

## What was once Chester Creek trash turns out to be a treasure

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COMMENT

*(Published: May 25, 2007)*

Forget the strange things found 'neath the midnight sun.

You should see what lurks in Anchorage creeks.

Among the city's rites of spring is the annual creek cleanup, when hundreds of volunteers roll up their sleeves and their pant legs to help pick up a winter's worth of garbage in and around the creeks.

The trash always yields a few treasures, as long as you don't mind your treasures a bit rusty or water-logged. Like the sawed-off shotgun someone found in Chester Creek during Saturday's cleanup.

The police confiscated the gun. No word yet if they've found its owner, or connected it to any crimes.

The rest of the day's more interesting finds were spread on a blue tarp at Valley of the Moon Park, except for the intact (but rusty) Mongoose mountain bike someone fished out of the water and parked next to the tarp.

Prizes were given: A huge container filled with still-wrapped Tootsie Rolls, maybe a hundred or more, won the It Still Works award. A collection of a dozen Frisbees and a half-dozen white and orange golf balls was deemed Most Colorful.

Someone found one of those grabber sticks -- those things you use to pick up litter or reach things on high shelves -- and received the award for Funniest Find, but only because there was no Most Ironic award. I mean, what are the odds of finding a trash-picker-upper while you are picking up trash?

About the same, I guess, as the odds of Julie Pierce's stolen purse being found.

The purse was stolen from Pierce's car last August at the Spenard La Mex parking lot. Someone smashed a window and grabbed the bag, a roomy Kate Spade knockoff.

The thief managed to make a \$93 purchase on a debit card before Pierce canceled all her plastic. She figured she'd never see the purse again.

Imagine her surprise when her bank called Saturday to say the purse had been found on the banks of Ship Creek, a couple of miles away from Spenard.

The reunion of woman and handbag took some serendipity.

First, cleanup workers had to find it and choose to bring it to the post-cleanup barbecue at Valley of the Moon rather than toss it into a garbage bag with the rest of their trash.

Then, someone had to figure out a way to contact Pierce, because nothing in the purse included her phone number. There was a Palm Pilot, a pair of prescription sunglasses, a checkbook and a large assortment of punch cards, membership cards and debit cards. Among them was an Alaska USA card. And among those rifling through the purse was radio personality Amber O'Neill, the emcee for the post-cleanup bash and a former Alaska USA employee.

O'Neill called Alaska USA, explained what was happening and gave them Pierce's account number. Alaska USA called Pierce and told her the purse had been found. Within minutes, a disbelieving Pierce was at Valley of the Moon.

"I still don't believe it," she said a few days later.

Pierce tossed the purse -- "It was gross," she said -- but salvaged some of the contents, including her Social Security card and some family photos.

"I'm kind of surprised they didn't try to hawk the Palm Pilot. I'm drying it out to see if it will still work," she said.

A teacher's aide at Denali Elementary, Pierce was especially happy to discover two irreplaceable items -- Army dog tags that belonged to one grandfather, and a 40-year-old tape measure that belonged to the other, with the logo of a Wisconsin lumber company he once owned.

Pierce says she hopes to be one of the trash-and-treasure collectors at next year's creek cleanup. She'll circle the date on her calendar -- an old-fashioned paper calendar, the kind she's used ever since learning how easily a Palm Pilot planner can disappear.

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