

Thom Marshall
 C NEWS
Flag endures even the gutter
 THOM MARSHALL
 Staff
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English

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CORRECTION: Hawaii was the 50th state. Alaska was the 49th. Correction published 7/6/92.

AN AMERICAN FLAG was lying in the gutter.

I was riding my bicycle by the dawn's early light on Friday, pedaling through a southwest Houston neighborhood when I saw the flag. I stopped, picked it up and put it in my pocket.

Hundreds of similar flags, on little wooden staffs, had been stuck into the ground at the edge of manicured lawns in front of hundreds of well-maintained American-Dream-come-true brick homes.

A card attached to each staff indicated the flags were being used to promote a local business, as well as observe a national holiday.

After I got back to my house, caught my breath and cooled down with some orange juice, I took the flag out for a close look.

It measures 12 1/2 inches at the hoist and 18 1/2 at the fly. I learned those two words from an encyclopedia.

""The hoist of a flag is its perpendicular edge, or its height when flying from staff," the dictionary said. ""The outer end, or the length of the flag, is the fly."

In bold capital letters along the hoist of that flag I found in the gutter is printed ""MADE IN U.S.A." In smaller letters is the name and address of the manufacturer.

True-blue American plastic

The flag is made of a plastic material. At one time, probably about the same period that the houses in that neighborhood were being built, you might have expected such an inexpensive mass-produced plastic item to be made in Japan.

No more. These days it would be sheer folly for a company to promote itself using plastic American flags made in Japan.

These days, with the balance of trade the way it is, and unemployment the way it is, and so many cars and television sets and other big-ticket high-tech products being made in Japan, it is important to make sure that any little plastic flags we scatter about on the Fourth of July are American made.

I counted the stars, just to check. Fifty. Do you remember when the 50th was added and for which state?

1960. Alaska (SEE CORRECTION).

That is about the same time the houses were built in that neighborhood where I was bicycling. Give or take a few years. America still was enjoying the post-World War II boom then. Rich.

It was the biggest lender of all the world's countries. Now it borrows the most.

So much has happened since the 50-star version of the flag we use today first was flown and people were moving into the brand new brick homes in that neighborhood.

The nation has been rocked by race riots, the assassination of the Kennedy brothers and Brother King, Vietnam, Watergate, Iran-Contra, October Surprise and more race riots.

Our society has been bombarded by many complex and divisive issues and problems -- AIDS, abortion, homelessness, pollution, sexual harassment. Many of us have spent a lot of time arguing about how we should react to the problems, how we should seek answers to them.

We also have invested much time and energy in arguments about the flag.

United we stand

Remember Abbie Hoffman being arrested in 1968 for wearing an American flag shirt at a House Un-American Activities Committee session?

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Three years later an 18-year-old Ohio State University student was arrested by police for sitting on the flag that he he had sewn on the back pocket of his jeans. An original sentence of three months in prison was appealed and reduced to a \$200 fine.

But fashion trends sometimes change drastically, and in 1989 Ralph Lauren came out with some Old Glory sweaters. And now you can find the flag on everything from umbrellas to socks to sunglasses to underwear.

In 1989, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that flag burning is a First Amendment right. There was a lot of argument after that decision, including a President Bush-led drive for a constitutional amendment to ban flag burning, but it didn't pass and things have seemed pretty quiet, flag-wise, lately.

Maybe something we've learned from all this is that symbols can be difficult to define and control and categorize. Especially when the symbol stands for something as complex and involved and ever-changing as the United States of America.

As for how that flag wound up in the gutter, it likely was not a deliberate act. It probably was a matter of carelessness. And perhaps there is some symbolism somewhere in that.

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