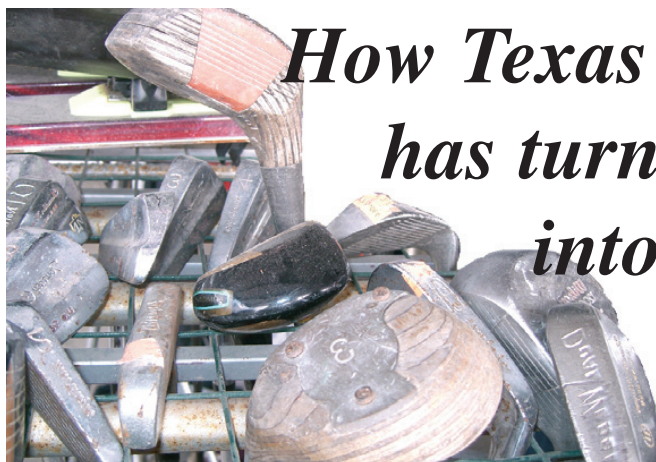


When trash isn't trash



How Texas Disposal Systems has turned everyday trash into a landfill of gold

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JEN BIUNDO
 Staff Writer

CREEDMOOR—Along with the Great Wall of China, the New York landfill ranks as one of the rare human structures visible from space.

Astronauts won't see the Texas Disposal Systems (TDS) landfill in Creedmoor, though if they looked very closely, they might be able to spot a grazing wildebeest or a prancing emu.

Bob and Jimmy Gregory, two brothers who founded TDS in 1977, thought they would operate differently when they opened the Creedmoor landfill in 1991, but a wild game preserve wasn't in the original plan.

The fence came first. The brothers were looking for something that would be welcoming to neighbors, rather than forbidding. Game fencing, designed to keep big animals in and small predators out while not marring the view, proved perfect for containing wind blown litter.

With the game fence in place and 800 acres of open buffer space, the next step was obvious — zebras.

"Before we opened, we promised people we would run a landfill that was noticeably different," Bob Gregory said. "It's about doing the right thing."

Residents of eco-conscious Central Texas are good about recycling, Gregory said. But they sometimes forget the other two lines of the triangle: reduce and reuse. That's where the resale shop comes in.

Lisa Lerma, TDS assistant manager, said most of the items in the TDS resale shop come from citizen drop-offs, though TDS municipal trash collectors also keep an eye out for items that can be sold to bargain hunters.

The resale shop is located next to the drop-off spot, a sort of open air garage sale meets thrift store. By most estimates, Americans generate roughly 220 million tons of municipal solid waste a year, or four pounds per person per day, surpassing every other nation for wastefulness. The TDS resale shop is a testament to America's disposable consumer culture.

Here are four wine glasses, never taken out of their cardboard packaging. Here's a gold lamé purse hanging on an old hat rack,



thrown out by an owner who didn't get the memo that vintage metallic accessories are wildly fashionable this season.

Here are rows of fully functional weed-eaters and lawnmowers, ranging from \$60-\$125, broken carburetors and stalled gears nursed back to health by a mechanically savvy TDS employee.

"They break and people don't know it's just a simple part to fix them," Lerma said.

Here are shelves of children's toys, bikes and plastic outdoor playsets, obsolete for one child who grew too old or tall. Here are racks of adult bicycles, priced around \$15, which tell their own expensive story of the forgotten New Year's fitness resolution.

Here's a ridiculous number of golf clubs, too many to count, gleaming in a metal rack. Did a one-time enthusiast get bored with his hobby? Did he find a better nine-iron and abandon the old one? Or are they the victims of a vengeful golf widow, surreptitiously tossed out in the night? Either way, they're a bargain at a few dollars.

The resale shop proves the adage that one person's trash, literally, is another person's treasure. Bill Wood, a Travis Heights building contractor, came in to TDS to drop off a load of trash, but a gem in the resale center caught the expectant father's eye.

"It's a jogging stroller," Wood said. "We've been looking at them for ages but they cost about \$300."

After a few minutes of close scrutiny and trial jogs, Wood left happily with his new find, just \$10 poorer.

From their two-man operation in 1977, TDS has expanded to



Bob Gregory, right, along with his brother, Jimmy founded TDS in 1977 on the idea that Americans should "reduce and reuse."

Growing up with a father in the scrap metal business, recycling was the natural way to go for the Gregory brothers, who were dedicated to the concept from the start.

"Austin is a superb area for our philosophy," Gregory said. "People are conditioned to know you should recycle. It's not right to throw it in a landfill."

Looking down into a trucking container full of scrap salvage, Gregory points out a wealth of metals concealed in human trash, enumerating his finds with the sharp, enthusiastic eye of a bird-watcher or a rock hound. There's copper waiting to be stripped out wires. There's a magnesium wheel. Aluminum. Lead. Steel. Brass.

Under the name Texas Organic Products, TDS sells about 30 varieties of composts, mulches and soils, with a brochure that reads like a sommelier's wine list for thirsty lawns. The various blends are made of a variety of organic materials, like brush and lawn trimmings, food products, and recycled soil, with a little help from San Antonio racehorses.



Interesting items show up at the landfill each day.



stretch from Austin to San Antonio, with 340 employees. And in those decades, the brothers have seen more and more people embrace their ideal of being a good steward of the earth.

"Since the late 1970s there's been a huge cultural awareness regarding the proper use of resources," Gregory said.

TDS' wild game preserve is just one of the many ways in which the TDS operation, located on 985 acres on FM 1327, distances itself from the idea a landfill is an eyesore and blight on the community.

The Gregory brothers also opened a conference center on the property, directly downwind from the landfill space. About 15,000 visitors come to the landfill each year to gaze at exotic animals or attend events at the pavilion.

"It's become a community center," Gregory says proudly. "It's a landfill that draws the community to it. Very few people have the philosophy that we do. The best way to convince people is to have them out to see it."

The TDS landfill, Gregory said, minimizes the size of working face where garbage is actually dumped, and works hard to eliminate wind-blown waste, buzzards, and bad odors.

The Gregory brothers went above and beyond minimum requirements for soil and groundwater conservation when they constructed the Creedmoor landfill, winning a slew of environmental awards through the years.



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