

Homeworkers Organized for More Employment

This Time

Orland, Maine 04472

Celebrating 40 Years of
"Serving First Those Who Suffer Most"

Ways we get by...Junking Metal for a living...

By Tracey Hair

There's a stark contrast in Maine where the license plate reads "Vactionland." In the lush northeastern woods, where Presidents vacation and poor people scrap metal to buy heating fuel. Logging was once the big industry, but logging jobs now are as rare as luck. The mills have closed one by one over the years.

People who scrap metal to sell fondly call themselves "Junkers." Their full-time job is sifting through trash looking for metal or anything else that might be worth something.

Most Junkers didn't choose to pick through trash for a living. Junking is no desirable vocation. Desperation drove many to it. Take Mike, he's a Junker who started junking literally by accident. In 1971, when he was working for a logging company, his left leg was crushed by timber. That ended his days of heavy lifting. He had no insurance, received no workers' compensation and needed a way to feed his family. He started collecting junk with the help of another man.

Each day Mike and his friend get up early, their hands scratched and hurting from the work. They load the acetylene tanks into the bed of their red Ford Ranger and tie them on with bungee cords. They start the truck and head down the road. They leave at dark never knowing if they are going to make a dollar and come home just before dark. It's an unpredictable living but as Mike says between puffs of his cigar "Who else is going to do it?"

Scrap metal is everywhere just waiting for someone to find, sort, clean and prepare it. Smart scrap collectors know a few tricks of the trade that help guarantee they get the most money for their metals.

Around here it's common to see pick-up trucks chugging down the road full of junk metal. While it's a money-maker for some and a hobby for others, for many like Mike, it's the only way to get by.

Some would consider scrapping metal a waste of time. After all it takes a lot of time to break the metal down enough to fit in your truck and it takes even longer to find the metal.

Knowing where to look for scrap metal begins with a new awareness that used metal has real dollar value. What some people throw away may be another's treasure.

Most Junkers begin by looking at their own living habits. They save and separate aluminum soda cans and then they take a look in their garage or storage sheds to see what metals they already have on hand. They might offer to take your metal in exchange for taking some trash off your hands.

Most Junkers drive pick-ups, trailers or any vehicle that can carry large amounts of metal. Their full-time job is sifting through trash looking for metal or anything else that might be worth something, so first they assess what a house has to offer.

Iron can get about \$210 per ton, mixed iron about \$155. The real treasure is in iron. Refrigerators and Air Conditioners can sell for about \$15 each. Copper sells for around \$2.65 per pound and brass about \$1.45. Typical household wires and car parts range from 15 cents to 50 cents per pound. Junkers might sell their finds to a plant that buys aluminum for 13 cents a pound.

Other places Junkers find scrap metal are demolition sites. Sometimes contractors and private individuals will pay them to clean up areas giving away any scrap metal from their site.

People who scrap metal for a living are creative. Scrap metal can be found almost anywhere, along roads, in farm fields, local dumps and landfills. It takes a long time to get a pile of scrap big enough to turn into money. By working "really hard, every day," a Junker could make as much as \$200 in a week.

But Junkers face competition in Hancock County, where 12% of residents live below the poverty level. Work is hard to find so metal scrappers rely on the refuse of the neighbors in Orland, Bucksport and Verona to put enough money in their pocket to help heat their houses during cold winter months.

"I knew we were in trouble soon as I opened the door. I recognized both cops. One was our driver, the other was our fence."

So began Marion's story, the story of one junker family I know. The other junker family of my acquaintance has two vehicles: one, a sleek sedan the wife drives to her beauty appointments around town; the second, a sturdy pick-up the husband uses for his profitable business in junking.

Junking, the rescue of scrap metal for resale, was once a scorned occupation marking the junker and his family for ridicule. No more.

Marion's family, the Sherwoods, once junkers of Gardner, had not always been scorned. Some forty-five years ago, before his disabling accident in the north Maine woods, Mr Sherwood was a member of that most honored Maine profession, a scout and guide up to Moosehead.

Unable to continue after his accident and untrained for a "more honorable job" down in civilization, Mr Sherwood, with the aid of his young sons, went to rag-picking at the dump, stripping out metal and selling it. The family, especially the kids, once among the most respected, became the butt of jokes and sneers. They also attracted the attention of the police who developed a sting.

When the oldest Sherwood boy was approached by a man who claimed he could identify houses safe to burgle and would take the loot off his hands, Robin agreed and recruited his younger siblings. As work goes, it proved a great deal easier and was better paying than the back-breaking job of junking.

Then one day about thirty years ago, Sister Lucy, visiting prison, met the older Sherwood girl and was so appalled by the conditions for women in their new facility in Windham that she started the first early-release program for women in Maine.

Since those days forty years past, things have changed mightily in Maine. Today those honorable and often unionized jobs in textiles, shoes, chicken processing, and clothing have all gone, some south as far as Mexico, some west to Thailand, Korea and China. For more and more workers, junking has become not a desperate last resort but an honorable way of life.

- Karen Saum



Gerald Botta
collecting a
pick-up truck load
of junk metal.

H.O.M.E./Emmaus is a nonprofit organization dedicated to keeping and enhancing the quality of life for low-income and homeless families. Through services, stewardship of resources, and shared responsibility, we aim to bring forth new possibilities for food, jobs, shelter, low-income housing, education and self sufficiency.

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