

In my opinion

We'd never ship china unprotected

By HANK WEISS

IT WAS A LOVELY early-winter Saturday morning; the clear, crisp and invigorating kind that encouraged accomplishing several of those everyday chores of living the Jones household put off until the weekend.

Naturally, the same infectious energy that motivated Mrs. Jones that fine morning had long since touched John Jr., 6, and Sally, 1½, as delightful squeals of rambunctious laughter could be heard from the family room.

All in all, it was a typical start to a typical day in the Jones household. One of the most important chores to be accomplished that morning was packing up Uncle Bob's holiday gift and the set of fine china teacups for Aunt Marge. The cups were a rare find at one of last Sunday's local garage sales; the kind of treasure that makes the hunt worth all the tromping around.

Mrs. Jones gazed longingly at the marvelous designs and fragile shapes, momentarily lost in childhood memories, yet deliberate in her caution and care as she individually wrapped, padded and boxed each piece. It was a good packing job, ready for mailing. Mrs. Jones even allowed a faint nod of satisfaction as gentle shaking proved a snug fit and proper separation of the precious contents.

Before noon, all the household chores were done. At last, the children were out of their night clothes, dressed and ready to accompany Mom and Dad on the short drive to the post office and grocery store.

Preparation for the trip proceeded as usual. Sally was put into her infant safety seat, as the law required, and was carefully buckled in. Because it was only a short jaunt to the post office, John Jr. was seated, unbuckled in the back, just like Mom and Dad up front.

Mr. Jones backed the car out of the driveway, checked for traffic, and slowly pulled away. Ten minutes later, as usual, the stop was made at the post office. While Mr. Jones waited with the kids, Mrs. Jones hurried in to pay for insurance and postage. The postal clerk took the package marked fragile (in at least a dozen places) and started it on its long journey to Aunt Marge and Uncle Bob.

The last errand was the short trip to the grocery store. But today the Jones family didn't make it. They were traveling about 35 mph when they collided head on with another car. The Joneses' car, of course, stopped very quickly. A few thousandths of a second later, Mr. Jones collided with the steering wheel and Mrs. Jones struck the windshield and dashboard. Their cuts were severe and disfiguring and the broken bones took awhile to heal, but their injuries were survivable. Little Sally was frightened by the noise and sudden movement and began to cry, but was not injured because she was securely anchored in the safety seat. John Jr. was thrown forward at 35 miles an hour when his body flipped over the front seat, smashing him against the front windshield and dashboard. Before help could arrive, he died of a broken neck.

Five days later the postman rang the doorbell at the home of Aunt Marge and Uncle Bob. He had a package of unbroken teacups to deliver. There was no answer . . . they were at John Jr.'s funeral.

We like to think we are reasonable people. Few would entrust unprotected teacups to the US mail without proper packaging to restrain, cushion and protect our monetary investments. We expect shipped materials to undergo bouncing, falls and rough handling and package them appropriately. Yet, what about ourselves and our loved ones?

We know that a car will undergo "rough handling" and will probably be involved in a serious crash sometime in its lifetime of use. We know that crash-packaging of the human cargo — through infant safety seats, toddler restraints, seat belts and air bags — will protect occupants from serious harm in most collisions. Yet 6 of every 10 infants, 7 of every 10 toddlers, and 8 of every 10 drivers and passengers nationwide are not properly restrained because most people will not take the time to ensure the proper use of restraint devices.

Mandatory seat-belt laws, as proposed for Wisconsin, can help convince more people to buckle up themselves and their children. However, the best device to ensure that crash packaging is always available and will be used when needed is the air bag.

Unfortunately, an air bag cannot be purchased for the overwhelming majority of cars on the road, and the US Transportation Department's recent ruling on the subject virtually guarantees that for the next few years, at least, air bags will not be available on most cars.

The result is all too predictable. We will continue to ship our most precious gifts unprotected, and some will be horribly broken.

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