

The Case of the Missing Screwdriver

By John E. Conover, Jr., P.E.

One day I got a call from a citizen- he was walking his dog in the woods in Bellport, walking down a dirt road, and he came upon a dozen drums, contents unknown. I got the directions, then went out to see if I could find them.

I found them in the woods, maybe a mile or more from a paved road. About a dozen drums, none leaking. I had been doing this stuff long enough so I knew this was a crime scene and I did not touch the drums or go up close to them. I drove out of the woods, found a phone (no cell phone for me yet), called the office, and asked for the environmental investigators (Bureau of Environmental Criminal Investigators or BECI). The BECI guys arrived, then they called the Suffolk County Police Dept, Special Services. They dusted the drums for prints- found a nice palm print on one. They took a plaster cast of a tire track. (just like in Alice's Restaurant)

We hired a cleanup contractor to overpack the drums and take them away for proper disposal. One of the drums had a layer of dried paint on the top- and the imprint of a large screwdriver in the dried paint.

The BECI guys thought that the drums were paint wastes from an autobody shop- the three of them went out and started visiting the autobody shops nearby. I stayed with the contractor as they overpacked the drums.

A while later, one of the BECI guys came back with a large screwdriver. He asked me to open the overpack drum so he could see if the screwdriver matched the impression in the drum with the dried paint on top. It did. Case solved. They had gone into autobody shops nearby- there was a few, and in one, they saw a big screwdriver with dried paint.-- they said to the guy- we know you dumped the drums in the woods- what we want to know is did you dump any more somewhere else?

He confessed. Case closed.



BROOKHAVEN /
Environmental Case Solved

The screwdriver fixed the case. Eleven drums of auto waste were found last January in Brookhaven hamlet in the woods off Montauk Highway, and there, in the hardened gunk on top of one drum, investigators noticed the imprint of a screwdriver more than a foot long.

The screwdriver that matched the imprint was found in a nearby auto body shop in Bellport with some of the hardened material still on it.

Last week in Suffolk County Court in Riverhead, the company that owns the now-closed repair shop was ordered to pay cleanup costs, and three men plead guilty in the case.

Kel Car Associates, a company that its attorney said is practically defunct, and owner David Wheeler, 29, of Holtsville, pleaded guilty to third-degree endangering public health, safety or environment, a felony. Suffolk County Court Judge John Vaughn in Riverhead ordered the

company to pay \$8,000 in restitution for waste generated at Aerobic Auto Body.

— Ellen Yan

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