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The Pack-Rat Syndrome

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In the 1960s, a middle-aged housewife named Kelton Roberts helped organize neighborhood cleanups as a member of Camarillo Beautiful.

But today, officials in this city an hour northwest of Los Angeles say Roberts herself is wallowing in filth. Last month, a demolition crew was ordered to haul more than 100 tons of festering debris from inside and around her modest duplex, which was condemned last summer after inspectors discovered massive heaps of trash piled in some rooms to within a foot of the ceiling.

When building officials first entered the house—donning protective overalls, rubber boots and breathing masks—they were forced to slog down narrow aisles through stacks of rotting newspapers, magazines, bottles, cans, clothes and leaves, all heavy with dust, cobwebs and rodent feces.

The walls had grown mold from rain pouring through the decayed roof. There was no plumbing, no gas and no heat. Refuse had almost completely buried the bathroom and kitchen fixtures. And Roberts, 64 and widowed, had been literally forced by the odor to find shelter in the back yard, where she had equipped herself with a tarpaulin, an electric hot plate and a garden hose.

"Nausea and disbelief," was the reaction from Richard Paddock, a Ventura County building and safety supervisor, who retired earlier this year. "It wasn't possible to live inside, it was so full of trash. I kept wondering how anyone could allow themselves to deteriorate into that kind of condition."

Throughout California and around the country, stories like that of Kelton Roberts are repeated with surprising regularity.

In Los Angeles alone, officials last year investigated more than 200 cases of garbage-choked houses, including four deaths caused by flames erupting from rubbish-filled dwellings. Because city inspectors usually don't learn of such conditions until a neighbor or landlord complains, it is estimated that hundreds, if not thousands, of additional cases go unreported.

Yet even in psychiatric circles, where obscure maladies frequently fill volumes, this phenomenon has scarcely been studied and has no commonly accepted name.

Many experts believe excessive hoarding often is a reaction to fear and loneliness. Sometimes, they say, it is caused by mental illness, such as obsessive-compulsive or paranoid-schizophrenic disorders. Other times, it might be explained by an impoverished childhood or other traumatic loss.

What is known is that those who live in trash-packed homes are almost always elderly, reclusive, distrustful and without friends or nearby family. A few exhibit signs of dementia, but many appear lucid and intelligent. Although most have middle-class roots, their money is usually stowed away or scattered throughout the filth.

Above all, these people's lives are characterized by an exaggerated attachment to their belongings, a bond that creates the illusion of abundance where otherwise there is a void, say mental health experts. Each item, sometimes even urine and used toilet paper, is attributed an unnatural value, until eventually refuse has run its collector right out of house and home.

"It's like food and drink for these people," said Tom D. Olin, a community mental health psychologist at the Arcadia Mental Health Center. "It's as if the more one has, the more one feels filled up inside emotionally."

Like the sinners in Dante's *Inferno* who were forced to suffer under the weight of their own excesses, so stew the victims of what one psychiatrist calls the "pack-rat syndrome." In just the last year, the following cases have come to light in Southern California:

—The Santa Barbara woman who wore diapers she made from plastic trash bags, saving the used ones in the dark garage she called home, along with two dozen large soda bottles filled with urine and a cooler so saturated with spoiled fruit that worms were oozing through the Styrofoam.

—The East Los Angeles woman who collected so much damp, decaying rubbish that everything in the first floor of her home turned to black, silty compost.

—The downtown Los Angeles man who lived in a junk-filled garage with dozens of dogs and cats, as well as several dead ones he had killed in a vain stab at veterinary medicine.

—The Windsor Hills man who died when flames leapt from the layers of trash in his two-story home, but whose body could not be found until firefighters hauled away more than 50 tons of charred debris.

"I really think it's a character trait—greed—taken to its farthest end," said Michael Theule, a Los Angeles fire inspector. "They can't pass a trash can without taking something off the top. In their minds, they really think they can find a use for this junk. They think they're going to get something for nothing."

Mental health experts generally view such hoarding with a bit more sympathy, explaining it as a way for the elderly to feel secure at a time when much else in their lives has begun to deteriorate. In the same sense that an infant might be distraught over flushing the toilet for fear of losing a part of himself, a pack rat clings to all belongings for fear of facing mortality ill-equipped.

"The garbage gives them the idea, metaphorically, that they can meet their own needs," said Carole Lieberman, the Malibu psychiatrist who coined the term *pack-rat syndrome*. "As all their powers are beginning to disintegrate, they're trying to make sure they will have what they need to take care of themselves, to make sure that everything is OK in their own little cocoon."

As, increasingly, older people may live long distances from their children and other family members, some experts fear the problem could become even more widespread. The hoarders, they say, are our parents and grandparents, our aunts and uncles, with whom we fall out of touch, and who, in turn, fall out of touch themselves.

"Even though it may sound simplistic, human beings are social animals and we really need somebody who cares," said Lissy Jarvik, a UCLA psychiatrist and author of *Parent Care*, a guide for adult children. "Accumulating things is just a symptom that these people are isolated and lonely."

It is nothing new, of course, for the isolated and lonely to collect junk and other oddities.

In his 19th-Century novel, *Great Expectations*, Charles Dickens wrote of the grim Miss Havisham, an embittered spinster jilted at the altar, who ever after wore a yellowed bridal gown, withered flowers and kept a moldy wedding cake in a cobweb-filled room.

Silent film star Mary MacLaren, who was romanced on the screen in the 1920s by the likes of Rudolph Valentino and Lionel Barrymore, lived her final years in two rooms of a once-grand Hollywood house amid trash, animal waste, flies and pigeons.

Perhaps the most celebrated such case involved the eccentric Collyer brothers, two elderly New Yorkers whose deaths in 1947 made headlines and drew crowds to the boarded-up brownstone where they had lived in seclusion for nearly 40 years.

The sons of a wealthy Manhattan gynecologist and a domineering mother who read the classics aloud in Greek, Langley and Homer Collyer had amassed an incredible array of musty newspapers, rancid food, rotting clothes and useless junk, all pierced by winding tunnels and guarded by booby traps that would crush intruders with a deluge of garbage.

Homer, 65, who was blind and paralyzed, was found dead, sitting otherwise naked in a tattered bathrobe, after police entered the building on an anonymous tip. Officers foraged through the garbage for three weeks before they finally found Langley, 61, smothered under the weight of one of his own traps.

"Perhaps the mother might have been the answer since she was the most dominant character in the family," wrote journalist Helen Worden Erskine in *Out of This World*, a 1953 collection of essays about hermits.

"It was the mother who made all the decisions," she wrote. "They lived for her, she for them. The tragedy was that by her overpowering devotion she rendered helpless the two human beings she loved best. After her death, they were utterly without initiative."

Such unpleasant ends happen more often than they should because authorities view living conditions, up to a certain point, as essentially private matters.

The garbage, which may be personal refuse or that collected from the streets, is frequently hoarded for years by people who have few acquaintances and who allow even fewer visitors into their homes. Even if a neighbor or relative suspects a problem, say officials, the law allows for a fair amount of filth and eccentricity before a public agency may intervene.

"As a mental health professional, I wish the laws were looser so that we could intervene before it reached that level," said Larry Wicker, acting chief of the Los Angeles County Mental Health Department's Long Beach district. "But the laws are very pro-civil rights, often to the exclusion of the kind of humane care that a person might need."

That dilemma has served as a backdrop to the year-long fight by Camarillo to clean the home of Kelton Roberts, who, now barred from the property, has been living on the streets with a shopping cart stacked high with personal effects.

Camarillo officials concede they knew of problems at the house as early as 1980, but say they were not aware of the severity until a flurry of complaints from neighbors prompted a more detailed inspection last April.

Although some officials wanted to clear the house with haste, others argued that the city should proceed cautiously, giving Roberts a chance to turn over a new leaf.

"We were concerned about her from a humanitarian perspective and wanted to give her every chance to comply," said Assistant City Atty. Lisa Kranitz. "We weren't going to just show up with a bulldozer and say, 'Hi, we're here.' "

Roberts, a plump, ruddy-faced woman with a keen wit, attributes some of her hoarding to a gypsylike childhood, in which her parents split up during the Depression. She followed her mother across Europe and around the U.S. for years, living in more than a dozen cities by the time she enrolled in an outdoors-oriented private high school in Colorado.

"We moved all the time and I hated it," she said the other day, as a demolition crew scooped the contents of her house into a dumpster. "I wanted roots, but my mother had a wanderlust you wouldn't believe."

When Roberts and her husband, Frank, an electronics technician for the Navy, bought their one-story duplex in 1954, she believed she finally had a nest where she could keep things around as she never could as a child. "I thought I had a haven here for the rest of my life," she said.

Always energetic, Roberts was an outspoken participant at meetings of Camarillo Beautiful, as well as the Camarillo City Council, the local school board and the Ventura County Board of Supervisors. She also raised her two children, Ronald, now 37 and a part-time landscaper in Santa Barbara, and Richard, 35, a sonar technician in the Coast Guard.

But, in 1967, her husband died suddenly after routine surgery. Not long afterward, her sons moved out. And Roberts, who had always kept the place a little cluttered, began to lose interest in maintaining order.

"I realized that nobody else cared but me," she said, eyes wide behind her antique aluminum glasses. "I kind of got the attitude of 'Why bother?' "

That attitude has frustrated Camarillo health and building inspectors, who say Roberts has failed to meet every deadline set for cleaning the place up over the last year. Even her son Ronald, who was appointed her conservator in January, began to lose patience with his mother's procrastination.

"I don't know if it's by choice or by some psychological problem that forces her to live like this," he said. "But she'll fight to the death to prevent anybody from helping her. . . I feel sorry for her, but unless she makes a decision to change, there's nothing I can do."

In fact, Roberts said she has seen a psychologist, who Roberts said believes she might be suffering from an obsessive-compulsive disorder that prevents her from discarding things she really doesn't need. Although she said she didn't know if she would pursue treatment, she joked that she would make "a pretty good guinea pig" if someone wanted to study the ailment.

For now, though, Roberts is homeless and without any particular plan. Nights are passed curled up in an isolated corner of Camarillo that she doesn't want to reveal. Days are spent in a nearby self-storage locker picking treasures from the boxes of junk she was able to salvage from her house.

"Nothing of real value," she said, gazing at a few yellowing photos. "Just sentimental."