



Parting With Old Electronics Can Be Hazardous To Someone's Health

■ I just recently emptied out a storage unit I had been renting for many years. As a consequence, my garage took over the job of storing all kinds of different electronic equipment.

Part of my original storage plan was to unload the old electronics little by little, mainly through eBay. I tend to think of eBay as this great storage bin in the sky, where you get paid to store an item and can buy the same or similar item back whenever you want, if the need for said item ever arises. But the reality is that very little of my electronics got posted on eBay. Most found a home in the storage unit for far too long of a time.

I did sell some great stuff on eBay, way back when. I sold an Epson HX-20, which many people consider the first portable computer. Then I sold a Triplett analog multimeter, one of the great analog test instruments. I also sold a souped-up Timex Sinclair 1000 computer—one that had a standard keyboard rather than the membrane keyboard the computer included. But after a while I lost interest in the process and let the electronics sit.

OFF TO THE DUMP

When sitting in storage, the electronics are “out of sight, out of mind.” When sitting in the garage, the story is quite different. Thus, the semi-annual e-cycling day in our town a few weeks ago became an event that was not to be missed.

I began loading the electronics in the back of my Jeep Patriot, rear seats down, of course, and filled almost all of the space. It so happens that my wife found a receiver, CD player, tape player, and turntable that had been hiding in the basement. They also got loaded into the Jeep.

I didn't take everything. For example, I kept most of my old computers, generation after generation, for further inspection of the hard drives. I don't want any sensitive information getting into the hands of ID thieves, or so I tell myself. That's a job for another day.

I'll just “zero out” the drives and will feel comfortable e-cycling these computing machines on the next semi-annual e-cycling day. By keeping the older computers, I had to keep a couple of older monitors and keyboards as well.

I also stored some vintage computing equipment for my brother, who had to stop by and pick it up. He has the original Macintosh and Apple II computers. He told me he would look into donating them to a computer museum. A good thought, but I doubt there's one out there without a Mac or Apple II. He asked me about my original IBM PC. “Are you throwing that away?” he asked incredulously. Yes, I had to admit.

With the SUV full of equipment, it was off to one of the town parks to do the e-cycling thing. While waiting behind

a long line of vehicles at the park, I noticed that mine was the only one that was filled to the brim. The comments started immediately when I reached the drop off area.

“Hey, look how much stuff is in here. I need some help,” was one guy's comment. Another said, “You're throwing away a turntable? Vinyl is coming back, you know.” Finally, one said to the other, “This is a great receiver. Want to take it home?” The other guy answered, “No, my wife will kill me.”

The workers didn't take long to add my equipment to the mountain of monitors, televisions, and other electronics on the grass at this “dumping” site. It has to be done, I thought, since I can't keep this stuff forever. I didn't stop to ask where it was going to go from there, though.

A DIRTY RECYCLING SECRET

I got a partial answer through the e-mail when *Business Week* sent me the table of contents of its October 27 edition. The headline of the story is “E-Waste: The Dirty Secret of Recycling Electronics.”

The purpose of e-cycling is, of course, to avoid putting old electronics and their toxic materials, like lead and mercury, into landfills. In theory, these e-cycled electronics will go to a recycling plant that will tear them apart and safely dispose of the toxic materials while selling materials such as gold, copper, and aluminum.

According to the story, 43 of these U.S. recycling companies sought to sell e-waste for export to Asia, in apparent violation of the law. In China and elsewhere, the article said, electronic gear is commonly stripped for reusable microchips, copper, and silver while dangerous metals are dumped nearby, often close to farms or sources of drinking water.

Since the early 1990s, an international agreement known as the Basel Convention has restricted trade in hazardous waste, although the U.S. has failed to ratify the pact. For its part, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) adopted civil rules that went into effect in January 2007 forbidding U.S. companies from exporting monitors and televisions with cathode-ray tubes unless they have approval from the EPA and the receiving country.

The article also said that according to a 2007 study conducted by Shantou University, the blood of children in rural Guiyu, China, a notorious e-waste scavenging site, contained lead at twice the acceptable level set by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control & Prevention.

I think my original idea of sending old electronics into the eBay universe, which is essentially a reuse plan, trumps recycling. But realistically, I will probably take advantage of my town's e-cycling program in another six months. ☐