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Cooks Current

Newsletter

Back to the Past: A column highlighting the natural history of the Watershed

Oil recycling 75 years ago

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Recycling has become a byword for those of us who value our planet and especially our beautiful watershed. We often think of the horrible things that were done with petroleum products in the past. Some people, after changing the oil in their car, simply poured it into the gutter or poured it over the weeds that had come up in their gravel driveways. Some used it to start fires to get rid of used lumber or the trimmings from pruned trees. All of these uses, we now realize, damaged our precious environment.

It was interesting to find out that some individuals and some corporations had a better idea and surprisingly enough this included petroleum companies who designed their service stations with some interesting features. It's hard to imagine any common facility that could be more damaging to the environment than a service station. The threat of frequently spilled petroleum products, customers with leaking oil and transmission fluid problems, even the residue from melting ice and snow that accumulated on the underside of automobiles and then was deposited on the service station floor all contributed to an incredible amount of pollutants that were destined to eventually enter the ecosystem.



We have evidence of a clever innovation here in our watershed area. Village Auto, in the center of Springtown, is a facility that dates back to the 1940's. Originally a gas station and service station, the facility continues to serve the auto repair and service function but no longer has any provisions for gasoline distribution. Atlantic Richfield, the company that built the building incorporated a system that enabled the service station owner to capture contaminated water and spilled oil, and then through a simple system separate the petroleum product from the water allowing the water to be released into nature while being able to reuse the oil in the service station's heating system. If you visit service stations that were built about the same time as Village Auto, or later, you will probably see a long grate in the floor about 8 inches wide and 8 to 10 feet long. This grate covers a shallow trench in the concrete floor. The trench is gently sloped from both ends and in the middle, a drainage hole leads to a specially designed holding tank. The tank consists of compartments

separated by a series of baffles allowing the sludge to fall to the bottom. As the level of the collected liquid rises, the oil being lighter than water floats on top and when the liquid reaches the top of the baffle separating the tank into its component sections, the oil drains off and is collected and saved. The water, now free of the polluting product can be released. When the collected oil reached a certain volume, it was taken and used to fuel the heating system in the garage that made working conditions tolerable for the mechanics during the cold winter months. When you consider the simplicity of the system you might think it a bit primitive, but it was proven to work. Of course, today we have more complex systems but most are simply a variant of the original design.

To be perfectly honest, I believe the concern of the facility's designers had little to do with environmental issues but rather more to do with economic ones. If you could save a few dollars by heating the garage with something that most people just threw away, why not do it? It is in our more enlightened times that we realize the environmental benefits of the system. Who knows how many gallons of oil would have made their way into our creek and others over the past 70 years if the builders of service stations had not incorporated this design into their structures.