

The Saga Of The Mobro

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The Mysterious Barge That No One Wanted

26 years ago, a barge loaded with over 31,000 tons of New York City waste triggered an international firestorm. Few knew what lay inside the floating landfill, but everyone understood that the barge was transporting a potential monster. Fearful of its toxic waste, no port would admit the barge.

For months, the Mobro 4000 cruised up and down the coast of North and Central America in search of a home, followed by the public's fascination and horror wherever it went. Read this noteworthy account of the high-profile incident that spawned a resurgence of the recycling movement in the United States.

The ship sailed from port to port, but everywhere the reception was the same. Looks of annoyance, even fear, as officials firmly shook their heads no. When the overflowing vessel first arrived in North Carolina, health officials boarded the ship and inspected it thoroughly from top to bottom. With a grim expression of stolid determinedness set on their faces, they left. Claiming it carried “unwanted elements,” they refused to grant it the promised landing permits.

The captain tried sailing to other states along America’s east coast, but everywhere he arrived he faced the same response. The governor of Louisiana threatened to dispatch military vessels should the ship dare approach. Thwarted, the captain tried landing in various Central American and Caribbean ports. At each stop officials coldly refused to allow it to land and unload its contents. It was hard to blame them for their behavior, though. By now, the ship’s freight had attracted huge swarms of insects.

In the end, the captain was forced to turn around and follow the long trail back to his point of departure. He was well aware that in all likelihood the contents of his ship would be disposed of in a giant incinerator.

Our story bears an eerie resemblance to the sad saga of the 907 German Jewish refugees of the *St. Louis* in 1939. However, no human tragedy was involved in this instance. The barge in question was carrying New York City waste for disposal elsewhere.

It is actually very common for ships loaded with garbage to sail the oceans, carrying refuse from the busy northeastern states to landfills in the more sparsely populated south. For whatever reason, however, this particular barge was branded as a pariah and refused entry anywhere. Granted, this massive barge was loaded with 20 times the waste carried on typical ships, but that was not the reason it was singled out for special mistreatment. The true reason behind its shameful excommunication was the media coverage that accompanied it.

Generally the national media in the US focuses on stories that are of wide popular



Barges are used to transport all sorts of loads. Here, one carries Space Shuttle Discovery on its final journey to the USS Intrepid in New York Harbor.



A house is transported on a barge.



GMC garbage truck in New York City, circa 1930.

interest. These include both natural and manmade disasters, particularly heroic acts or political wrangling that may interest or affect the general public. But in 1987, the national media was focused on a massive barge that carried garbage! The “gar-barge,” as it came to be known, was loaded with over 62 million pounds of refuse and for several weeks Americans followed the story closely, curious to learn where the trash

would find its final haven. Eventually the barge, its captain and owners became a national joke, the target of nasty comments and witticisms.

Once the matter occupied the US media, it didn’t take long for the interest of the international media to be attracted. In a short time people all over the world learned the embarrassing story of the ship loaded with rubbish that nobody wanted. Wild rumors began circulating about all sorts of dire secrets that lay buried inside the mass of waste. Soon a simple investment on the part of some entrepreneurs from Alabama and New York was transformed into a controversy that mushroomed until it was totally out of proportion to its true nature.

Islip, Long Island

A national crisis began unfolding during the 1970s. Until then, municipal waste removal had been a fairly simple matter. Each state established its own sanitary regulations for the collection and disposal of garbage in landfills. Each town negotiated its own contract with private waste removal companies to meet their disposal needs and garbage was dumped on a field outside of town. Other than the civil authorities and waste contractors, Americans never stopped to consider the consequences of their consumerism.

Slowly, though, the local landfills began to reach their maximum capacity. Federal environmental officials imposed increasingly strict regulations. They were concerned about limiting the spread of toxic waste and the potential effects on the environment and water supplies of such waste. A report from the Environmental Protection Agency indicating that 27 states will have reached 100% of their landfills’ capacity by 1991 was widely publicized and discussed. The report urged that new methods for waste disposal be considered immediately.

The truth was that the landfills were not in danger of reaching their maximum capacity. What had changed was that new federal



Top: Fresh Kills Landfill in Staten Island, where New York City’s garbage was deposited for decades. Bottom: A bulldozer flattens out the trash at the Staten Island landfill.



A worker cleans a polluted river in Kathmandu, Nepal.



Town Hall of Islip, New York.