

THE TYRANNY OF THINGS

by John Eliot Allen

An uncle of mine was for many years chief steam engineer for Electric Bond and Share Corporation in New York, designing steam power plants in such then exotic places as Hong Kong or Buenos Aires or Singapore. When he was home, he and his wife lived in a large apartment in downtown Manhattan. In 1929 I stayed there for several weeks while trying to get a job on a boat back to the west coast. I marveled at the elegant furniture, pictures, art objects and oriental rugs in what seemed to me to be an over-furnished apartment.

My uncle's wife died several years later, and when in 1964 I came through New York and tried to visit him, I found that he was about to leave on a trip but he again offered me his apartment. It was tiny - and as barren as a hotel room! Only three or four hangers of clothes in the closet, only one drawer in the dresser occupied.

At least once a year after my uncle retired he would visit us in Portland, and always arrived carrying only a brief case. If it as cold and raining, he would buy a sweater and raincoat, wear them and give them away when he left. I finally got up nerve enough to ask him about this style of life, and he said he had learned to travel with as little as possible during his active days, and he told me "John, beware of the tyranny of things — the less you have to care for, the more freedom you will have!" I suspect that this was in part his reaction from the over-acquisitiveness of his beloved wife. I never knew what happened to all those gorgeous apartment furnishings!

My wife Peggy and I were married in 1933, and during my first 10 years as a field geologist we lived in 12 different houses in 8 different towns. When we moved, everything we owned would go into our car or into a small box trailer towed behind it. During the first 33 years of marriage we moved 30 times. However, for the last 26 years our home base has been a Portland apartment house, and the stays away from home have been shorter, from a week to six months, so we never moved our accumulated things. Now they fill to overflowing both our living and our guest apartments.

We have found several ways for trying to cope with these accumulations, in a continual fight against the aggregation (and tyranny) of things:

* Obviously, the most efficient way to keep "things" under control is to make frequent moves — it worked for us in the early days. Each time you move, you have to decide whether something is really useful, necessary and worth the cost of moving it.

* Although we have never had a "garage sale" of our own, but have visited many of them (and bought "things" there!). Very few people want to go to this extreme unless they must vacate a house.

* At regular intervals we try to weed things out and give them to Goodwill or other charitable agencies. If you keep a record of what is donated, you can deduct their second-hand value from your income taxes.

* Everyone needs a hobby and most people have them. Hobbyists, almost by definition, are collectors of things! I have collected stamps, coins, chess sets, rocks and

minerals, hi-fi equipment, old (19th century) geology books, guns, swords and knives, and hats.

But note that word “have” — nearly always I pursued my hobbies one or two at a time, make my collections one after another, *en sequitur*, and once I have learned all I want to know about the objects in a collection, I get rid of them and start on different collection. This generally takes from 5 to 10 years for each hobby, so I have learned a lot and gotten a great deal of enjoyment from my hobbies. Right now I’m still on knives and hats.

* Books are for us a major problem, and our apartment shows it, with 8 bookcases (30 shelves, about 100 linear feet) in three rooms. My tiny office at PSU has 140 linear feet of shelving, to the ceiling on 3 walls. I turn in to Powell’s or give away several cartons of books every few months in order to make room for the new.

During my early years (1956-70) at Portland State, I would send a few cartons of technical books to the library each year. Cataloging is now so expensive that they no longer can afford to shelve outdated textbooks, so I give them away to students. We now have visits from our adult grandchildren who tag the books they would like to have, so that we can later mail them a carton.

* For several years I have formed the habit of sending back all “business reply mail” envelopes offering something I don’t want with a notice “Please take me name off your mailing list” next to my address. One can get rid of many unstamped pleas without spending a stamp by writing the national address clearing house.

* Magazines are a major problem — how many times have you heard of someone who wants to sell a complete set of the National Geographic Magazine going back to 1914? I still have the ancient Geographic issues on horses and dogs!

We like to try out new magazines, and sometimes subscribe to more than we have time to read. Within the last ten years we have tried out and quit Insight, New Yorker, Yankee, Asimov’s Science Fiction, Analog, AIPG Bulletin, AIMS Bulletin, GSA Bulletin, Science, Health, Insight, Newsweek, Saturday Review, World News Report, and many others I no longer remember.

Right now we take Time, Modern Maturity, Good Housekeeping, Readers Digest, Consumer Reports, National Geographic, Smithsonian, Natural History, Discover, Wilson Quarterly, Journal of Geological Education, Geology, Geotimes, Oregon, California, Washington and New Mexico Geology magazines, Scientific American, American Scientist, Oregon Scientist.

* But the proliferation of magazines has recently been overwhelmed by the proliferation of mail-order catalogues, which fill our mail box two or three times a week. Our forests dwindle as the lumber industry supplies the paper for them. I throw away 10 to 20 pounds of magazines every month, and an equivalent poundage of catalogues every week. That is nearly half a ton of slick paper per year for one family of two!

Incidentally, a year of The Oregonian newspaper (with all the ads) would make a pile more than 10 feet high, weighing more than half a ton. I was delighted when our apartment house recently put in facilities that require us to separate newspapers, tin

cans, and glass for recycling.

John Eliot Allen is emeritus professor of geology at Portland State University, and for four years writer of the “Time Travel” column in the science section of the Thursday Oregonian.

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“HOW DO YOU DO?”

by John Eliot Allen

Until very recently, this well-meant question baffled me! An octogenarian seldom “does” very well, and must constantly guard against frustration by the multitude of onerous daily activities necessary just to keep on one’s feet and present a cheerful face to the world. One is not about to tell anyone the repulsive details, so admirably summarized by Jeff Moss:

I’m feeling very horrible
And low and mean and mad
And dreadful and deplorable
And rotten, sick and sad
And nasty and unbearable
And hateful, vile and blue.
But thanks a lot for asking
And please tell me. . .
How are you?

For several years, if things were going well, I would cheerfully lie “Great!”. Or, if I didn’t feel too bad I would say “Pretty good!” or “OK”. When I reached 80, I discovered another that satisfied me: “Better than I ever ever expected to be at my age!”. Both my parents died in their 60’s, and when I reached 70, I considered that I had it made, any further years were a bonus!

Recently I saw that lovely movie, “Driving Miss Daisy”, and the last scene gave me the reply that I have been using ever since. For those of you unlucky enough not to have see it yet, in the final scene, the faithful old chauffeur is visiting his employer of 50 years who lies in the rest home, afflicted with alzheimers, and she asks him “How do you do?”. His reply is “Well, Miss Daisy, we do what we can!”

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