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## *History in the Attic*

By Leo R. West

**H**OUSECLEANING time sometimes yields treasures from the past. Most attics contain relics of yesterday, but perhaps the most interesting items are the old newspapers which were used to wrap pictures, dresser scarves, boxes, and other items to be saved for later use. The wrapped items themselves are interesting artifacts of days gone by and sometimes one wonders why certain items were retained. The newspaper wrapping clearly tells when the item went out of use. The skeleton of an umbrella carefully wrapped in a 60-year-old newspaper is cause for wonder. So are faded and torn drapes. But the paper itself becomes the focal point because it is a unique picture of a particular day in time. It prompts questions. Why did they stop using this item at that time? What accidental circumstances saved this individual copy of the paper? What was happening? What was life like at that time?

While newspaper accounts of events are not always accurate, advertising is seldom in error. Ads for food, fashion, furniture, new autos and the theater provide a good portrait of prices and an insight into the lifestyles of the times. Classified pages indicate the availability of jobs, housing, and used automobiles, as well as the latest stock market report.

What about this treasure trove of information? Where attics still exist and people take the time to save things, plastic is the wrap of choice. Most people today dispose of items rather than store them. Wrapping them with newspaper is too time consuming for today's "throwaway" society. Besides, many people no longer subscribe to a newspaper.

The ubiquitous plastic bag offers few clues to the age of an article it contains. Valuable time capsules are disappearing. The attic, once a storehouse of history, has been eliminated in most townhouses and apartments constructed in recent years. Storage space is limited, so few people save outdated items. Historians of the future may have difficulty piecing together what happened because of these changes in people's habits. Certainly the amateur historian will be curtailed. In the process of spring cleaning, the chance discovery of an old paper

while engaging in a not-too-pleasant task makes the job a little less onerous. Children in the family are excited as they peruse a paper older than their parents, as are the parents.

While old newspapers on microfilm are available in most libraries, the impact is not the same. The old newspaper is unforeseen artifact: curiosity is a natural motivator. To use microfilmed copies, a special effort must be made, and unless there is a particular reason for doing so, such as a research paper, few people will take the time. Microfilm cannot be spread out on a floor. Reading a yellowed, flaking paper in a natural setting makes history come alive. Real people are vividly portrayed in a natural setting doing natural everyday things at a particular time and place. Nothing is retold; nothing is revised. Attitudes, values, and tastes of the time are readily seen. Textbooks digest the times and become dull and general. Old newspapers are lively, particular, and anything but dull.

Not only are attics and newspaper wrappings disappearing. An observation in a recent periodical laments the demise of the letter as a means of communication. Reaching out to touch someone by telephone may be convenient, warm, friendly and charming, but it fails to leave a record to be studied by historians of the future.

Future historians may be poorer because of technological and social changes which have affected the habits of people. Technology has created a knowledge explosion. We now have more information available than any one person can ever hope to hear about, much less use. People can communicate instantly and records can be easily accessed through satellites and computers. But perhaps we have lost the ability to communicate with the future. Records are meticulously preserved on computers, video tapes and other media but only a few persons will ever have access to them readily. An effort must be made to utilize technology to preserve the flavor of the past. Maybe we need more attics and more people who will take the time to put newspapers to good use by wrapping up those useless items that are a shame to throw away. ■