GARBAGE LAND

Elizabeth Royte, in “Garbage Land: On the Secret Trail of Trash” (2005) sorts and weighs her own, then follows it to landfills, recycling centers and sewage treatment plants. She wants us to know what happens after we set out the curbside bins or flush the toilet.

Since 1960, the U.S.’s annual municipal waste stream has nearly tripled; at 928 pounds per capita, it’s more than any other nation. McDonalds alone generates enough waste daily to fill the Empire State Building.

Thanksgiving to Christmas we’ll throw out an additional million tons of trash a week.

And every 100 pounds of stuff we manufacture generates 3,200 pounds of waste.

125 years ago “Satan’s resin” – Royte’s adopted name for plastics – didn’t exist. There were no trash cans. Much got burned in the kitchen stove; scraps went to animals. Little was packaged – we stored our own in cans and jars. Old clothes got repaired, used in quilting, mattresses, rugs or rags. Peddlers took ashes, metal, bones and rubber to manufacturers, tinsmiths, button and boot makers. Chicken carcasses went to rag and bone pickers – fat from bone marrow for lighting and lubricating, gelatin for glue and food and photo processing.

Bones became fertilizer, chicken grease became candles or – with lye from wood ashes – soap. She implies that, compared to today, very little got wasted.

So how are we doing now, according to this intrepid downstream explorer?

Here's her take on landfills. None is "sanitary" – despite trash being covered with dirt each day. Sooner or later, landfills always leak, leaching toxic water and gases – including cyanide, arsenic and mercury. Biodegradation stops 8 feet down, and what's there can remain indefinitely in suspended animation, so wet landfills can leach for thousands of years. Near them, birth defects and cancer rates are high.

How about recycling? Paper can be recycled 4 times, and saves trees, oil, water, energy and landfill space. But virgin timber paper extraction, "though one of the most environmentally harmful industries," is subsidized, and thus cheaper than recycling. So in the U.S. about 40% of all paper goes to landfills.

Recycling metal is immensely more environmentally friendly than smelting ore from scratch, but also highly polluting.

In the U.S., electronic waste is now growing 3 times faster than overall waste. We dump hundreds of thousands of lead-filled computers daily. Each year we dump 100 million cell

phones, filled with nerve, brain and organ damaging chemicals. As of 2005, recycling electronic waste was discouraged; it's cheaper to make new gadgets.

Plastic, which breaks down into ever smaller but still deadly pieces – hence, "Satan's resin" -- is almost impossible to degrade. Trying to recycle it may even make environmental pollution worse. Royte's solution? – eliminate plastic entirely, as soon as possible.

As for glass, very little gets recycled, partly because its major ingredient, sand, is cheap, and partly because bottle legislation hasn't made much headway here. In Europe, virtually all bottles are refillable.

And bodily waste? We could reduce it to useful biosolids, if we didn't also flush thousands of pounds of illegal chemicals daily. Spread on pastures, this sludge poisons both steers and those who eat them. Storms routinely overwhelm sewer systems, sending raw sewage into nearby waterways.

And garbage, Royte discovers, flows downhill, to the margins, to settle among the poor and the disenfranchised.

There are some partial solutions – methane extractors, purifying wetlands, composting toilets – but of all the U.S.'s waste, municipal solid waste comprises a mere 2 per cent. The

rest comes from industry, over which most citizens have little control.

So we need to buy less, hang onto things longer, and find ways to hold manufacturers responsible for recovery and recycling costs.

Until then our composting and recycling, as valuable as they are, may be little more than absolution of guilt for "participating in an environmentally destructive culture."