

North Royalton man keeps I-71 exit clean

By PETE JEDICK

Ah, spring! A young man's fancy turns to baseball, short skirts and warm evenings.

Unless your name is Al Koreny.

In Koreny's case the first spring thaw is the opportunity for which he's been waiting all winter to survey the fresh mess of litter along Interstate 71's W. 150th St. exit ramps.

Spring signals the start of his annual cleanup of the area.

Over the past two years Koreny, known as "Popcorn" to his friends, has picked up more than 200 bags of rubbish along the highway.

"That's not including the batteries, tires and other things too large to bag," he said.

Koreny is one of those rare individuals who cannot be categorized. His favorite television show is Dr. Who, he drinks Schmidt's beer because it's brewed in Cleveland and he is fond of T-shirts that sport sayings such as "Milk Is A Natural."

"When I first got out of school I used to drive my dad to work downtown," he said in explaining his project's beginnings.

"I'd tell him how someday I was going to do something about the mess along the interstate but he'd just laugh. Then I was laid off in the spring of '79, so I finally did."

He went out, bought a pack of large plastic trash bags and in three hours filled 10 bags on the cloverleaf's southwest quadrant.

By the time he was called back to work unloading trucks for Modern Builders Supply he had filled 100 garbage bags and the W. 150th St. exit looked immaculate.

Independent trash collectors such as Koreny, however, have the same difficulties as other small businessmen. What do you do with the bags once you've filled them?

At first he piled the bags neatly around



Motorists along Interstate 71 at the W. 150th St. exit may have noticed the area has been looking much cleaner the past two years. Their thanks should go to no governmental body, for the improvement is the work of Al Koreny, a self-appointed, one-man cleanup squad.

an exit ramp light pole. Ward 33 Councilman Al Koson noticed the pile and dispatched the city's waste collection department to pick it up. A few days later Koson noticed another even larger pile and became infuriated.

"I was about to call the media to make an issue out of this guy dumping his trash along the highway when a friend of Koreny's called me to have the stuff picked up," Koson said.

"After found out what he was doing I felt humiliated."

Koson sponsored a resolution in Council commending Koreny for his civic

pride and then Mayor Kucinich wrote a letter thanking him for his efforts.

"So many people don't care but so many do," Koreny said. "They don't like looking at litter. They pay their taxes and feel they're being cheated."

He was disappointed that the voters turned down a statewide bottle and can deposit bill last year.

"Most of the litter is disposable bottles, cans and wrappers from fast food chains," he continued. "In the '30s and '40s everything was returnable. I don't see why we can't do the same thing in the '80s."

Not everyone appreciates Koreny's ef-

forts. Passing motorists often look at him as if he's crazy.

"One time after picking up an area I sat down to admire it, you know, like a work of art," he said. "So a guy pulls up in a little sports car, pours a couple quarts of oil in it and throws the cans right in front of me. I couldn't believe it."

Another time a youngster on a school bus yelled for his attention and then dumped a bunch of candy wrappers out the window.

"It's not just the teen-agers," Koreny said. "Lots of older folks think nothing of throwing a cigarette pack out their window."

He traces his litter consciousness to a childhood experience.

"I was waiting at a bus stop with my buddy Jack when all of a sudden he started picking up the trash lying around and put it in the proper receptacle," Koreny remembered. "It was so easy. It only took a couple minutes and the whole place looked better."

After high school Koreny worked as a graveyard landscaper, lost his job trying to form a union and then joined the ranks of the Teamsters.

Today he's married and lives in a condominium in North Royalton, which may explain his need to "work the land."

Last summer he expanded his operations by convincing some friends to help at the W. 150th exit and to clean the hill under the west end of the Harvard-Denison Bridge.

This summer he's planning a new approach by taking a cue from RTA's landscaping of the W. 150th Rapid Station.

"I'd like to plant some trees along the highway, out of the way of the traffic," he said. "After a couple of years, the litter keeps coming back, but trees are still there 20 or 30 years later."

"If you live in the city, your only contact with the country is along the highways. The trees, grass and everything green are the only places left that are kind of wild. They should be protected."

Press photo by Tony Tomsic