ANNOUNCER: From the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.

THEME MUSIC: “Pay Day” played on guitar by Mississippi John Hurt.

NANCY GROCE (HOST): Welcome to America Works, interviews with contemporary workers throughout the United States collected by the Library’s American Folklife Center as part of its Occupational Folklife Project.

This is AFC folklorist Nancy Groce, and this America Works podcast features excerpts from a longer interview with Mike Peabody, the program coordinator at the Additional Recyclables Collection Center for the Central Vermont Waste Management District in Montpelier, Vermont. He was interviewed by Archie Green Fellow Virginia Nickerson as part of her oral history project “Trash Talk: Workers in Vermont's Waste Management Industry.”

This interview project documented the work experiences of the men and women who collect garbage and recycle trash throughout the Green Mountain State. Mr. Peabody talks about how he learned his trade, working with hard-to-recycle materials, and why he’s proud to be a garbage man.

INTERVIEW

Mike Peabody: We moved here from my in-laws’ basement, about 80 miles north of here. And I needed a job. All I’d had up to that point was farm work, which is not a resume fluffer. So I noticed that there was like a weekend attendant, I think, at the Barre facility, and I fell into that position.

It’s very much OJT. On the job training, right? So you can have a pretty good idea of what is garbage, and what is recyclable, or what is hazardous waste. And also, I started getting very clear on state regulations about what’s banned from disposal, things like televisions and household chemicals and certain batteries.

And so I started getting an eye for those things coming in the door. I know I made a couple of people very mad because I refused to take things that I knew were not acceptable. Stuff like 50-gallon bags completely full of liquid paint. Someone was just trying to convince me, “Oh, no, it’s just trash from my house.” Like, really? That’s an everyday thing for you is just eating paint with your hands, right? Come on. Straighten me out.
There are a few hard-to-recycle centers in the country. They all do very similar things. There’s actually a small but strong undercurrent for recycling really weird stuff—not like methyl mercury or anything like that, although I guess there’s some recovery on that, too. But things that like you don’t think about “Oh, can I recycle it?” Like crayons or potato chip bags or household stain paints. Those kinds of things. And generally speaking, if you can get enough volume of something, you can usually get a truck or a recycler or a processor or a buyer interested in dealing with it.

I think middleman is kind of a fair word, middle person, a “gofer”. Gofer works, too. Yeah. There’s a lot of talking to customers and consumers and businesses who want to deal with waste, or have an idea about wanting to green their image. Or just being really frustrated that they have this one waste stream that they know can be recycled. But for whatever reason, because of an economy of scale hurdle, or a lack of proper equipment, or not knowing who will take it where and when, they just can’t get it to where it needs to go.

About 25 percent of what we take right now is what the state refers to as covered electronic devices. That’s computers and TVs. And we’re doing about 450 to 500,000 pounds a year. Which, in the bigger scale of recycling, isn’t that much. But for central Vermont, half a million pounds is a decent output. So, yeah. I say like the big ones are books. We’re getting a lot of books. And computers and TVs. Below that, textiles, tires, scrap metal or household appliances like vacuums and microwaves that we do often process or send to specialty electronics handlers. What the district tries to do is divert as much as we can from landfilling.

Believe it or not, my workday is pretty typical. It’s generally the same thing. I show up, I look around the building to make sure that no one, like, threw a pile of tires or a broken TV or something around… ‘cause it does happen that people just leave stuff with us. Sometimes it’s kind of benign, like just like a sack of Legos or something. People just don’t know what to do with it. They’ve heard that we quote unquote “take everything.” And so when they show up and we’re not open…or they come by at midnight--because I guess they expect us to be there at midnight--they just leave the bag.

Our offices the next town over in Montpelier, someone dumped, I want to say, about 40 pounds of potassium nitrate on our front step. And there was just like a note taped to the box that said like, “Found this while digging fences. Heard you guys took dangerous stuff.” We almost called in the bomb squad! We didn’t know what to do with it. The person who brought it to us didn’t do any kind of research or packaging. They just probably threw it in their truck and was like, “Oh, I should leave a note. That would be the polite thing to do.”

A lot of what we do is kind of pickup work for a packaging and manufacturing industry that is sort of moving with the blinders on. Like so much of what we take right now is just big glass TVs. And nobody at any point during television manufacture in the last 60 years was like, “Hmm, it’s a giant glass ball full of lead, pumped full of about 20,000 volts of electricity. Someone else’s problem. I guess I don’t need to think seriously at all about how to properly manage or deal with
Like “downstream” is such a modern word. Like really, before that, at no point was anybody thinking seriously like, “No. Because once it’s not working anymore, it goes in a hole in the ground. And once 50 million people decide that it doesn’t work anymore, they’re all going to go into 50 million holes in the ground.”

And so when I say I hope that no one’s doing this work, it’s because I sincerely hope that inside of thirty years, someone’s just -- some group of someones -- gets it enough that they decide we’re just going to start making things that either break down like the autumn leaves or it just won’t exist, or it will be permanently reusable. But we’re not going to make stuff that’s just made of limited shelf-life trash, and then make it everyone’s problem but ours to deal with it.

The garbage man is sort of this weird archetype in our culture. I don’t know how other places, even like Canada, think or talk about or depict garbage people. But I think in our culture there’s like this idea of like this kind of cigarette-on-the-edge-of-his-lip, beer-belly dude hanging out the back of a truck just like flipping off little kids and shaking cans outside the buildings at four o’clock in the morning. I think that as garbage has become more refined, as recycling has become a bigger thing that this archetype hasn’t drifted out to pasture.

And I do still get moments with customers where they kind of seem to think that I’ve made a bad career choice. I mean, I don’t know how to break it to a conversation with them: like, I get government benefits and medical and vision, and a retirement plan. Like I’m probably doing okay. You don’t have to pity me. You don’t have to feel bad for me.

And plus, it’s incredibly fulfilling. I mean, I’m sure some people don’t want to be garbage men, or don’t want to handle solid waste, or don’t want to have the same conversation about how to properly package paint or old shoes or whatever every single day. I’m not that person. I’m okay doing that stuff all the time.

I just feel like everybody’s job’s got some amount of value, some amount of worth in it. So it’s okay to be a garbage man. It’s okay to be a fast food worker. It’s okay to sweep floors. It’s okay to have like 14 jobs and they all pay like nothing and you just drive around all the time, but you like doing them. If you like doing them, you should just keep doing them. And if you like your one job, you should keep doing that one job. And nobody should feel the right to make fun of you for it.

END OF INTERVIEW

THEME MUSIC: “Pay Day” played on guitar by Mississippi John Hurt.
**NANCY GROCE (HOST):** You’ve been listening to garbage man and trash recycler Mike Peabody, who was interviewed by documentarian Ginger Nickerson as part of her oral history project “Trash Talk: Workers in Vermont's Waste Management Industry.”

To hear the complete interview with Mike Peabody, as well as interviews with dozens of other men and women who are involved with collecting garbage and recycling trash throughout the Green Mountain State, please visit us online at [www.loc.gov/folklife](http://www.loc.gov/folklife) -- or just search online for the “Occupational Folklife Project.”

On behalf of the American Folklife Center, this is folklorist Nancy Groce. Thank you for listening to *America Works.*

**ANNOUNCER:** This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress. Visit us as loc.gov.