

PAPER OR PLASTIC?

by Fred Hobbs

Chances are for most of your life you didn't think much about the origin of something as common as the containers for the merchandise you buy. In the past quarter century or so, however, a controversy has arisen concerning shopping, particularly at the grocery store. "Paper or plastic?" you were often asked at the checkout stand.

Until relatively recently, paper sacks had long been the norm. With an increasingly concentrated concern about the environment, "tree huggers" as their detractors call them, began to question why so many trees were sacrificed to make paper to hold your various viands. Besides, they argued, production of paper bags creates 70 percent more air pollution than an alternative, containers made of plastic.

Then, another group of environmentalists stepped forth armed with the fact that plastic bags create four times the solid waste compared to paper and they can last up to 1,000 years.

Depending on how scientists, historians and inventors may view its beginnings and its desired applications, the synthetic organic solids under the broad category of plastics date back to as long ago as 1600 B.C. Modern use of plastics evolved in the 17th and 18th centuries and became commonplace and widely used in the 1900s.

Economics today apparently are trumping environmentalism as a solution to the paper vs. plastic dilemma. Not just "green" establishments, but traditional super markets are introducing the quaint notion that customers can pay a penalty for each plastic bag or paper sack used...or better yet they can "pay up front" by purchasing permanent containers they can bring to the store to haul their groceries home.

For the patron's "convenience" many stores offer these bags for sale. So far, there has been no hue and cry that cotton or canvas or whatever these bags are made of would cause environmental concerns. And, because customers own the bags, most appear to prefer to pack them also. Thus, perhaps eventually eliminating the jobs of the "baggers." The trend seems to make certain that both paper and plastic use will gradually fade from the retail scene along with the burden of making the decision of which to use.

When that happens, one of the funniest sketches in all of comedy regarding the use or non-use of plastic will die with it. Not paper, but metal was involved. On his wildly popular old time radio show, Jack Benny portrayed himself as a consummate miser, though in real life he was very generous. When he went to the store to buy a pair of shoelaces as a Christmas gift to his longtime announcer, Don Wilson, Benny could not decide on plastic or metal tips. He drove the clerk, played by Mel Blanc, wild. After exchanging the laces back and forth repeatedly, Blanc is heard screaming insanely, "plastic tips, metal tips, I can't stand it any more." The audience is left roaring with laughter and we're not sure even to this day which Benny found to be better, metal or plastic. But we do know that in the grocery store, "Paper or plastic?" rapidly is becoming a closed question.