



CANADIAN COUNTERCULTURES AND THE ENVIRONMENT

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Countercultural Recycling in Toronto: The “Is Five Foundation” and the Origins of the Blue Box

Ryan O’Connor

Blue box recycling is big business in Ontario. In 2010 the program serviced 95 percent of the province’s homes; in the process, over 900,000 tonnes of materials—or 68 percent of the province’s total waste—was diverted from landfill. Managed by Waste Diversion Ontario, which was created by an act of the provincial Parliament, the program’s costs are evenly distributed among the municipalities and Stewardship Ontario, a not-for-profit organization funded by the companies whose products are collected.¹ Long renowned as one of the world’s most comprehensive and effective recycling programs, Ontario’s blue box initiative was recognized in 1989 with an environmental award of merit by the United Nations.² Use of the blue box has not been confined to Ontario; it has been adopted in hundreds of municipalities throughout Canada as well as the United States, Europe, and Australia. The successful, and widespread, adoption of the blue box belies that object’s rather humble origins. This chapter examines the story of the Is Five Foundation (IFF). Founded in 1974 according

to countercultural principles, the IFF was a beehive of activity that undertook a plethora of initiatives. The group found its greatest success in the field of recycling.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Toronto was home to a rich countercultural community. Stuart Henderson's *Making the Scene* documents how the Yorkville neighbourhood was the premier Canadian hippie destination in the 1960s.³ Grant Goodbrand has documented the sometimes strange story of the Therafields psychoanalytic experiment that developed in the Annex and grew to be the country's largest commune.⁴ Yorkville would eventually be gentrified, replacing its hippie-oriented cafés and coffee houses with upscale shopping, while Therafields has long since sold off its once extensive properties. The IFF, then, provides something unique. On any given day throughout Toronto—or elsewhere in Ontario and around the world—people view a curbside reminder of this countercultural organization's legacy.

Exploring the experience of the IFF furthers our growing understanding of Toronto's countercultural past as well as its contributions to Canada's environmental history. This chapter will also shed light on the relationship between the counterculture and business. In one respect, the IFF operated a number of business ventures, aimed at generating the income necessary to continue operations and sufficient for the members to earn a living. In creating the blue box, the IFF and its spinoff organizations worked closely with a variety of corporations, most notably Laidlaw Waste Systems Ltd. While we tend to think of the counterculture as being, by nature, averse to "big business"—how many times have we heard critiques of former hippies who "sold out" and began working for "the man"?—the story of the IFF reveals this notion to be rather simplistic. Just as some of the key innovators in the personal computer industry had countercultural backgrounds, the IFF had similar entrepreneurial success.⁵ The IFF demonstrates how a countercultural organization can, through natural developments and happenstance, develop into a mainstream corporate entity.

JACK MCGINNIS AND THE FOUNDING OF THE IS FIVE FOUNDATION

Born on January 3, 1947, and raised in the prosperous Cleveland suburb of Solon, Ohio, Jack McGinnis was the third of four children. From an early age, McGinnis showed the signs of a sharp intellect, which was verified when tests conducted in high school revealed he had a genius-level IQ. A mischievous youth—a characteristic his sister attributes to the boredom of life in a small town—he developed an interest in writing while in high school. Having worked at the school newspaper, during which time he won awards in various national writing competitions, he decided to study journalism at the University of South Florida in Tampa.⁶

In sharp contrast to his life in staid Solon, McGinnis found Tampa to be an intellectually nourishing environment. McGinnis enjoyed the cultural and ideological diversity found on campus and in the surrounding city. While he continued writing, he engaged in other activities such as experimental theatre. Described as a “free spirit” by some and a “hippie” by others, he, like so many of his contemporaries, underwent a dramatic physical transformation in the late 1960s. Whereas his hair had previously been cropped short and he had been inclined to wear khakis—the traditional preppy look—he began to grow his hair and beard long and to wear blue jeans.⁷

The cynical political climate of the late 1960s, marked by the escalating war in Vietnam and Richard Nixon’s election as president, began to take its toll on McGinnis. A teenage bout with spinal meningitis left him draft exempt. His friends were not as fortunate, leading some to move to Canada as war resisters. Shortly after graduating in 1969, McGinnis and his first wife, Michelle, made the decision to follow his friends north, believing that it would be unconscionable to continue living in the United States. They initially lived in the Niagara region, where he worked as a photojournalist. In 1971, McGinnis moved to Toronto and began working a variety of odd jobs, which included driving a bookmobile and a taxicab. These work experiences

proved to be less than fulfilling and were the impetus for some inspired thinking. As he recalls,

I had realized years before that I wasn't really cut out to work for anybody else. That wasn't my lot in life, not what I enjoyed. And so I started something in the early seventies, just a small business, and was really successful, in those terms anyway, but then had a huge shock which was the realization [that] as much as I didn't like working for somebody, I also didn't like the idea of somebody working for me, which was more of a surprise than the first one was. So what came out of that was a strong desire to find a way to work with people, and I didn't really know what it exactly was at that point, I just knew it was looking for a way to take on something with other people in a teamwork relationship, not in a traditional business way. That was the stronger thing for me: I hadn't really set out to be an environmentalist or to be a recycler or anything else. I set out to be a "worker co-operative" person.⁸

The desire to create a worker co-operative resulted in the creation of the "Is Five Foundation." The choice of a rather unusual name was deliberate, as McGinnis felt it would create a natural opportunity to explain the organization's purpose. The name was derived from two sources: Buckminster Fuller's concept of synergy, and a book of poetry, *is 5*, by E. E. Cummings. According to McGinnis, "The idea was to find a way for people to work together so that it was exciting and inspiring, and so ultimately the whole would be greater than the sum of the parts, and what we did together would be more than if we worked on our own."⁹ In essence, the aim was to empower people through co-operation. "We wanted to tell people there was a problem," explains McGinnis, "but the solution was them in their own home and their own lifestyle. So it was very much people working together within the group, and trying to find practical ways to ask

people in their own home and eventually in their workplace to do things differently.”¹⁰

The IFF established itself as a non-profit, registered charity and began operation as a collective, with its seven initial members all participating in decision making. Its first effort was a roadside, multi-material pickup that operated weekly in Toronto’s east-end Beaches district. Launched in January 1975, Project One Recycling filled a sizable void. Despite a growing awareness of the benefits of recycling, a by-product of the emerging environmental consciousness of the period, few options existed for those wishing to participate in this activity. Due to the high value of newsprint, the city of Toronto began experimenting with paper pickups in 1971.¹¹ Those wanting to recycle items such as metal, plastic, or non-newsprint forms of paper were forced to seek out depots where they could drop off their materials. The depots, which tended to be staffed by volunteers, were often short-lived operations, fluctuating with market prices for reclaimed materials and the ability to procure government grants to cover operating costs.¹² Prior to beginning operations, IFF members travelled door to door publicizing the program while McGinnis drove the organization’s lone vehicle, a pickup truck. Project One Recycling focused on practical research. According to the IFF, “It is designed to evaluate the feasibility of source-separated collection for recycling. . . . This project has provided assistance to the advancement of environmentally sound recycling methods. This project continues as a service to the community and for its research potential.”¹³ While the numbers were not particularly impressive—by 1977 an estimated four thousand residents were participating—McGinnis was generally pleased with the results. As he notes, “We didn’t have professional equipment. We didn’t have blue boxes. Everybody had to use cardboard boxes or whatever. So there were definitely limits. What went well was the community involvement and the fact that people would listen to reason. People were proving what we believed in: people were naturally good, you just needed to give them the tools.”¹⁴ The IFF would later find out that theirs was the first roadside, multi-material pickup to operate in Canada.¹⁵

EXPANSION OF THE IS FIVE FOUNDATION

McGinnis's astute business sense enabled the IFF to expand dramatically in its second year. Seeking support from the Local Initiatives Program (LIP), a federal employment scheme, he recognized that there would be major competition for funding, which was capped at \$100,000.

We knew we were up against a lot of competition after our first year because other people had heard about the program and even though we'd done fairly well and they seemed to like what we'd done in year one we knew we'd have to be clever. And we wanted to get bigger and figured out they gave out the money riding by riding. So there was competition ... [within] a federal riding, but often there was a bit of money left over once they got done deciding who was going to get the priority. So we figured out how to come up with the smallest grant we could apply for—the least amount of people for the shortest amount of time. I did twenty-one applications, photocopied exactly the same with every federal riding in Toronto, except the one in the Beaches where we had our original grant. So with the Beaches we got another round of seven people as the head office, and out of the twenty-one [applications] we submitted they approved eleven of them, without knowing it. When they had their first get-togethers for the project officers to meet their new grantees, it was only then that they figured out how much money they'd give [*laughs*], which was well over \$100,000.¹⁶

McGinnis' canny manoeuvring led to a revamped application process the following year, as LIP applicants were required to identify whether they were simultaneously applying for funding in any other federal ridings. Nonetheless, the LIP funds enabled the IFF to undertake a variety of projects, employing twenty-nine people full-time at its peak.

The bulk of the IFF's income, not to mention its public renown, came from its work in recycling; however, this was far from its only

focus. From the outset, the aim was to create an environment in which individuals would work together to pursue their collective interests. A review of the group's periodical, the humorously named *Another Newsletter*, reveals a great diversity of projects that reflected the IFF's countercultural basis. These projects generally fell into one of three categories. The promotion of a healthy lifestyle was a major focus. The newsletter featured numerous easy-to-make yet healthy recipes. IFF members conducted a survey of the nutritional value of food options available to office workers taking their lunch break in downtown Toronto. They created an exercise booklet summarizing the advice of experts, noting that a fit body was essential to achieving physical and mental health. Likewise, in a September 1977 column, member Tim Michael provided a first-hand account of how he had managed to quit smoking, complete with practical tips.¹⁷

Energy issues were also prominent. While some attention was devoted to alternative energy sources, such as solar power, the subject of energy conservation was of particular interest. This can be seen in the inclusion of workshops and practical tips to help save on heating along with a demonstration of how old newspapers could be used as insulation.¹⁸ The newsletter also revealed the organization's abiding interest in waste reduction. In the September 1977 issue, Michael Johnson explained how he recovered useful items such as furniture, an eight-track player, and Pirelli radial tires from the garbage. The group hosted a weekly flea market in its centrally located Dupont Street headquarters, with the proceeds helping to fund its activities. It also established a "community waste exchange" to redistribute useful but low-value items that would otherwise be destined for landfill.¹⁹

While environmentalists have generally advocated for the development of recycling programs, it is important to note that recycling was not viewed as an ecological panacea. In itself, recycling is not a particularly radical action, as it allows for the continuation of the consumer-driven lifestyle. According to the 3Rs waste hierarchy introduced in 1973 by the Toronto-based Pollution Probe, the key to combatting waste is threefold. First, individuals must reduce their consumption, as this will cut down on the wasteful use of raw

materials and energy. Second, individuals must reuse items. Finally, those items that cannot be reused should be recycled. While recycling proved preferable to both sending products to landfill and utilizing virgin resources, it was the final step in this hierarchical process because extensive energy and resources are required to collect and physically recycle the materials. If the 3Rs are viewed as an inverse pyramid, “reduce” limits the amount of goods consumed, “reuse” further limits this, and “recycle” is only for the remaining items.²⁰ This philosophy was consistent with the thought process at the IFF. As was noted in an *Another Newsletter* article timed to coincide with the 1977 Christmas shopping season, “Recycling is good, but reduction is better. . . . Our first opportunity to limit our personal wastage of valuable natural resources generally comes as we are deciding what products to buy.”²¹ As Derek Stephenson noted in a 1978 interview with *Globe and Mail* reporter John Marshall, active participation in the recycling process was an important step in recognizing broader issues. He explained, “Individuals just can’t see how they can clean up the Great Lakes, save the seals, stop rip-offs. But they can peel labels off cans. It’s a start towards an acceptance of the environmental ethics of a conserver society.”²²

Stephenson was drawn to the success of the IFF. A recent graduate of the University of Western Ontario, he had studied under William Bunge, the innovative urban geographer and spatial theorist whose radical politics led him to flee the United States in the early 1970s.²³ “He knocked me right out of the system,” Stephenson recalls.²⁴ Upon graduating, Stephenson and his classmate Tom Scanlan moved to Toronto to run, with six others, the Toronto Geographical Expedition. Patterned after the earlier, Bunge-led Detroit Geographical Expedition and Institute, which brought together locals and geographers from Michigan State University to study power dynamics within the African-American neighbourhood of Fitzgerald, the Toronto project brought together eight “urban explorers” who spent the year living in a house on Brunswick Street. Maintaining a constant dialogue with the local residents, they engaged in a sophisticated power analysis of the inner city, focused upon traffic patterns and park life as well as

the effects of high-rise apartments on the development of children.²⁵ With this project completed, Stephenson and Scanlan backpacked throughout Europe, speaking at numerous universities about their work. Upon returning to Toronto, and looking for new projects to undertake, Stephenson was directed to McGinnis. As Stephenson recalls of their meeting,

He and I hit it off, probably in the first fifteen minutes. He was describing all the things his organization wanted to do with public transportation, which was a strong interest of mine as an urban geographer, organic gardening, health-related things, energy conservation, and something called “recycling.” . . . I said, “Well, this sounds very interesting. I would join you as the research director for Is Five but the one thing I’m not interested in is recycling” [because I said it didn’t turn my crank and I don’t see people sorting out their garbage, so how about I do everything else but that? And from that sort-of-fateful moment I started to get involved, getting introduced to the concept of recycling, and got drawn into it.²⁶

Scanlan, incidentally, would also join IFF, focusing on the publication of educational textbooks and workbooks.²⁷

As the IFF further established itself at the forefront of the local recycling industry, it began to attract something rare: volunteers with experience in the field. Such is the case of Toni Ellis. While studying at New Brunswick’s Mount Allison University, Ellis had started a campus recycling program. Bothered by the amount of waste paper created by faculty, staff, and students, she filled her knapsack with an assortment of paper types and hitchhiked to Moncton, where she visited a recycling plant. Having determined that the plant could indeed make use of these papers, Ellis organized a collection program. Upon graduating in 1976 she moved to Ottawa, where she helped the local Pollution Probe affiliate establish a fine-paper recycling program, collecting materials from government offices in the city. A few months

later she moved to Toronto and enrolled briefly in a public health inspection program at Ryerson Polytechnical Institute. After speaking to a city employee about her interest in recycling, Ellis was encouraged to contact Jack McGinnis; she subsequently visited the IFF office on Dupont Street and offered to volunteer. She laughs as she recalls that the response to her offer was not quite what she had expected: “They said, ‘Oh yeah, sure, we could use some volunteers. Here, take the vacuum.’”²⁸ Ellis became one of dozens of volunteers dedicated to working with the IFF.

In 1978 the IFF launched two recycling programs in the Greater Toronto Area. Even with careful planning, the recycling industry was notoriously turbulent. This would become particularly evident in the case of a weekly newspaper-pickup program started in North York. Focusing on the area between Victoria Park Avenue and Bayview Avenue, and from Highway 401 to the borough’s southern limit, the project was suspended shortly after it began, as the IFF’s paper broker, Attic Insulation, went bankrupt.²⁹ However, this failure was offset by resounding success elsewhere. On December 8, 1977, the IFF submitted a proposal to the East York Works Committee to operate a weekly newspaper pickup throughout the borough, with IFF assuming all costs. Approved by the works committee four days later, the plant received the go-ahead from East York council on December 19, 1977.³⁰ Operating under the auspices of the East York Conservation Centre (EYCC), pickup began in February 1978, utilizing two trucks. Six months later the program had achieved 33 percent participation, averaging twenty-five to thirty tons of newspaper per week. By June 1979 these figures had increased to a 45 percent participation rate and thirty-five tons per week.³¹ At this point the EYCC boasted of running “Canada’s largest non-municipal source separate waste reclamation program” and expanded the program’s scope to include collection of cardboard, glass, and metals.³²

As explained in a November 1979 report, the “East York recycling project was initiated to provide a demonstration of the viability of local at-source recovery programs.”³³ Documenting their extensive planning in a series of reports, the IFF also took the opportunity to

study the functionality of various technologies and approaches to recycling. As the group acknowledged, a “major barrier to the successful implementation of at-source recovery on a broad scale was identified as a lack of suitable collection equipment designed for multimaterial curbside collection of recyclable materials.”³⁴ Having started with a pickup truck in the Beaches in 1975, by the time the East York pickup began the IFF had purchased a GMC MagnaVan with a 2.5-ton carrying capacity and rented a similarly equipped vehicle. The foundation received funding through Environment Canada’s Development and Demonstration of Resource and Energy Conservation Technology Program, which allowed them to collaborate with the Toronto-based DEL Equipment Ltd. in the creation of a vehicle specially designed for recycling programs. The resulting prototype cut down on the physical labour involved in collection, enabled a two-person crew to collect multiple waste streams, was capable of automatic unloading, and was priced competitively with existing collection vehicles. Having organized and run some of Toronto’s pioneering recycling programs, the IFF was also intimately involved in the development of the associated recycling technology.

THE SPINOFF ORGANIZATIONS

The twin problems of rising unemployment levels and inflation in the aftermath of the 1973 energy crisis led the federal government to introduce austerity measures. This, Dennis Guest has noted, resulted in the cancellation of various governmental make-work programs, while LIP saw its budget cut dramatically beginning in 1976.³⁵ The IFF therefore had to seek alternative sources of income. This search was met with varying degrees of success. In addition to recycling, the group generated income from its flea markets and the use of its press, which printed materials for local non-profit organizations. Nonetheless, staff were forced to fund their work with personal savings and income drawn from elsewhere while they awaited results of new funding applications.³⁶ However, the solution to the IFF’s financial woes soon appeared. As Stephenson explains, “We were starting

to get lots of consultants, people in really nice suits, coming by our operation to learn how we were doing things. We would tell everybody everything. And it dawned on me sometime that we were providing information that consultants were then selling to clients for a lot of money. I thought, ‘Wait a minute here, why don’t we do the consulting?’³⁷ In March 1977, Resource Integration Systems Ltd. (RIS) was launched to provide “consulting service in the field of conservation, with a particular emphasis on waste management and recovery systems.”³⁸ With Stephenson serving as president, RIS began funding the IFF’s activities by charging consultants’ rates for its expertise.

In July 1977 RIS received a subcontract to design and implement a multi-material recycling program for Canadian Forces Base (CFB) Borden. This project was the brainchild of Rick Findlay, senior project engineer at Environment Canada’s Environmental Protection Service, and had been inspired by a visit to the Centre for Resource Recovery (CRR), still under construction in the Downsview district of North York. The CRR was a mechanical separation system designed to handle all forms of recyclable materials. While the project was based on unproven technology, the province had invested \$20 million in it. Convinced that separation at source would prove much more efficient than the unproven mechanical separation system in which the province had invested millions, Findlay chose CFB Borden because of its proximity to markets for recovered materials, the detailed knowledge of its past waste generation and management practices, and the willingness of the Department of National Defence to consent to the project.³⁹ This project meshed with the IFF’s belief that separation at source was essential to environmental change, as it forced participants to consider their consumer habits. Stephenson recalls, “We were essentially given this place to experiment with recycling. Had a good budget, but we were subcontractors to consultants who were theoretical, MBA-types, while we were operational types. And from that experience we . . . got to play around with other people’s money and perfected a lot of techniques.”⁴⁰ The project resulted in the collection of corrugated boxes from shopping centres on the base, glass and bottles from its drinking establishments, paper and newsprint from

its offices, and cans, newspaper, and glass from its residences. When it ended in March 1979, the project was considered a success, with 45.9 percent participation in the curbside collection of newspaper and 21.4 percent in the collection of glass.⁴¹ It was subsequently determined that this program, if continued, could provide upwards of \$15,000 in net profit annually.⁴²

In 1978 Jack McGinnis secured a grant to spend three months meeting with recycling advocates and practitioners throughout Ontario in order to determine the need for a province-wide recycling organization. He also paid a visit to the West Coast in order to examine the model of the British Columbia Recycling Council, formed in 1973. As McGinnis later recalled, the trip left him with an unequivocal reaction: "For the first half of the tour . . . I'd tell people that we were thinking of forming a province-wide group. Halfway through, I was saying, 'We've formed a group.'"⁴³ For two days in June 1978 over one hundred interested parties gathered at the Holy Trinity Church in downtown Toronto to launch the Recycling Council of Ontario (RCO).⁴⁴

Beginning its life in the IFF offices at 477 Dupont Street, the RCO had a twofold agenda: to serve as a network for the province's non-profit recycling groups, and to develop co-operative marketing for its members. It had an early brush with success when the Ontario Paper Company announced its decision to build a de-inking plant in Thorold. The RCO had offered to provide 64 percent of the plant's needs within three years; however, an unstable market and pressure from the province's traditional paper companies that now viewed the organization as a threat led the RCO to abandon its marketing efforts. Despite this, the RCO flourished as an information provider. In March 1981 it established the Ontario Recycling Information Service (ORIS), which created a toll-free telephone line to answer the public's queries about recycling and available programs. Modelled after a service operating in Portland, Oregon, ORIS was fielding 20,500 questions per year by 1990.⁴⁵

The first executive director of the RCO was Eric Hellman. About to enter his freshman year at the University of Toronto with the

intention of becoming an engineer, Hellman underwent what he described as “an epiphany” while visiting Manitoulin Island during the summer of 1974. Feeling a sense of “oneness” with Lake Huron and the sun, Hellman recalls, “I just fell into the beauty of it. I remember the inner conversation going something like ‘I love this so much’ and then a . . . deep inner-voice said, ‘Well, why don’t you do something to help it?’ Totally nothing I’ve ever experienced before, but this kind of a deeper, larger sense of self. In that moment I knew that I would be going into environmental work.”⁴⁶ He promptly changed his course of study to reflect his newfound passion, supplementing it with volunteer experience at Pollution Probe, the city’s preeminent environmentalist organization. Hellman later transferred to the University of Waterloo in order to pursue a degree in environmental studies. Hellman organized Garbage Fest 77, an event held on November 19, 1977, that brought many of the province’s foremost environmentalists together in Waterloo to discuss waste issues. Having impressed members of the IFF, Hellman was hired to join RIS as a consultant before subsequently assuming his position with the RCO.⁴⁷

BIRTH OF THE BLUE BOX

Garbage Fest 77 also brought the IFF into contact with Nyle Ludolph. The director of special projects at the waste management company Superior Sanitation, Ludolph had previously cared little for recycling. However, the day spent in the company of recycling advocates had a transformative effect upon him: “My conscience got a hold of me and I said, ‘I’m going to try this.’ I went home that day and dug up a hole in the backyard for compost, and I put boxes at the side door in the garage and I said to the family, ‘We’re going to test this recycling thing.’ Consequently, we . . . only generated 102 pounds of garbage for the entire year.”⁴⁸ This amazed Ludolph, who notes that the average family of three at that time would normally generate a ton of garbage annually. As acquiring land for landfill sites was becoming increasingly difficult, he saw recycling as a way to help the company while at the same time earning the public’s support. His boss, Ron

Murray, president of Laidlaw Waste Systems Ltd., was also intrigued with the potential; however, Murray worried about the potential business implications. As Ludolph recalls, “He said, ‘Look, if we do that we may as well park the garbage trucks.’ And I said, ‘No, no. For every garbage truck we take off we put on a recycling truck. What’s the difference?’ He kind of agreed with that concept. We weren’t going to hurt our business any—it would complement our business.”⁴⁹ Despite Ludolph’s optimism for the initiative, he admits that “A lot of garbage handlers thought we had lost our minds.”⁵⁰

Following RIS’s success at CFB Borden, Ludolph approached Hellman about bringing recycling to Kitchener. According to Hellman,

He said to me, ‘Wouldn’t it be amazing if we could do this city-wide? If everybody would do this?’ And I’m looking at this guy who was head of garbage collection for this company going, ‘Do I hear what I’m hearing? Does he actually want to do recycling?’ I said, ‘Now, if you’re serious I’ll give you a proposal.’ So I went back to the office in Toronto that day and put together a proposal for the test program, which was approved by Superior [Sanitation] and became the foundation for the blue box.⁵¹

Hellman recalls Murray’s response to the proposal:

In the conversation about the proposal we had made to them he [Murray] said something very frank. ‘We make our money off of garbage. We make a good living. But something in me says this can’t last forever, that it doesn’t make sense, business-wise or social-wise, to be paying somebody to keep picking up garbage. At some point this has to turn into something like recycling, where there’s some good being made out of this material.’⁵²

Hellman’s proposal to examine the efficiency of a variety of collection methods from a sampling of one thousand homes in Kitchener

received funding from Laidlaw. RIS was given the opportunity to design the project, which would be carried out by a new division of Laidlaw headed by Ludolph. The project was an astounding success. Originally scheduled for six months, beginning in September 1981, it continued uninterrupted until 1983, when the recycling program went city-wide. Particularly positive results emerged from the homes—a quarter of the total sample—given a blue box in which to place their recyclables. According to Stephenson,

[for] the first hundred boxes that went out there, . . . participation rates went from one-third to maybe one-half of all households to essentially one hundred percent of all households. You gave them a box and people loved it. In fact, they loved it so much . . . we would get calls from different parts of Kitchener that would say, “You haven’t picked up my blue box today.” Well, they’d gone over to that neighbourhood and stolen one out of the test area and taken it over to their home.⁵³

And why was blue chosen as the colour of the boxes? As Stephenson recalls,

When we had the Kitchener program we were able to experiment with a hand-assembled one, what we used to call chloroplastics, and we assembled about 150 of these boxes. We hand stenciled them with “We Recycle.” They happened to be blue . . . [because] with plastics the darker it is the less likely it will break down with ultraviolet light, at least in those days. We thought black was good for that, and black would stand out in the snow, but it wasn’t very attractive. We didn’t want to go the conventional green, and so we picked a spectrum in there that was our best guess for what the right color was. We picked blue.⁵⁴

In 1983 Laidlaw’s blue box program went city-wide in Kitchener. Almost immediately, participation levels hit 85 percent.⁵⁵ As Ludolph

recalls, implementation of the program, which was strictly voluntary, was very easy. Bins, containing educational information, were left at the entrance of each home in the city. “When we distributed the 35,000 [blue boxes] I only had four people that said, ‘Come take this thing away, we’re not going to do this.’ I must tell you that within a week three of these people called back and said they had changed their mind.”⁵⁶ Despite the popularity of the expanded program, in which Laidlaw was heavily invested, it was nearly abandoned the following year when the company’s contract with the city expired. While the company attempted to recoup some of its costs in its follow-up bid, it was revealed that a rival garbage contractor without a recycling plan had submitted a bid \$400,000 lower than that of Laidlaw. However, at the ensuing general council meeting, public support for the blue box program, coupled with supportive presentations from Ludolph, Paul Taylor of the RCO, Pollution Probe’s executive director Colin Isaacs, and a group of schoolchildren who recited a poem on the merits of recycling persuaded council to accept the higher bid.⁵⁷

The blue box program continued to expand. In 1985 Laidlaw brought it to Mississauga. That same year, the Ontario Soft Drink Association (OSDA) made a deal with the provincial government: the Environmental Protection Act would be amended to allow the introduction to the Ontario market of non-refillable, but recyclable, aluminum and plastic containers. In return, the OSDA promised it would be recycling 50 percent of its containers by December 1988.⁵⁸ In 1986 the provincial government, industry, and municipalities struck an agreement to share the capital costs of starting a province-wide blue box recycling program. By 2011, 95 percent of Ontario households were serviced by blue box recycling programs.⁵⁹

CONCLUSION

The Is Five Foundation ceased operations in the mid-1980s, although its name, or at least a close approximation, continues in the guise of Scanlan’s Is Five Press. Meanwhile, the foundation’s consultation arm, RIS, parlayed its recycling expertise into global expansion. By the late

1990s the firm had grown to encompass five offices across Canada, the United States, and Europe, with seventy-five employees and \$8 million in annual sales. Stephenson notes with pride that RIS played an important role in setting up recycling programs in such far-flung locations as Belgium, France, and the United Kingdom. Such was the reputation and reach of RIS that it was acquired in 1998 by a British venture capital company, Enviros.⁶⁰

Stephenson continues to work in the business of recycling consultation. Whatever his original misgivings were concerning recycling, as expressed to Jack McGinnis at the time of their first meeting, the industry has made him a wealthy man. He is currently the Director of Global Solutions at Reclay Group, an international waste management consultancy, and a member of the board at LRS Consulting Ltd., a London-based firm specializing in sustainable resource management.⁶¹ McGinnis, meanwhile, left RIS in the 1980s and turned his focus to opening the Durham Conservation Centre in Pickering, which continues to operate as Durham SustainAbility, a non-profit environmental organization dedicated to educating and supplying the public with the tools necessary to live sustainable lives. He also established himself as a leader in operating recycling initiatives at special events, including the 1991 International Special Olympics, the 1992 Super Bowl, the 1996 Summer Olympics, and the 2002 Winter Olympics. On January 29, 2011, McGinnis passed away from respiratory failure. The ensuing accolades, published in the *Globe and Mail* and the *Toronto Star* as well as in various industry publications, highlighted his role as the “father of the blue box.”⁶²

Recycling proved to be a highly successful undertaking for McGinnis, Stephenson, and their colleagues. At the same time, it is interesting to note that the success of recycling led to the transformation of their *modi operandi*. RIS, after all, had been formed to help fund the operations of the countercultural IFF. While RIS initially attempted to maintain the spirit of its predecessor, the nature of its work rendered this impossible. Toni Ellis related a telling incident when officials from Alcan were scheduled to visit the IFF-RIS headquarters. Employees tended to dress casually in the office; however, with

important figures set to visit, there was a frantic effort to look more businesslike. As Ellis recalls with a laugh, “Somebody ran around the office handing out ties to all the guys that worked there so they could suddenly look more legitimate.”⁶³ The addition of clip-on ties may seem minor, but it underscores an important transformation. In order to conduct business, the staff at RIS were forced to professionalize. This meant dressing appropriately in order to be taken seriously; it also meant adopting standard office procedures and implements, such as personal computers.

This maturation of RIS coincided with the maturation of its staff. In the late 1970s they were, by and large, fresh out of university. By the early 1980s they had transitioned into working adults. According to Stephenson, “Not-for-profits [such as the IFF] are wonderful environments for young, motivated people for a period of their life, but if you can’t give them a career and adequate amount of money they eventually drift away.”⁶⁴ This is not to suggest that the group became entirely corporate in its culture. As Ellis explains, “While we were definitely getting more businesslike I don’t think we were losing our drive or our common vision.” Given their close working relationships and frequent social gatherings, she points out, RIS continued to feel much like a collective.⁶⁵

The IFF was born out of McGinnis’s desire to work with others in a fulfilling manner. While it would undertake a broad spectrum of activities, its greatest success came in the realm of recycling. In addition to operating some of Toronto’s earliest recycling programs, the IFF helped build the provincial recycling infrastructure through the creation of the RCO. It would also create RIS, the recycling consulting firm that created the iconic blue box and later took its expertise global. The countercultural organization with the strange name left a lasting legacy.

NOTES

- 1 The blue box is virtually synonymous with recycling in Ontario. A recent survey shows that 89 percent of Ontarians “feel that the Blue Box Program still remains the main driver of their recycling habits.” Further demonstrating the significance of the program is the fact that 75 percent stated that “the Blue Box is their primary environmental effort.” “2010 Stewardship Ontario Annual Report,” Stewardship Ontario, accessed 5 September 2012, http://stewardshipontario.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/SO_2010_Annual_Report_FINAL.pdf.
- 2 Tony Wong, “Ontario Blue Box Program Honored by UN Award,” *Toronto Star* (hereafter *Star*), 15 September 1989, A7.
- 3 Stuart Henderson, *Making the Scene: Yorkville and Hip Toronto in the 1960s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011).
- 4 Grant Goodbrand, *Therapies: The Rise and Fall of Lea Hindley-Smith’s Psychoanalytic Commune* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2010).
- 5 Walter Isaacson, *The Innovators: How a Group of Hackers, Geniuses, and Geeks Created the Digital Revolution* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 264–76.
- 6 These background details were derived from conversations with McGinnis and his sister Pat. Jack McGinnis, interview with the author, 8 July 2008; Pat Roderick, interview with the author, 13 November 2012.
- 7 McGinnis, interview; Roderick, interview.
- 8 McGinnis, interview.
- 9 McGinnis, interview. The name is also described in “Is Five Foundation Research and Public Education,” insert in *Another Newsletter* 2 (September 1977); John Marshall, “Metro Alchemists Turn Garbage into Gold,” *Globe and Mail*, 1 March 1978, 5.
- 10 McGinnis, interview.
- 11 Ryan O’Connor, *The First Green Wave: Pollution Probe and the Origins of Environmental Activism in Ontario* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2015), 88–89, 148–49.
- 12 The May 1972 edition of the *Probe Newsletter* listed information for twenty-four depots scattered throughout the Metropolitan area, while a May 19, 1972, profile of Metro recycling efforts in the *Star* estimated the number was closer to forty. These varied greatly, from community-oriented endeavours such as the Newtonbrook Secondary School depot, which accepted newspapers between noon and four o’clock on Sundays, and the Boy Scouts of Pack 33 depot, which operated out of a private residence on Christie Street, to for-profit operations such as the Canadian Paper Fibres Company on Commissioner Street and Consumers Glass Company on Kipling Avenue. “Metro

- Recycling Depots,” insert in *Probe Newsletter* 4, no. 3 (1 May 1972); E. H. Hausmann, “Waste Recycling Efforts Only Scratch the Surface,” *Star*, 19 May 1972, 8.
- 13 “Is Five Foundation Research and Public Education.”
- 14 McGinnis, interview.
- 15 Ibid.; Diane Humphries, *We Recycle: The Creators of the Blue Box Programme* (Toronto: Pollution Probe, 1997), p. 6, accessed 7 March 2008, <http://www.pollutionprobe.org/Reports/we%20recycle.pdf>.
- 16 McGinnis, interview. The actual amount, according to a contemporary newspaper report, was just over \$129,000. Jacques Bendavid, “Environmental Group Awaits New Funding,” *Star*, 1 September 1976, F3.
- 17 “Food and Nutrition,” *Another Newsletter* 2 (October 1977): 5; Tim Michael, “Is Five Fitness,” *Another Newsletter* 1 (June–July 1977): 6; Tim Michael, “Let’s Quit Smoking,” *Another Newsletter* 2 (September 1977): 6.
- 18 *Another Newsletter* printed an educational overview of solar energy, complete with a reading list for further information, while Bob Argue, vice-president of the Solar Energy Society of Canada, gave a presentation on the subject during the IFF’s March 1977 general meeting. “Solar Energy,” *Another Newsletter* 1 (March 1977): 2–3; “General Meeting,” *Another Newsletter* 1 (March 1977): 3.
- For information on the group’s conservation efforts, see Arthur Jacobs, “Energy Conservation—A New Frontier,” *Another Newsletter* 1 (June–July 1977): 5; “The Is Five Seminars and Practical Workshops,” *Another Newsletter* 2 (October 1977): 2; “Energy Conservation: Making Insulation from Old Newspapers,” *Another Newsletter* 2 (October 1977): insert.
- 19 Michael Johnson, “Junkie!” *Another Newsletter* 2 (September 1977): 7; “Warehouse,” *Another Newsletter* 1 (February 1977): 5; Jack McGinnis, “Is Five Inaugurates Free Waste Exchange,” *Another Newsletter* 1 (June–July 1977), 2.
- 20 Gregory Bryce to the Toronto Recycling Action Committee, 10 January 1973, F1057 MU7361, Ontario Archives, Toronto; O’Connor, *The First Green Wave*, 110–12.
- 21 “Reduction is Better,” *Another Newsletter* 2 (November 1977), 6.
- 22 Marshall, “Metro Alchemists,” 5.
- 23 Bunge was an unrepentant Communist who appeared between H. Rap Brown and Stokely Carmichael on a 1970 House Internal Security Committee list of radical campus speakers. David E. Rosenbaum, “House Panel Lists ‘Radical’ Speakers,” *New York Times*, 15 October 1970, 23.
- 24 Derek Stephenson, interview with the author, 11 December 2009.

- 25 For more information about these projects, see Ronald J. Horvath, "The 'Detroit Geographical Expedition and Institute' Experience," *Antipode* 3, no. 1 (1971): 73–85; Derek Stephenson, "The Toronto Geographical Expedition," *Antipode* 6, no. 2 (1974): 98–101; Clark Akatiff, "'Then, like now . . .': The Roots of Radical Geography, a Personal Account," *Antipode*, posted 4 September 2012, <http://antipodefoundation.org/2012/09/04/then-like-now-the-roots-of-radical-geography-a-personal-account>.
- 26 Stephenson, interview.
- 27 Tom Scanlan, "Is Five and Education," *Another Newsletter* 1 (June–July 1977): 1–2; Tom Scanlan, interview with the author, 10 June 2011.
- 28 Toni Ellis, interview with the author, 26 October 2012.
- 29 Harold Hilliard, "North York Okays Newspaper Pick-Up for 3-Month Trial," *Star*, 5 September 1979, A22.
- 30 "Environment/Jobs—Conflict or Harmony," *Another Newsletter* 2 (December 1977): 2.
- 31 *Investigation of the Feasibility of Increasing Corrugate Cardboard Recovery through Industrial and Commercial Source Separation in Ontario* (Toronto: Is Five Foundation/Resource Integration Systems, 1979), 1.
- 32 *Ibid.*, i (quotation), 8.
- 33 *Description and Evaluation of the East York Recycling Model* (Toronto: Resources Integration Systems, 1979), 7.
- 34 Is Five Foundation, *Development and Demonstration of a Customized Truck for Collection of Glass, Metal and Paper Refuse* (Ottawa: Environment Canada, Technical Services Branch, 1983), 1.
- 35 Dennis Guest, *The Emergence of Social Security in Canada*, 3rd ed. (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003), 180–81.
- 36 "Self-Support Survival," *Another Newsletter* 2 (November 1977): 2–3; Marshall, "Metro Alchemists," 5.
- 37 Stephenson, interview.
- 38 Resource Integration Systems (hereafter RIS), *Submission to the Ontario Paper Company* (Toronto: 1980), 2.
- 39 RIS, *At-Source Recovery of Waste Materials from CFB Borden: The Viability of At-Source Recovery in Small Communities, Executive Summary* (Toronto: RIS, 1979), 1.
- 40 Stephenson, interview. CFB Borden consisted of 1,276 residences and nine commercial operations. The average weekly pickup totalled 4,515 pounds of newspaper and 907 pounds of glass from the residences, alongside 2,000 pounds of corrugated boxes, 440 pounds of glass, 1,000 pounds of computer paper, and 958 pounds of ledger-grade paper from the commercial operations and offices. RIS, *At-Source Recovery*, 33–34.

- 41 Ibid., 33.
- 42 Ibid., 7.
- 43 Quoted in Katharine Partridge, "RCO Celebrates 20 Years!" *RCO Update*, October 1998, 2.
- 44 Ibid., 1–2; "Government Policies Thwarting Recycling, Conference to be Told," *Globe and Mail*, 1 June 1978, 3; McGinnis, interview.
- 45 The toll-free service, renamed the Waste Reduction Information Service in 1993, was discontinued in 1996 as a result of government cutbacks. However, as of 1998 a walk-in service continued to operate. Partridge, "RCO Celebrates," 3, 5–7; Eric Hellman, interview with the author, 12 January 2010.
- 46 Hellman, interview.
- 47 "Garbage Fest 77," *Another Newsletter* 2 (October 1977): 6; Hellman, interview.
- 48 Nyle Ludolph, interview with the author, 16 January 2010. While recycling was seen as an economically viable activity, it appears that composting did not inspire the same confidence. Subsequently, compost pickups have historically been much scarcer in Ontario.
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 Ibid.
- 51 Hellman, interview.
- 52 Ibid. As Ludolph recalls of the meeting, "Eric had said, 'You're a waste management company but you don't manage waste. You just pick it up and bury it.' [laughs] My president, Ron Murray, was impressed with the honesty of Eric Hellman. He was very impressed, so he gave him an ear, and he agreed to give him \$70,000 in an experimental program in recycling." Ludolph, interview.
- 53 Stephenson, interview.
- 54 Ibid. Eric Hellman tells a slightly different story: "Jack [McGinnis] was the one who went to the plastics manufacturer and was looking at what kind of boxes we could get, found one that was reasonably economical and that was blue. It was a plastic corrugated container and that became the reason why it was blue." Hellman, interview.
- 55 Humphries, *We Recycle*, 8.
- 56 Ludolph, interview.
- 57 Ibid.; Stephenson, interview; Humphries, *We Recycle*, 8.
- 58 *A Brief History of Waste Diversion in Ontario* (Toronto: Canadian Institute for Environmental Law and Policy, 2008), 2; David McRobert, "Ontario's Blue Box System: A Case Study of Government's Role in the Technological Change Process, 1970–1991," (LLM thesis, York University, 1994), 40. While the blue box system would continue to expand across the province, dramatically increasing the recycling participation rate, the share of refillable soft drink containers would drop from a market share of 40 percent in 1986 to just 3 percent in 1993. Derek Ferguson, "NDP Record

- on Refillables Criticized,” *Star*, 24 November 1993, A10.
- 59 Stewardship Ontario, “The Story of Ontario’s Blue Box,” p. 19, accessed 15 September 2015, <http://stewardshipontario.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Blue-Box-History-eBook-FINAL-022513.pdf>.
- 60 Stephenson, interview; Geoff Love, “Curriculum Vitae,” Love Environment Inc., accessed 10 September 2012, <http://www.loveenvironment.com/cv.html>.
- 61 “Derek Stephenson,” LRS Consultancy website, accessed 10 September 2012, <http://www.lrsconsultancy.com/about-us/our-team/3/Derek-Stephenson>.
- 62 Louise Brown, “‘Father of the Blue Box’ Died This Week,” *Star*, 4 February 2011, <http://www.thestar.com/news/gta/article/933197---father-of-the-blue-box-died-this-week>; Tony Leighton, “Jack McGinnis,” *Globe and Mail*, 22 April 2011, <http://v1.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/LAC.20110422.LFLIVES0422MCGINNIS-ATL/BDAStory/BDA/deaths;GuyCrittenden,‘RecyclingCouncilofOntarioandBlueBoxFounderPassesAwayonJanuary29,2011,’SolidWaste&Recycling,1February2011,http://www.solidwastemag.com/news/jack-mcginnis-obituary/1000401159/>; Karen Stephenson, “Jack McGinnis—King of the Curbside,” *Green Solutions Magazine*, 1 April 2011, <http://www.greensolution-smag.com/?p=1765>.
- 63 Ellis, interview.
- 64 Stephenson, interview.
- 65 Ellis, interview.