

The hidden story of your plate

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From Lowell speeches, we've heard a lot of stories about exotic trips, unique experiences and amazing mental journeys. But today, I will tell you a story of something ordinary, that we are all familiar with, probably too familiar with - your plate. That's right, I'm talking about the dinner plates from our dining hall, sitting right in front you, right now.

Let's start with a question: have you ever wondered why almost all the plates you've seen are white? It's a bit strange if human beings have been using white plates since Jesus Christ was born. Well, they're actually not always white. In fact, white porcelain was not produced in Europe until the mid-18th century, which is also roughly when America became independent.

Therefore, around 1850s, the majority of Americans actually ate their dinners from red clay plates, instead of white porcelain ones. White plate was, in fact, a luxury item that could only be imported from European companies.

The story begins with a potter named James Pass. James was tired of eating his dinner from crude, red clay plates, nor was he interested in purchasing the fine white ones from Europe. So in the summer of 1871, James, together with his friends, decided purchase a local pottery, to produce his first, also America's first, white porcelain plate. This company James founded, was Syracuse China, the same company that made the plates in front of you.

Syracuse China became the first company to produce American white porcelain, and was fairly profitable as a business. When James passed away, he passed the business to his son, Richard Pass, who happened to be a graduate from Harvard College. Richard, being an intelligent Harvard grad, introduced a number of new technologies and marketing ideas to the company. Syracuse China expanded tremendously, until something that destroyed hundreds of thousands of companies happened: the Great Depression.

But Syracuse China did not surrender. It created a new design of coffee cup plates that features an inner rim that will fit multiple sizes of coffee cups. The product became very popular among hotels, and luckily, Syracuse China sold enough coffee sets to survived through the 1930s. So if you have a chance to visit an old hotel, take a look at their coffee sets. You might still find these little cups and plates that saved Syracuse China from the Great Depression.

The story doesn't end here, because something even worse happened right afterwards: the WWII. Having survived the Great Depression, Syracuse China will certainly not give up to the war. Instead, it responded quickly by cooperating with the military, and start manufacturing non-detectable anti-tank mine. So take another look at your plate. The exact material of the plate you're eating your dinner from was used to fight German tanks during WWII.

Where is Syracuse China now? Unfortunately, under the great pressure of new materials, manufacturing technologies and cheap labors from China and India, Syracuse

China finally closed down all North American factories in 2009. It is very likely that Harvard dining hall plates were among the last several batches produced by Syracuse China in America.

So, here we are. What do we learn from the story?

First, don't drop your plate. If you drop it, we'll probably never find another.

But more importantly, be curious and appreciative. Look around you; we're living in an amazing world, surrounded by objects and crafts that are absolutely unimaginable 100 years ago. We enjoy so many dazzling technology and fine crafts that will even make an emperor jealous. And yet, we take so many things for granted.

This is a plate that has been through the golden ages of American companies, the dust bowl of the Great Depression, the fire and ashes of WWII, and finally, the great waves of globalization of the 21st century. The glass in front of you may have a story of the rise and fall of a family business; the clothes you're wearing may bear the history of a rising nation; and the fork you used may hold the struggle and glory of thousands years of research and craftsmanship. And it might just take a little bit curiosity to start appreciating, learning and exploring the world we take for granted.

So the next time you chat with me, tell me a hidden story of your world.