The thousands involved in recycling — businesses, governmental agencies, environmental groups and others — owe much gratitude to a 51-year-old Baltimore resident. As a 23-year-old college student, he won a contest sponsored by a recycled product maker, and, by doing so, graphically helped push recycling forward. With this article, written by two of the many recycling professionals who have hunted for him in the past years, we reintroduce Gary Anderson to the recycling world.

Environmentalism’s heyday
In 1969 and early 1970, national attention toward environmental issues reached a crescendo, culminating in the first Earth Day. In response, then Chicago-based Container Corporation of America, a large producer of recycled paperboard which is now part of Stone-Smurfit Corp. (St. Louis), sponsored a contest for art and design students at high schools and colleges across the country. The CCA effort was headed by Bill Lloyd, the manager of design in the company’s public relations department. CCA asked students, “for the love of the earth,” to present designs that symbolize the recycling process. The three prizes were tuition at colleges chosen by the students.

CCA chose to have students submit the design, which would appear on the company’s recycled paperboard products, because, “as inheritors of the earth, they should have their say.” CCA at the time was the nation’s largest paper recycler, consuming 750,000 tons per year of secondary fiber.

The more than 500 submittals that were received were evaluated by a distinguished panel of designers at the 1970 International Design Conference in Aspen, Colorado. In September 1970, CCA awarded the top prize of $2,500 to a senior at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles — Gary Anderson — who used the funds to contin-
ue his education in Sweden. The symbol was a three-chasing-arrows Mobius loop, with the arrows twisting and turning among themselves. (August Ferdinand Mobius, the nineteenth century mathematician, discovered that a strip of paper twisted once over and joined at the tips formed a continuous, single-edged, one-sided surface.) Because of the symbol’s simplicity and clarity, it became widely used worldwide, and now is as common as the Nike “swoosh” and the Coca-Cola lettering.

Into the public domain
At the same time, in the fall of 1970, CCA was working with other paper and paperboard producers to assess how their industry should best address the rising call for fiber recycling. Because CCA now had a new symbol, the company chose to license Gary Anderson’s design, refined and adapted for print-use by Bill Lloyd, to trade associations for a nominal fee. In September 1970, the symbol was accepted by the three principal paper industry groups, the Fibre Box Association, the Paperboard Packaging Council and the American Paper Institute. CCA applied to the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office for registration of the symbol as a trademark. But registration for the symbol — now becoming popular due to CCA’s promotion of it — was challenged. The corporation dropped its application rather than fight for the trademark, and the Anderson design fell into the public domain.

Several years later, CCA designed two revisions of the three-arrow recycling logo.

On the logo’s design: “The figure was designed as a Mobius strip to symbolize continuity within a finite entity. I used the [logo’s] arrows to give directionality to the symbol. I envisioned it with the small edge or the point of the triangle at the bottom. I wanted to suggest both the dynamic (things are changing) and the static (it’s a static equilibrium, a permanent kind of thing). The arrows, as broad as they are, draw back to the static side.”

On the design’s variants. “Originally, when I saw variations on it, that bothered me. I had submitted three designs which were variations on a theme, and the judges chose the plainest of the three. The design as modified by CCA is more static than the way I originally showed it. The proportions and the angles and the arcs are the same as in my original design, but Container made the linework sharper so that it would reproduce better. They also rotated it by about 60 degrees. What’s important to me now is that the symbol is general enough that it has been capable of being modified. The more variations made on it, the better it is.”

On the source of such symbols: “Karl Jung [says that a] symbol really is a reflection of a primeval form that’s in our collective consciousness.

On his feelings about his product’s universal, worldwide use: “One thing is certain: It seems to belong to everybody — and that is fine with me. I entered the contest with the understanding that the winning entry would belong in the public domain. I’ve gotten used to seeing it. At first I felt very gratified and, I guess, proud and I was happy that I was able to come up with something which people could latch on to — happy, pleased, gratified to make a contribution — that’s pretty neat.”

Resource Recycling extends many thanks to Penny Jones, whose seven-year search for Gary Anderson made this article possible.

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