

"Litterbugs--Then and Now"

The following article is about Annette H. Richards, the author of the term "Litterbug." While it may seem that our current problems with litter and vandalism are a new phenomenon, this article gives us the perspective that discarding trash and destroying public and private property was also prevalent nearly 50 years ago. Perhaps with a renewed awareness of the consequences of litter and graffiti on our community, we can all make a concerted effort to help keep Tucson Clean and Beautiful for future generations:

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Author Who Coined
Word 'Litterbug' Is
Tucsonan Annette
Richards

-Citizen Photo

By now everyone has heard the word litterbug and uses it with careless ease to describe someone who-thinkingly or not-dumps trash on the scenery.

But when Annette H. Richards, now of Tucson, was casting about for such a word in 1952 to use in a magazine article about vandalism in our National Parks, there wasn't one.

So she made it up - coined it.

The article was printed in the American Museum of Natural History's publication "Natural History" in August of 1952 and was picked up and reprinted by "Reader's Digest" - both articles under the title "The Great American Litterbug."

The word litterbug caught on rapidly and soon swept the country, even engulfing Miss Richards herself who now finds she is spending more time away from her writing, while furthering Pima County's litterbug campaign, than she can well afford.

The article was so popular that readers of "Natural History" voluntarily sent in more than \$1,000 to fight the litterbug. The editors casting about for an idea, finally decided to distribute free decals bearing the legend, "Keep America Beautiful - Don't Be a Litterbug."

By the following year (1953) the Keep America Beautiful idea won strong support from various organizations and (financed largely by the container industry of the U.S.) soon was an active, nationwide institution dedicated to the death of the litterbug.

Because nearly everything Americans buy comes in a disposable container, and because it is so easy to toss it out the window of a car or drop it on the sidewalk, litterbugs have made a mess out of thousands of miles of roadsides.

And because visitors accumulate in the most scenic areas, that's where the trash piles are highest.

"Each year," wrote Miss Richards, "some 65 million persons pass through our local and national parks and forests. In 1950 vandals among these visitors did \$6,000,000 worth of damage in stolen and mutilated facilities, in defaced trees, rocks and monuments, and the dumping of trash."

In Mexico (where she once spent a year gathering material and writing) there isn't such a litter, Miss Richards points out, simply because there aren't so many tempting containers.

Litter alone, of course, isn't the total extent of damage. In her litterbug article, the young conservationist described the discouraging case of the "Goblet of Venus." This unique sandstone formation on the road to Natural Bridges National Monument balanced its five-ton weight almost unbelievably on a tiny base-until someone knocked it over. She also describes other efforts to destroy our national heritage:

"The souvenir mania afflicts all ages and classes. An Indiana family boasted of outwitting the rangers in the Petrified Forest... by smuggling out a specimen of petrified wood under the hood of their car...

"Last summer a teen-age boy climbed the four story adobe of the Casa Grande National Monument and before the ranger in charge could do anything about it had knocked off a large chunk of this irreplaceable prehistoric structure. . .

"Names and obscurities are written with lipstick and pencil and carved with knives... A few years ago the lipstick epidemic did thousands of dollars worth of damage to the Statue of Liberty."

Miss Richards, who started writing in 1949, has since sold hundreds of articles to all types of magazines and presently is finishing her first non-fiction book.

She was born and schooled in Philadelphia and, except for the year in Mexico (which she "loved"), spent most of her time there until coming to Tucson about three years ago, now makes the Old Pueblo her home. Although she writes about a great variety of things, her work is somewhat centered around Scientific and natural history subjects.

Aside from her writing she also paints (but can't find time for it), plays the piano and the accordion and spends whatever time she can find hiking and camping in the great out-of-doors.

By now that idea has swept the country and Americans are just beginning to wake up-and clean up. Soon there'll be trash barrels at convenient spots along nearly every highway and they are even distributing "litterbags" to motorists to hold their trash in the car.

"But we're not going to become glorified garbage collectors," the litterbug lady says.

What we must do is change people's litter-habits. We must educate them (and enforce our laws) as well as giving them a place to dump."

As she wrote in her first article: "Americans can learn not only to improve their outdoor manners but to take pride in their recreation lands. They can learn to use and not abuse, to enjoy and not destroy. They can take to heart the forest-fire slogan: This is God's Country - Don't Make It look Like Hell!" - Clifton Abbott.