

Ode to Garbage & Recycling Haulers  
By Mary Warner

Flies buzzing. A layer of grime. Rank and vile smells. It must be garbage day. Or maybe it's just the garbage man. A picture of Pigpen from the Peanuts cartoon fills the head and nostrils and dissipates as the truck drives away.

Garbage haulers and their co-workers, the recycling truck drivers, are aware of the public's perception of them as putrescent filth slingers. Really, who in their right mind would want to do this job? Suburban McMansion dwellers have as much use for garbage men as gum on their trendy-spendy Manolo Blahnik shoes.

The tune changes when the garbage isn't set out on time and the hauler has missed the bag or bin. A frantic call comes into the company office. "Come back! Come back! Mustn't leave the garbage on the curb! We can't take it back in the house. It'll stink. Can't leave it on the lawn! What will the neighbors think?"

Calls like this push garbage haulers and recyclers into madness. They passed the house at 10:00 a.m. Garbage cans and recycling bins are supposed to be out by 6:00 a.m. They weren't. On a busy day in a suburban area, a driver may have between 500 and 700 stops to make. Being forced to make a return trip extends an already long day unnecessarily.

Garbage men drive the truck, hustle out, hook the cable to the can, push the button, wait as the can lifts and dumps into the truck and then lowers, unhook the can, jump back into the truck, drive to the next stop and repeat the process. For recycling truck drivers, the routine involves physically lifting burgeoning bins of glass, metal and plastic, plus piles of cardboard. Often, customers neglect to break down the cardboard into manageable pieces. There are no cables to assist with placing stuff in the truck, just a strong back. The repetitive motion kills that strong back (and the hips and the knees). Lifting two to four tons is not uncommon for a day's work.

Ever wonder why recyclables have to be sorted? First, and foremost, not everything can be recycled, mostly because there is no market for the reclaimed materials. Second, some products are too complex to make it cost effective to tear them apart and reuse the resources. This does not stop some people from attempting to recycle dirty diapers, used cat litter, iron frying pans, tennis shoes, fish guts, basketballs and other sundry items. Wishful thinking on the part of the customer does not make these things recyclable and creates more work for drivers.

Sometimes, a customer's blunder puts drivers in unsafe conditions. For example, placing contaminated needles, or sharps, into a pile of cardboard exposes drivers to potentially fatal diseases. Sound farfetched? It really happened and the driver underwent periodic blood tests for a year to rule out AIDS and hepatitis.

Garbage haulers and recyclers have a slew of other hazards to worry about. Fido, who is normally so friendly towards family members, doesn't care for garbage men. From the

dog's point of view, a driver is an intruder who is trying to take something off the owner's property. Creative drivers bring treats. They use them to reward the truly friendly dogs and to bribe the mean ones. Whipping a dog biscuit as far away as possible, hurling the garbage or recyclables into the truck and then bouncing back into the driver's seat could become a new speed sport.

Along with vicious dogs, garbage haulers must also put up with frothing, maniac motorists. If there are stupid maneuvers to be made, garbage men have seen them all. From passing on the shoulder to attempting crazy cut-offs to trying to slip around a garbage truck on an uphill road in the dark, there's no limit to the risks some motorists will take with a giant, several-ton vehicle. Visibility in these trucks is almost nil and stopping them on a dime is impossible. When doing battle in a car or mini-van with a recycling or garbage truck, just remember who's going to win.

Roads, weather and darkness can prove hazardous to garbage haulers. Cul-de-sacs, that favorite design element of development planners, are a particular pet peeve of garbage haulers. Large trucks are difficult to maneuver as it is, so let's give garbage truck drivers a tight turning radius and ask them to shift their vehicles back and forth like Austin Powers in a golf cart in a tiny hallway. Add a pile of snow or a basketball hoop to the cul-de-sac and quadruple the garbage collector's aggravation.

Low-maintenance country roads and long, narrow, dirt driveways are not kind to garbage or recycling trucks. Country roads often have weight restrictions because they are not constructed to carry the load of huge vehicles. With non-existent shoulders, the road bed is soft and can wash away in heavy rain. Garbage trucks are generally exempt and can travel down roads with weight restrictions because people demand this essential service at their doorstep. Just because garbage trucks are allowed, the roads don't suddenly become sturdier. Drivers periodically find themselves in the ditch or rolling over (imagine that, if you will!) when their trucks hit a soft patch. As for those long, narrow, dirt driveways, add the Austin Powers' move to rutted goat paths and the mood of a garbage hauler becomes less than chipper. Country folks love their quarter-mile wooded driveways, especially because they don't have to haul their stuff to the curb like city folks do. Garbage collectors would be tempted to plant a big kiss on country folks if they'd make the trek with their bags and bins to the street end of their driveways. Barring that, an easy-to-navigate turn-around would work wonders on the hauler's mood.

Slush, sleet, snow, and ice are killer conditions for drivers of automobiles, mini-vans, and pickup trucks. For all their weight and size, garbage and recycling trucks have less traction than most of these smaller vehicles. An inch or two of fresh fluffy snow can helplessly mire a garbage truck. Rocking and spinning the wheels of these giant trucks rarely works. Drivers radio back to the company shop so frequently for tows that contracts with towing companies are a regular expense for garbage companies. When a garbage truck starts sliding on ice, it's much more difficult to stop than a smaller vehicle. It will coast further, especially when it's filled.

Even though some are of the opinion that any monkey can drive a garbage or recycling truck, such is not the case. Garbage and recycling truck drivers need either a Class A or B Commercial Driver's License in order to operate these behemoths. Not only are the trucks bigger than most vehicles on the road, they have special features that drivers need to understand, such as hydraulics and standing right-side drives. Hydraulics, which give garbage trucks the power to crush items as large as boats and allow recycling trucks to lift and dump their buckets, are a serious force to be reckoned with. If a hydraulic hose breaks and the fluid leaks out while the hydraulically-powered portion of the truck is in use, a driver can be smashed when that piece of the truck comes thundering down.

Standing right-side drives, which allow the driver to work more efficiently during frequent stops, also take some skill to operate as the driver is literally standing while driving. Normally the door is open, so the driver can quickly hop in and out. If a maniac motorist decides to blow a stop sign when a garbage hauler is moving through an intersection while driving on the right side, the hauler can easily be hit or thrown out of the truck.

Drivers receive extensive training sessions and regular safety meetings in order to avoid potential problems. They are also required to conduct daily pre- and post-trip inspections on their trucks. Even with regular inspections, the trucks are used so heavily that they will break down, most likely in some remote area outside of radio range on the busiest garbage day of the year. If a garbage or recycling hauler is having an especially bad day, Murphy's Law guarantees a major truck malfunction.

Obviously, the people who drive garbage and recycling trucks have to put up with a considerable amount of risk. They don't really need to be saddled with a reputation for being smelly and dirty. In fact, once they're off the clock, garbage haulers clean up "real nice", almost to the point of prissiness. They also have a classic comeback for those customers who insist on believing the stereotype, "Hey! I don't make the garbage. I just pick it up."

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Tips for keeping your garbage and recycling haulers sane:

Set your garbage out on time.

Properly sort your recycling.

Keep a safe distance from garbage & recycling trucks.

If you live on a cul-de-sac, do not clutter it with items such as toys and basketball hoops.

Teach your children to stay clear of garbage & recycling trucks.

If you live at the end of a long, narrow driveway, try to take your garbage and recycling out to the curb.

Contain or chain your dogs.

Bury fish guts in your garden.