The Gleaners

Salvaging a living from what others discard, bottle pickers make the most of our disposable culture

by Norm Sacuta, photos by Dan Power

I'M IN THE METAL GARBAGE BIN THAT faces the side entrance to Mill Creek Elementary School. It's early Saturday morning and most of the residents in the small houses that face the parking lot, rising and looking out their windows, would only be able to see my black toque bobbing up and down just above the bin rim as I tear open bags.

A few seconds before, Roy, after throwing Michelle three or four of the smaller green bags, vaulted over the side of the bin and looked at me with a grin.

"Okay. It's your turn. There should be enough room."

I stepped on the heavy metal ledge and balanced myself before sliding onto the orange and green bags. I felt, at first, a bit like one of those birds that steps quickly from lily pad to lily pad, dancing across the surface of a pond; but soon enough my weight pulled me down between bags and I was up to my waist in rubbish.

I've kept my gloves on despite Michelle's best advice. She says she never wears gloves when tearing open the bags, and though her hands freeze in the coldest weather, she insists on keeping the gloves in her pockets. Today it's only minus 10.

"You can't get a grip with gloves. And if you've done this long enough," Michelle confided earlier at the A&W, "you can tell what's in the bag before you open it. I like to use my fingers to tear a small hole. There's no need to make a mess, and in residential areas you take care."

I'm getting caught up in the momentum of it all, though. Roy has a couple of bags on the ground beside the bin and has ripped a neat hole in the top of one of them. He tosses the juice tetrapacks down the slope toward Michelle, who stomps them flat and collects them into two linked, makeshift carrying sacks.

I'm onto my second bag in the bin, and where the first was mostly pencil shavings and frozen pearls of chewed gum, the second begins with more promise. Half-finished pizza and bagged lunches are at the top, and I get excited, ripping the whole length as if gutting a seal. The tangled guts of frozen spaghetti spill around my hips. There are a couple of dozen half-empty tetrapacks of juice and Kool-aid.

"Great!" Roy says. "You got a lunch room bag."

"We call the half-full boxes squishies," Michelle says, as she points and stomps on the hardened tetrapacks. They shoot slush in colourful streaks across the snow.

"You know," I shout, as I burrow to find another bag, "it's a bit like Christmas, really. It's exciting to see what's in each bag."

They laugh as I find an unusually heavy green one. I haul it to the edge of the bin and get a good grip on either side of the knot at the top, and pull. The whole length gives way and the weight releases on the front of my jeans. There are small designs of Disney characters and Spiderman, floral patterns and plain white plastic. The cold keeps the smell under control. Diapers. Dozens of them, open and stained against my jeans.

"Oh," says Michelle, looking over the edge of the bin. "I meant to tell you. This school has a daycare."

I'D BEEN INTRODUCED TO MICHELLE AND Roy at the Strathcona Bottle Depot two weeks before. Roland Paté, the manager of the depot, had agreed to an interview about the ins and outs of depot operations, and had graciously granted me access to his staff. One of his employees, Jessie Bablitz, a 53-year-old woman I'd spoken to often at one of my favourite bars in the area, was the person to whom I'd first floated the idea of an article about bottle-pickers.

"Well," she said, sitting in the bar after an eight-hour shift, "I can tell you one thing. I prefer the homeless to anyone else. They really help us sort and know to remove the lids."

Jessie's hair is grey streaked, and it flows long over the flipped-back hood of her parka as she sips her beer. She's a bit like the pickers she talks about—born here, raised in the Yukon, but drawn back to the city by the same boom that's now leaving so many people dazed and stressed. She looks above her wide glasses at me, like a schoolteacher might.

"Can I show you something?" She lifts her boot and puts it on the seat of the chair. "The pickers, they bring us stuff they've found in the garbage cans. A telephone, a frying pan. If it's something I want, I buy it and it gives them a bit of extra pocket cash. These boots. Brand new. I paid five bucks!"

"Can you recommend anyone in particular?" I ask.

"Yeah. There're hardly any couples who pick together. Talk to Roy and Michelle."

Roland is explaining how the bottle return system works in Alberta and about problems with pickers at the depot. He's also a bit like Jessie—greying beard and hair, 45, and exuberant despite being tired around his eyes. Born in Nova Scotia, he arrived in Edmonton at the tail end of the first big oil boom in the seventies. He's ridden through the bust, and now manages the depot after six years working there.

"The bottle pickers we get here in Strathcona aren't the same as the ones they get further south at the Mill Woods depot," he explains. "We've got pickers that are your classic homeless people.

Eventually, when they figured out the taxes and other deductions coming off their cheques, they realized bottles might actually pay more.

Alcoholics. Drug addicts. Or just people who've dropped out. And then we've got women who drive around with their cars, and bring in 50 dollars worth of bottles."

I wonder aloud if maybe it's hidden money for them, something they don't have to tell their husbands about.

The depot processes more than 50,000 units a day, and frequently hits 80,000. The problems he faces with customers vary. For the pickers, they're mostly alcohol-related (he's strict about not allowing in anyone intoxicated). For the middle class it's mostly heated arguments about what gets shelled out for various containers.

"I've had people argue and argue about the fact they paid a 10 cent deposit for a bottle, when I know it's five cents. I end up telling them, look, if you have a complaint about it, contact the ABCRC, not me."

The Alberta Beverage Container Recycling Corporation is the agency, through its Beverage Container Management Board, that sets the rates for deposits and what is eligible for return. It argues and negotiates with environmentalists and industry over what should be returnable, rather than simply recyclable, and collects the deposits from companies to turn over to the depots. The pickers, Roland says, would like nothing better than for milk cartons and all tin cans to be refundable.

"When I was talking to Jessie," I say, "she suggested a couple named Roy and Michelle to follow on their regular route."

Roland smiles and waves me into his back manager's space.

"They're here right now. They usually stay at closing to help with the garbage and floors."

I SET UP A BREAKFAST MEETING WITH Roy and Michelle for a couple of weekends later at the A&W on Whyte Avenue. When I order my coffee and walk to a booth by the windows, I pass a short, bearded man in a down-filled coat who smiles broadly. I say hello and he nods. His eyes are vivid, wide and constantly moving, and his hands are smeared black and grey as they clench and unclench his cup of coffee. Every time I look up he's looking back and waving.

Roy and Michelle come in the side door, leaving a single green garbage bag just inside the entrance. The weather broke the day before and they look relaxed. Michelle's pink coat is as mottled with stains as the bearded man's hands, and Roy has his ball cap pulled down so his eyes are barely visible. Michelle immediately goes to check the trash bins inside the store.

"Hey, Ricky," Roy says as he passes the bearded man.

Ricky nods. Michelle smiles when she sees me, and I order them bacon and eggs.

Michelle Mercer was born on Salt Spring Island 44 years ago. This, at least, is what she tells me at A&W. She's Métis. She lived in Vancouver before moving to Alberta in 1982, where she worked first at a few sour-gas plants, and got married to "an oil patch boy." That didn't last, and she got married again. Now, she's with Roy.

"I'm still married, actually, to the second guy," she says. "I just don't know where he is."

Roy Gillebrand is a little more guarded about his past. He's 48 and was born in Montreal. He came to Alberta in 1987. He delivered truck parts for a while. He's divorced.

They both finished high school.

"So how did you meet, and what got you started on bottle picking?"

"We met through Labour Ready," says Michelle. "Eight years ago."

"This is the agency that pays cash for a day's labour, right?"

"That's them," says Roy. "We only started travelling around together about a year ago, though. She was the wife of my best friend."

"This is the second guy?" I ask Michelle.

"Nope, another guy," she says. "I have a knack for attracting men."

"Hopefully," says Roy, smiling, "that's changed."

Bottle picking, originally, was just a supplement to their other income. Both claim Labour Ready paid fairly well—over eight bucks an hour—but not enough to keep an apartment. Eventually, when they figured out the taxes and other deductions coming off their cheques, they realized bottles might actually pay more. And while they still take odd jobs, they make sure they do their route before anything else.

The talk turns to nitty-gritty as breakfast arrives. What do you make in a day? Between 20 and 50, but it used to be higher. How far is your route? It's not always the same. Some days we do 15 miles. What are the pitfalls? Hornets in the summer, and falling bin lids year round. What're the worst things about it? Kitty litter and diapers.

Ricky comes over, interrupting the flow of questions.

"Hey, Rick!" says Roy, "this is Norm."

"I know. We've met before."

We have? I used to live two blocks away, in a walkup on 83rd Avenue, so it's possible.

"You still at camp in the river valley?" Michelle asks. I'll eventually discover that he lives underneath the wooden lookout platform on Saskatchewan Drive, just below my apartment window.

Ricky's eyes flash constantly, caught somewhere between irritability and exhilaration. He says little, but sometimes I could swear he wants to whack Roy.

"Look, there's Ray!"

Another man approaches, taller, older, with a black toque, not nearly as jumpy as Ricky.

"You guys hear about Chimo?" Ray asks. "He checked himself into the University and two days later he was dead!"

"Y're kidding me," says Roy.

"I guess his liver just gave out. He must have known, which is why he checked himself in. Died at 1 a.m. Saturday."

"Who's Chimo?" I ask, but no one answers. Michelle eventually suggests I contact their outreach worker, Terry Kettleson, if I want background on people in the neighbourhood.

Michelle and Roy take a break in the home they built.

"I was wandering around, pushing a cart with my stuff in it one day," Michelle explains, "because I kept getting booted out of locations and having to move my stuff all the time. That's not good. So I saw this property near the rail yards, and I thought, this is perfect! I can squat there. And I thought, well, why not just be honest. So I went up to the door, and asked the gentleman if I could stay there, in the yard behind his house, and he said 'Sure.' My first camp was just a tarp, but there was a monsoon and I moved into the woodshed behind the main house. Well, it was open air, so I boarded it up with scraps from the yard, but it was really too small. So Roy and I built a new one. It's comfortable. What's the dimensions?"

"Maybe 15 by 12 feet," says Roy.

I'm following Roy and Michelle along the edge of the Strathcona rail yards. We turn down an alley partially lined with used tires, piled five and six high, and come to the single remaining house on the block. It's one of the perfectly square ones, almost identical, that were originally built south of Whyte for the Gainers employees who worked at the former packing plant along Mill Creek.

Roy avoids the main house, stepping between a rusting Streamline trailer and piles of tires. He stops at what I think is a garage.

"It's actually an old chicken coop," Roy says. "The guy who owns the house used to keep chickens, years ago. We built our place along the side."

Roy pulls away a metal brace that's keeping the door to the shack shut. There's too much ice and snow against it to open more than a few inches. I manage to squeeze inside.

It's more brightly lit than I expected. A high workbench runs along the entry wall with unopened tins of vegetables, tetrapacks and prepackaged, expired sandwiches found in dumpsters. There's a small bottle of fuel. In the middle of the room is the vinyl back seat from a car; in front of it is a cluttered, knee-high table with an ashtray. There's a Klimt-esque print on the wall. Just to the left of the door is the bed—a double foamy with bed sheets and a comforter. Roy and Michelle prefer sheets that they wash every couple of weeks, unlike others who keep the same sleeping bag for months on end.

There's no heat or electricity, no water, no toilet. Michelle confides that they relieve themselves in pots, and then just walk to any of the nearby vacant lots, or through the various mazes of tires, to dump them out. On really cold nights—40 below—they snuggle in bed, hang blankets around that part of the hut, and light a torch or propane heater to warm the draped-off area. They have candles from Army & Navy, and read by candlelight.

Saturday is dollar swim night at Scona pool. That means a long, hot shower.

Michelle sleeps with her bottled water in bed. Otherwise, she says, it freezes solid, and there's no place to get water at 2 a.m. They have a radio, but the battery-powered TV they scavenged only worked for about 10 minutes before it died.

They rejig the brace on the door, and we're off to Mill Creek Elementary.

Two years ago the Old Strathcona Area Community Council, a group made up of representatives from the surrounding churches, businesses and community leagues, approached the Boyle Street Coop—based in Edmonton's downtown core—about establishing an outreach worker in the Whyte Avenue area to deal with the homeless, pickers and panhandlers.

Terry Kettleson is that outreach worker. Educated at the University of Lethbridge, married to a native man, she's been fascinated since childhood by native culture. Her degree isn't in social work, but the social sciences—anthropology, Native American studies and sociology.

We arranged to meet at Starbucks in the Chapters on Whyte Avenue.

"There's a lot of things that happen in Old Strathcona," Terry says. "And this is a really wonderful community. Even though the businesses had absolutely had it at various times with the street people, they still found the time to help my program."

I ask how that's possible when there had been such a media outcry two years before when some of the Old Strathcona churches decided to open up as temporary shelters. They closed after a year.

"The two churches opened up because it was very inclement weather," Terry says. Shelters were getting filled up downtown, so Strathcona Baptist and Trinity Lutheran opened up. It was initially successful, so they decided to form a society and do it again.

"Then so many people from the inner city decided to come to Whyte. These are two different cultures. The street people and panhandlers on this side are mild-mannered for the most part. If they're aggressive, they tend to be aggressive with each other. They police each other. So we ended up with a mixture of Whyte Avenue

Top to bottom: Michelle and Roy at the Strathcona Bottle Depot. They make between $20 and $50 a day bottle picking.
Sharing some beers in the alley behind Alternative Video on Whyte Avenue.
Roy, chest deep in his work inside a dumpster at Mill Creek Elementary School.

and downtown street people, and it turned out to be diabolical. You had individuals coming from the inner city that were gang affiliated, carrying weapons and drugs. The thing about Whyte Avenue, though, it's just a little bit more empathetic toward street people. When someone's hurt or drunk, it bothers people and they're more willing to help."

I'm wondering where that empathy comes from. Is it a simple difference in the type of street people, or the way neighbourhoods develop? The Old Strathcona Area Development Plan has restricted the high-rise condo developments on Whyte that have taken off in downtown Edmonton. Do they weaken neighbourhood and community? Garbage bins get locked downtown, where they don't along Whyte. Michelle and Roy actually have permission from schools to go into their trash. Is it because Strathcona has maintained its mix of students, elderly and low-income tenants that the empathy survives? That mix is only threatened on Friday and Saturday nights, when the influx of suburban teenagers and 20-somethings turns the Avenue into an urban bush party.

I look out the window of Starbucks; we're kitty-corner to a huge vacant lot that was formerly an Esso service station and has been sitting empty and contaminated for seven years in the heart of Whyte. Esso, the Canadian subsidiary of what recently became the wealthiest corporation on the planet, continues to insist that rapid cleanup would be too expensive. The lot is to remain empty, slowly leaking contaminants through vents, for three more years. The chain-link fence ensures there are no squatters. So much for neighbourliness. I picture a future property battle centring on a high rise.

"When I first started this job, I decided to be on a crusade. I would try to get as many individuals as I could into appropriate housing, and there were some individuals, Chimo for example, who panhandled right outside, who would never have wanted appropriate housing. So I changed my mandate. What I now do is ask 'what can I provide that will increase the quality of their lives?' I don't apply my values. Chimo never wanted housing. He never wanted clothing. He never wanted any material thing. The only thing he wanted was for me to visit with him. So I made a daily ritual of going to him, giving him a hug, finding out who's who around him. He liked that. He did eventually move into a place, but by that point it was too late."

"Roy and Michelle found out last Saturday that he died. They said he'd had too much swish."

"Actually, it was tuberculosis. There's a woman who's contagious out there giving it to people because she won't take her meds, and Chimo caught it. Of course, he was already weak from the drinking."

I wonder if maybe Roy and Michelle are at risk. And Ricky. And Ray. I try to picture Chimo, but I can't. He would have been outside Chapters every single day of the week, for several hours, silent with his cap held out, nodding every time I passed, smiling when I gave him a few quarters. But I can't remember his face?

WE'RE A LONG WAYS UP THE ALLEY from Mill Creek school now, and I can definitely smell my coat and gloves. I understand now why Michelle goes into the bins barehanded. I start to slow as we approach another big container behind Tasty Tom's Eatery.

"Naw, that's no good," Roy says. "The only things in there are big tomato tins and restaurant crap."

They've already introduced me to half the personal lives in the neighbourhood. The black garbage bag behind the radar-dished house, for example, garners at least a dozen black beer cans a day. Michelle calls him "Mr. Black Label."

"We furnished our entire place, cutlery, furniture, plates, pots, clothes, blankets, all from garbage," says Michelle.

"Hey, we are recycling. We're helping the planet, ourselves. We're staying fit. We're out there in the fresh air. We're our own bosses. We get to see a lot of people and a lot of things."

"We found a camera once with a whole case of lenses," says Roy. "We sold it to Roland."

"Who would throw that out?"

"Oh, you know. A couple's divorcing. One throws the other's stuff out. We know what's going on." Roy smiles.

"You'll get to know the neighbourhood," Michelle says.

"I hope so," I say. "Is there some sort of etiquette to bottle picking?"

"Yeah, this is what picks me!" Michelle says. We're approaching Whyte and will have to cross to the next school, King Edward. "If you go into an alley and you see someone, don't come around. We were out with a cart one day and this guy, he was on a bike, and what he did was just leapfrog us. I took a strip off him at the bottle depot in front of everyone. Haven't seen him since."

"And if you can afford a vehicle, then you don't need to be bottle-picking," says Roy.

I'm carrying the makeshift bottle bag for Roy and it hangs over my shoulder like Paul Bunyan's saddlebag. Roy's made sure to balance the heavy items, like beer bottles, between front and back, but after an hour it's getting heavy.

"Do you have any idea why you do this?" I ask. It's a stupid question, and obviously leading.

"Hey, we are recycling," says Michelle. "We're helping the planet, ourselves. We're staying fit. We're out there in the fresh air. We're our own bosses. We get to see a lot of people and a lot of things."

"People come home," Roy goes on, "and they bitch. They bitch about jobs or school. They bitch at each other. We try to stay happy."

We're passing Top's liquor store, and Ray takes the bag off my shoulder.

"So, are you gonna buy us a six pack? Now that you got your exclusive interview."

I don't see the harm. Roy leads me inside, and picks up a six-pack of the strong cans (12 per cent alcohol). Back on the Avenue, we head toward the river valley and King Eddy School, but in the alley we see a tight circle of six or seven people, seated on cardboard, huddled inside the small L-shape of a cement wall. They call out to Michelle and Roy.

I'm hoping this isn't one of the "hairspray" parties they told me about. With pharmacies keeping most products like rubbing alcohol behind the counter, the new cheap drink of choice is certain pump-action brands of hairspray. Some types are 80 per cent alcohol. Only the bags of antibacterial soaps in washrooms at the University Hospital are comparable in alcohol content, and they disappear from the emergency ward washrooms almost as fast as they can get them in.

Michelle mentioned her drinking while we were at A&W. She said she currently has no outstanding D&Ds (Drunk and Disorderlies). The police give them out when they want to break up a drinking party like this one behind Alternative Video: $115 for drinking in public; $286 for drinking in a vehicle. When cops really want to get someone off the streets for a few days, they run a check and find at least a few unpaid D&Ds.

"No one ever pays them," Michelle says. "I just stand up in front of the JP and she'll say, 'I can give you a few weeks to pay,' and I say, 'Forget it.' They send you to the Remand for a week and then you're clear."

At least it's a warm bed for six nights.

I approach cautiously, but there's only beer and wine in sight.

I'D BEEN TRYING ALL DAY TO REMEMBER a story a college friend of mine, the writer Leo McKay, told me about living in Tokyo with his wife when both were teaching English in the early nineties. I decided to phone him.

Tokyo garbage days were a time when all the Westerners came out of the woodwork—much to the distaste, he added, of the locals.

"Sodai gomi" was the local term, and it meant, more or less, "bulk garbage day." Once a month residents were able to leave any items they didn't want—regardless of size—at curbside for pickup. And it was on this day that North Americans would hit the streets on bicycles or with some sort of carrying bag to pick up items to furnish their meagre apartments.

"The thing is, there's no storage space in Tokyo and the country was booming then," Leo told me. "Whenever the Japanese bought anything new, they had to immediately get rid of the old. And for the Japanese there was a certain shame in taking anyone's used goods."

Garbage is a relative and culturally specific term. It was hard for any Western teacher to accept seeing a 1990 Walkman as trash simply because the 1991 version had come out. Perhaps as their bank accounts grew, their notions of garbage did too.

Leo told me of a man from Detroit who would use the silk from discarded kimonos to make Western-style shirts and pants. The only likely reason for discarding such clothing would have been the death of its wearer, and the Japanese believed in the contamination of clothes by the spirit of the dead. This man had made an entire business out of such silk, and purchased an industrial sewing machine to help clothe foreigners.

And what of Alberta's boom? As I'm crawling into bed still faintly smelling of diapers and orange juice, my pants soaking in the tub, I only momentarily think of Roy and Michelle, huddled on their foam, water bottles under arms. Then I'm off again worrying about my student loans about how much more I'll need to work before I owe no one anything, even eight years after college. I turn out the light and look out the window, toward Ricky hidden beneath the wood

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