

Media Contact:

Vicky Shokatz

(414) 239-0407

vshokatz@buzzmonkeyspr.com

New interactive exhibit explores evolution of scrap industry

Jewish Museum Milwaukee opens Scrap Yard: Innovators of Recycling Oct. 8

MILWAUKEE, WI – Sept. 30, 2021 – Jewish Museum Milwaukee’s (JMM) newest exhibit, *Scrap Yard: Innovators of Recycling*, opens Oct. 8. *Scrap Yard* tells the story of scrap recycling, an industry that turns waste into raw materials, has given millions of people a livelihood and a community, and has propelled American industry and innovation for centuries. This groundbreaking national traveling show is accompanied by a local component telling the stories of Wisconsin people and companies. The exhibit features over 300 objects and media pieces, along with a number of interactive displays that make the visitor feel like they’re walking through a giant scrap yard.

“Scrap entrepreneurs were the originators of what we now call recycling,” said Molly Dubin, JMM curator. “Hard working individuals and families who were once seen as junk peddlers grew to become the global businesses that invented solutions to what we do as a society with trash.”

For over 200 years, discarded metals, rags, paper and animal hides have provided economic opportunities for immigrants and native-born Americans who collected, stored, brokered and sold them. The work was grueling, scrappers were stigmatized, and the industry was criticized as a source of social and environmental ills. Still, generations of individuals and families gravitated toward the work—including many Jewish scrappers, who made up 70 to 90 percent of the industry for at least half of the 20th century.

In addition to the national perspective, the JMM exhibit explores Wisconsin’s history in the industry naming nearly 400 local companies, many of them multiple generation family-owned businesses. A scrapbook in the exhibit allows visitors to learn more about Wisconsin scrap stories.

“Our state has a very rich scrap history,” said Dubin. “In Wisconsin and across the industrial Midwest, scrap dealers became pillars of Jewish communities large and small, quickly dominating the industry.”

The exhibit is especially family-friendly, including a number of interactive displays to engage people of all ages. Visitors can find out their weight-based value in scrap; test the magnetism of a variety of everyday objects; pull a lever to figure out the strength required to make a bale of plastic water bottles; and listen to scrap industry songs and oral history interviews. Additional

displays show how common objects are reused, including a motorcycle broken down into its recyclable parts.

A variety of programs supplement the exhibit. Highlights include:

- **Virtual Opening Preview** – *Thursday, Oct. 7, 7 p.m.*
A presentation by *Scrap Yard* curator, museum consultant and historian, Zachary Paul Levine, a virtual tour with JMM staff and performance of family folk music featuring the washboard by local duo Fox & Branch.
- **America Recycles Day** – *Monday, Nov. 15*
Visitors receive free admission to commemorate the national holiday. JMM will also offer a \$2 discount if visitors bring an electronic for recycling on Oct. 31 or textiles on Nov. 17.
- **Junkyard Planet with Best-Selling Author Adam Minter** – *Thursday, Nov. 18, 7 p.m.*
This virtual program features Adam Minter, the world's best-selling chronicler of the global scrap industry. Minter takes participants on a journey from the small family scrap yard where he grew up, to massive recycling operations around the globe.
- **Conversation Starters** – *monthly conversations with industry leaders*
October: WasteCap Executive Director, Daniel Hartsig, reducing waste in the building industry and food waste
November: Recycling Connections Executive Director, Karin Sieg, the 40-year evolution of residential recycling
December: TBD
January: Tetrapak Sustainability Director, Jason Pelz, how businesses approach environmental practice

Scrap Yard: Innovators of Recycling was created by the Jewish Museum of Maryland and is accompanied by a Wisconsin-focused section curated by Jewish Museum Milwaukee. Ticket information, a full list of programming and more information is available at www.jewishmuseummilwaukee.org.

Major support for the exhibit and related programming comes from Alter Trading Corporation with support from the Brico Fund, Mellows Family & Charter Manufacturing Company, and WI Humanities. Connect with Jewish Museum Milwaukee on Facebook and Instagram @JewishMuseumMilwaukee and on Twitter @JewishMuseumMKE.

About the Jewish Museum Milwaukee

The Jewish Museum Milwaukee is dedicated to preserving and presenting the history of the Jewish people in southeastern Wisconsin and celebrating the continuum of Jewish heritage and culture. The history of American Jews is rooted in thousands of years of searching for freedom and

equality. The museum builds bridges between diverse groups of people through shared difficult histories and uses historical events and art to explore contemporary topics.

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