a standard car, low to the ground and a well rested driver, would be a brisk commute. In a high riding bus with aging tires and a pin hole in the muffler, it was nothing short of life affirming. We passed semis and cars alike, bouncing from one lane to the next in a fiery display of momentum, strategy and a driving acumen that would have made AJ Foyt proud. I jammed both my knees up against the seat ahead of me, reminiscent of riding the school bus in the dark when I was 12 years old back in Montcalm County. The seat belt was nothing more than an afterthought and its metal buckle bit tightly into my navel. During the first 30 minutes I sat eyes fixed on the road ahead, ready to scream at some traffic oversight that the driver missed; a stray antelope, a broken down car on the side of the road or maybe some busted guard rail that was the last line of defense between the road and a long plunge into oblivion. The next 20 minutes, I kept recalling the headlines of various bus disasters that I ran across my news feed.

“Greyhound Crashes Killing 20.”

“Casino tour bus ends in fiery crash- killing 10”

“Sleepless Driver at fault for Bus Crash in Connecticut”

I even pictured my own demise in the headlines “MRF Supervisor gets trashed in Vegas crash”-MRF Supervisor Martin A. Curry from LaPointe Wisconsin met the Great Recycler in the sky on his way to Las Vegas as the late bus he was traveling in missed a turn and plunged 190 feet off the road and came to rest in a canyon in what highway transportation officials have labelled a “new distance record.” He left behind three beautiful children, many friends, three dogs, chickens, and pigs. He will be missed by some.”

I took many deep breaths and it was only 60 minutes into this terror, that I was resigned to accept my fate, whatever it may be; with even the faintest hope that I might actually make it.

And somehow, somewhere along the way, I fell asleep.

I awoke to the sounds of luggage being removed from the bus. Was this the scraping sounds of heaven? No. It was McCarran Airport. Miracles do happen in Vegas apparently and I was tempted to get on my knees and scream some hallelujahs but I figured it may be in bad form for a new arrival who was not in a casino. I sat up in my seat, pulling the seatbelt out that was imbedded deep in my gut and after a few brief courtesies, the bus driver agreed to drop my at my hotel instead of having to wait for the downtown transport. We meandered out of the airport labyrinth of advertisements and neon lights of tonights performances. Rich Little??? Wha? Is he still alive? I was sure that was an error. No way. The bus driver seemed much more relaxed and beamed with pride; 90 minutes. A solid performance in any race arena. I didn't tell him that he was probably responsible for my latest ulcer but seeings as how he was going the extra mile and I was still alive, I threw him a 20 and thanked him for the ride. He dropped me off at the biggest Neon “6”, I have ever seen in my life. which wasn't the exciting part. It was right next to a 24 hour Dennys and that meant only one thing...coffee and the legendary 4:15 am Las Vegas crowd that was either too broke to go home or too drunk to care. There was both.

It was too early to check into my hotel room. 12 hours too early so that meant wasting as much time as possible until my 3:00 check in. I walked into the very bright and very neon Dennys, complete with a caricature of Wayne Newton. In the corner a couple sat, hand in hand barely noticing me passing by. At the counter some guy was going off about the price of gas and how he couldn't afford to drive his cab anymore. He was wired on anger and Moons Over My Hammy. I hucked my bag into the seat across from me and plopped wearily into the seat. My waitress called me “Honey”, her cheeks covered in glitter and lips painted bright red and I immediately felt welcome. I ordered coffee and some 9 grain

pancakes...or were they 12 grain? I cant remember. Bottom line is there was a lot of grain in them and it was the first non Amtrak "heated in a microwave" dining car food I had eaten in two days and brother it...was...good. And the coffee; oh man. After "train coffee", Dennys coffee tasted like the beans were picked and roasted that morning by angels. There was no way humanly possible to sit inside a Dennys for half a day But I was going to give it a try.

The next two days were pretty uneventful. Food. Walking. Television and a lot of laying by the pool in the sweltering 80-90 degree sunshine. I will spare you (the winter residents) of Madeline Island the details only to say it was awful and you probably wouldn't have liked it very much.

The morning of the conference I got up two hours before I had to register. I spent the morning at Dennys with my usual – coffee, one of the many fine breakfast entrees complete with fake maple syrup and a side of Las Vegas hospitality. After breakfast and a couple stretches, I donned my Green Bay Packers hat and started off on my brisk ¾ mile jaunt to Mandalay Bay Convention Center.

The opulence was addictive. AS I was walking through the hotel, the ISRI presence was everywhere. "We're BACK!" was the post COVID slogan that signaled a return to normalcy for this convention. It was plastered on the walls, in stand alone kiosks, on floors, and on badges of men and women who passed me in the long marble adorned walkways. People who were strangers to me, walked into the staging area outside the convention center floor and suddenly broke into laughter, handshakes and hugs. It was a sign that everyone was wanting to kick off the rust from the pandemic and get back into fine social form; but not everyone was comfortable with new found freedoms. Masks still covered some faces and in the interest of public safety, vaccine cards and IDs were still required to attend the convention. I attended the New Member and First Time attendee orientation session. It was a great intro into the world of ISRI complete with maps, schedules, lanyards, promotional ink pens. A majority of the attendees were dressed in suits and high end business attire and only a few of us were in business casual. This was the corporate end of the equation. This would be interesting.

What can I tell you about this convention? Let me first list to you the sessions I attended and try to put the overall impact into a concise summary.

Opening Session- Words Matter- Connecting with Your Audience: Will Howard was great!! What is the power of a word? In this industry, there are numerous words that are misleading and have an impact on public perception. Example: SCRAP. A word that has multiple connotations of something small or insignificant that has been discarded; also a slang word for a small fight. This multi billion dollar industry is built on small bits of insignificance that have been cast aside. During the time of pandemic, there was agreement that waste industry workers, recyclers and scrap artists were ESSENTIAL in fight against COVID (see the processing and treatment of medical waste) and to prevent our recurring issues with supply chain shortages (see the processing of materials to restock food shelf packaging and materials that make up a standard ventilator; copper wire, plastics, ferrous metals etc- all recycled). Words like "dump", "garbage" and "waste" are misnomers of an outdated lifestyle. Even as we look to start our local composting operation, there is very little in our daily material consumption that cannot be recycled. There is also the messaging of recycling that needs to be refined. There is frustration among the consumers that can be best summed up by a popular bit of information "Why should I recycle when 71% of global emissions is created by 100 Fortune 500 companies??" The reality is that the recycling industry is a NECESSARY component of the decarbonization process. It is a counterbalance to extractive industry and in our efforts to promote and expand our recycling efforts we need to continuously send message of positive improvements. "Its not what you say, its what they hear" was a repeated theme and has application in many of the interactions

we experience. The language that convinces people to recycle needs to adopt the Four "P's"- Plainspoken, Plausible, Personal and Positive.

Spotlight On Ferrous- An Industry in Transition:Two Words- Ukraine and Russia. In this industry, we are not immune from global change. As much as we are emotionally impacted by great social change in the world, we are equally impacted economically in the world of the global commodities market. The tone of the presentation was that the Ukraine Conflict has thrown the recycling industry into chaos and with economic sanctions comes economic uncertainty. With the cancelling of NORD sStream 2, European smelters and refineries will be off line in the coming months and that causes further uncertainty. There seems to be an inkling of agreement that prices will continue to rise in the coming year. In the past 2 weeks, prices have shot up and continue to rise and this will have an impact on the auto recycling segment here at the MRF. Given last years success, we stand to increase our profit margins given that prices may hit \$300 a ton.

Spotlight on Plastic- Recycled Content, EPR and Market Conditions: The frustration that we experience at the MRF is not isolated. There are numerous communities that have problems with cross contamination and experience issues with the sale of plastics. This session also brought out the challenges of global markets and global frustration with a waste product that no one wants. Cargo ships of plastic are sent to third world countries who have refused port for these ships only to send the thousands of tons of plastic back the port of origin. There is a new plastic industry trend that is trying to gain traction in the form of chemical recycling/pyrolysis.. In layman terms, it is a fancy way of saying "incineration". It seems that ISRI position is that it is 100% against this and "isn't really recycling" and "creates a justification to make more plastic." I reached out to Resa Dimino who made a point of mentioning MRFs very prominently in her presentation. Our MRF as a town owned entity is a rarity in the overall scheme of things. More than 75% of MRFs are private entities with 55% of them being owned by 5 companies (including Waste Management and Republic). There are advantages and disadvantage to both the most impactful being the access to funding. I will be communicating with her on this in the future and look for "crossover funding" that could help offset costs at our organization.

General Session- Challenges and Opportunities for Recycling in a Post-COVID Trade

Environment: Vikram Mansharamani was a pretty inspirational speaker. From his assessment of the global trade market to his insights on futures. Some of his lecture into what can best be described as "human logistics" were timely. There used to be an idea that "expertise" was created in academia (and the business world) by pushing a "narrow focus, expanded depth and core competence in ONE niche area." The new focus is "breadth over depth." The NEW economists and workforce will focus on a broad spectrum of topics outside of a singular focus. This really resonated with me. It mirrored by own academic history; having spent 6 years in college, accumulating 79 college credits but no degree. I have dabbled in a cross section of arts, sciences, communication, agriculture (as well as a Phd in "social" education lol) it felt relevant and timely. "A wide angle lens instead of a microscope." While this may not seem to have applications to our MRF, it is an overall change in how education and our future island workforce will be viewed. It is a reassessment of work place prerequisites and on the importance of on-the-job cross training (and we can see this in the relationship between MRF staff and roads crew.)

Spotlight on Aluminum: How Long Can the Light Metal Perform? Russian/Ukraine Part 2: There is so much uncertainty in the future markets but this was another very interesting discussion as I am a consummate news junkie and foreign policy dweeb. With trade sanctions against Russia (supplier of 7% of American Aluminum) and the concerns around high energy prices, there is a high probability that prices will hit an all time high late in the 2nd quarter. There seems to be a similar trend in metals that we have seen in our local paper markets. It is cheaper and more efficient to recycle then it is to process 1st generation raw materials. With energy prices and inflationary pressures on the supply chain, recycling is king.

MRF Innovations and Collaborative Financing Models to Strengthen Recycling Infrastructure: Interesting material, but not applicable to the scope of our town MRF. Again highlights the uniqueness of our MRF as a public entity. Privatization leads to inefficiency and removes the human condition from the necessity of recycling. There was an over all theme that our industry is a human industry. 500,000 jobs and \$110 Billion dollar industry and yet...there is the push to remove the Human component from the industry. Instead of investing more money in wages, it is viewed as more profitable in the long term to invest in a \$350,000 optical sorters and \$500,000 mag screeners. Again there does seem to be some cross over funding sources that may serve us well in the future. This will be an ongoing research topic.

Spotlight on Tire and Rubber: Recycling's Role in Sustainable Development: This was interesting from the standpoint that there is SO much regulation of tires once they leave our MRF. The multiple uses of shredded rubber for roads and playgrounds continues to gain favor while the trend of burning rubber to make energy is viewed as a flawed and ridiculous idea. Most of these incinerators have no answer for the emissions and continues to avoid the obvious which is "Its not recycling if you aren't recycling". There is discussion on creating a certification process for recycled tires that have post consumer rubber content, similar to what we see in paper and plastic. What baffles many is the push back from the industry on creating a recycled rubber content standard.

Creating a Sustainable Future: The Role of Recyclers and Our Industry: Quite a bit of this session was a emphasis on what we know to be true. The necessity of the recycled materials market is a cornerstone at the decarbonization of the future. Everything in this session is mirrored in how we are doing business at the MRF. What is the impact on our community? How do we take responsibility for the waste we make and how do we set an example for the future generations?

Closing General Session – Workforce Wake-up Call: How Many Must Leave Before Retention Is a True Priority? The closing general session was geared more toward the large industrial centers of this business. In the age of COVID and the "Great Resignation" questions continue to arise regarding worker equality and how to keep seasoned employees longer.

Summary: There is an antiquated idea that business is a top down approach; meaning that it is upper management that determines its success. In the global recycled materials market, it is the reverse. It is the "small guys" like the LaPointe Material Recovery Facility that determine the success of the industry. We are the tributaries in a great flow that will ultimately determine the course of our success as a society. George Adams, President of S.A.Recycling said "I will never beat the small guy...we need to treat our business like a profit centers instead of a cost center." In the age of post pandemic, we are shifting our focus from a "just in time economy" to a "just in case economy" and efficiency and consolidation are the keys. It is generally accepted that supply chains are still about 2-3 years from being fixed (if at all). Leadership isn't reserved to any singular segment of the business model; it is a necessary component of daily living. We are on the right track and our failures will be cautionary tales while our successes will be road maps for others to follow. This business requires an active approach to success; "RECYCLABLES" = INPUT; "RECYCLING" =PROCESS; "RECYCLED" = RESULT.

We are MRF-tastic and will push to send a message of continuous improvement.

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