A Bunch of Garbage?: How Sedgwick County's Trash Came to be Exported and its Innovator Ignored

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1. A Scrappy Visionary

Bill Compton, of Wichita, has been looking for an alternative to landfills and trash outsourcing since the early 1970s. Compton was a WWII fighter pilot, who used the GI Bill to get degrees in chemistry and physics at Emporia State University. It was high school chemistry lessons, however, that led him to believe pyrolysis, or the use of heat to change matter, could be the solution to Sedgwick County and the nation's trash problems. From 1992-1998, Compton, with the help of friends, designed, built and operated his own pyrolysis pilot plant. Compton ran the plant for approximately 300 hours and converted about 700 pounds of waste into usable oil, carbon and gas. Compton and his friends have persistently petitioned city, county, state and national leaders to consider building large-scale pyrolysis plants to convert trash into useful products, but they have met with little success and a great deal of bureaucracy.

Although an ancient technology, very little has been written about pyrolysis by environmental historians. The problems, politics and economics of trash have been researched, though, and Compton's story is a vehicle to understand those issues in our area.

2. Primarily Primary

At the age of 83, Bill Compton is still quite active. Severe arthritis has limited much of his physical activities; consequently, he has handed over the more physical aspects of his work to Paul Rhodes, who is working to promote Compton's work. Compton, however, continues to write politicians and has worked with me on and off for over a year to help me research and understand his endeavor. In this project I will utilize the oral history provided by Bill, as well as his vast wealth of records and correspondence. Additionally, I will use personal interviews with local politicians familiar with Compton's work, waste management professionals, and civil engineers. My research will include public records from city and county meetings, as well as newspaper articles relating to local debates on trash. I will include basic scientific information on the feasibility of pyrolysis and the analysis of the oil, carbon and gas Compton produced in his pilot plant. I will also mention industries currently utilizing pyrolysis and the environmental impact it has. Finally, I will utilize knowledge gained from secondary readings in the history of waste to place Compton's struggle in national and historical framework.

My paper will show how bureaucracy, politics, and an apathetic attitude about waste have discouraged innovative solutions to the trash issue. It will also show, through Compton's efforts, how different kinds of interests compete for tax money and public and political support.

3. Where Things Stand

In two years Sedgwick County is supposed to have a new solid waste plan. The County will most likely build another landfill or continue to export our trash to other communities. These are the only solutions our leaders have agreed on in the past. Even if one doesn't believe that pyrolysis is the best solution to getting rid of our trash, it is important to know and understand the powerful interests that are controlling the disposal of our junk. What we
consider to be worthless is worth a great deal in contracts to trash haulers and waste managers. These groups make money from taking trash and are in the position to make money from the materials in the trash. Bill Compton has been fighting not only for pyrolysis but for the idea that trash should be used as a resource for the people who dispose of it instead of for an outside party. This paper will look at why Compton's efforts for the last thirty years were ignored and why, despite promises to adopt innovative solutions, local leaders continue to hand over our trash to third parties who can profit doubly by it.

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