

Latch string always out for Yankee peddlers

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Enterprising, shrewd and endearing, the Yankee peddlers were the ancestors of the 19th century tycoon and the 20th century businessmen. There were peddlers of services as well as peddlers of wares. In the 1700s peddlers on horseback carried an amazing assortment of little things in their satchel or trunk — needles, pins, buttons, combs, tableknives, and spoons, spices and salt — real necessities for a new settler. Also, itinerant workmen — cobblers, weavers, gunsmiths, artists, doctors, preacher and judges — frequented the pioneers' homes and were welcomed as a guest of the household. They carried the political news and gossip of the roads with them. Many memorized stories to entertain the family members. Hence the beginnings of commerce as the pioneers traded with the peddler.

In the early 1800s when the wagon peddler came in, the stock enlarged. Farm implements and animals, bolts of cloth, clocks, rag rugs, spectacles, iron cooking ware, baskets, Britannia ware, brooms and, in the early stages of its development, well equipment, found its way to the farm via the familiar route of the peddler. You name it — woodenware, spinning wheels, looms, fiddles, bowls and plates, cups and saucers, buttermolds, shoelaces, warming pans, cowbells and hand bells, cooperage such as piggins, wash tubs and pails were among the array.

Ward's Anodyne Pearls were a popular peddler's item. These were worn as a necklace by babies during teething. How they were expected to help in the teething process is hard to see.

"Seneca Rattlesnake Root," guaranteed to cure pleurisy, was another mysterious powder which claimed to cure the bite of a snake, cancer, toothache, gout and (believe it or not) labor pains.

The peddler of drugs and essences was so closely allied to the medical profession that the line between them fades. During the latter part of the 19th century, a shelf of simple herb remedies was in every home. A housewife kept a little herb garden near the kitchen door in which she could raise sassafras, rhubarb, sweet basil, and maybe boneset, but those she could not either raise or find growing wild in the fields she bought from the peddler. It's been said that an ounce or two of essence of wintergreen or peppermint would cover up the technical errors in distilling farmers' homemade liquor. In her Diary of Westford (1847-1937), Kate Hamlin records: "The drugstores being unknown in the country, many herbs must be gathered and kept for winter use. Among those I remember were wormwood, chamomile, sarsaparilla, sage, pennyroyal, peppermint and spearmint. They were hung on the attic rafters to dry."

For a full century and a half, tinware was the number one item carried by the Yankee peddler. The bride who could present her husband with a hope chest filled with tin cups and pans, a kettle or two, maybe even a dishpan, could be sure of a delightful reception. In like manner, a wide selection of tinware displayed in the home of an Early American settler distinguished him in the economic affairs of the community. Those who go back in memory to the early part of this century may remember the passing of the old tin cup, either at the school yard or town pump. Every village had its pump to which was always tied a tin cup. On Aug. 17, 1906, May E. Day records that after berrying she "Went home through town. Got a drink at the pump." Somehow the old tin cup arouses a nostalgia that the paper cup, which has superseded it, will never quite do.

That peddlers frequented the winding roads of Westford, and that for them the "latch string was out," is chronicled by those who greeted them. Let's begin with the diaries of Emma Day:

'The pedler staid here'

"Dec. 3, 1868: New Year's Eve. Mr. Thomas Parker staid here all night — he has Lard Presses to sell we ordered one 2.50.

"Jan. 1, 1869: Snowed all day long very hard. Mr. Parker went away this morning.

"Jan. 8, 9, and 19: Mr. Parker is here.

"Jan. 20, 1869: Mr. Notage is here. W. & Mother & Mr. N. went down to look at a stove at the depot — Mother took it at 2.00.

"Jan. 21, 1869: I got me a sauce dish of Mr. Notage owe him 60 cents.

"March 8, 1869: Mr. Notage has

staid here (4) nights since Thursday. We took two tea-pots.

"April 21: John Henry Nottage has staid here last night.

"April 22: John Henry Nottage has staid here last night.

"June 3: John Henry Nottage has staid here last night.

"August 11, 1869: Mr. Walton a poultry dealer staid here last night.

"Sept. 1869: We put a pedler up last night he lives in Lowell. W. got a pr. of undershirts and we got a tablecloth.

"Nov. 17, 1869: The pedler staid here tonight.

"Thurs., Nov. 18, 1869: Thanksgiving Day (We had three chickens and all fixings for dinner.) Mother Day took 3 handkerchiefs 40 cents each.

"Dec. 23, 1869: The pedler is here. The Pedler tipped his wagon top over drawing it out of the shed on runners.

Dec. 31, 1869: The Mutton man was here to dinner.

"Sept. 28, 1871: We had two tin peddlers to stay tonight.

"Oct. 25, 1871: A tin peddler came here to stay tonight. His name is John Wilcox.

"Oct. 28, 1871: John helped Warren husk.

"Oct. 27, 1871: The peddler went away this morn and it has rained hard since. We took four tablespoons.

"Nov. 7, 1871: had John Danver here to dinner — the tin pedler — got a tin strainer for pumpkins and a quart kettle and paid him 40 cents what we owed him before.

"April 27, 1871: Our tin Pedler put his horse here & he want to Lowell. Mr. Davis gave us the same as a dollar for staying here last night and then we paid 50 cents a piece and took the paper & picture — Sara & I have both got a picture From Shore to shore - a real Steel cut.

"June 6, 1872: We had two Pedlers come to stay all night.

"June 7, 1872: We had a tin pedler here to dinner and is here to night to stay.

"June 8, 1872: Mother took a siz qt. pail and we let him have our Wolen rags and we took a sieve and a Pail for Cream.

"June 10, 1872: We had a tin pedler come to stay John the one we put up last fall.

June 11, 1872: We took 2 brooms a corn brush box of blacking and stove brush."

Jumping ahead to the 1890s, we find that many of our townspeople peddled produce and goods to earn their livelihood. Edmund Whitney of Nabnasset had vivid memories of his father, Sydney, peddling fish from his cart during that decade. "Father left Westford at 3 a.m. to go to the T-Wharf in Boston to pick up

fish. He had a 'hoss' and covered wagon. I went once, but slept all the way. I can still see the lanterns hanging each side of the wagon. He only went in the good weather. In the winter, fish was sent in barrels by freight. Father peddled the fish about town.

"Mr. Ingham sold meat from his butcher cart. You'd pick what you want and he'd cut it off — he had a butcher block. The butcher man went from house to house — there was ice amongst the meat. I remember the Bar Harbor Express (Me. to Boston) killed both the horse and him at the R.R.

"At one time I had 13 carboys — delivered Cold Spring water in a wooden case to the wealthy people in Westford Center for 20 cents a bottle. I delivered to the Abbots and Camerons. It had to be water that came away from the spring, not from the spring. The Cold Spring is located across from Depot St. Its waters are said to possess precious minerals and were bottled and sold for a period."

Florian Woitowicz of Forge Village gives the following peddler descriptions: "A man from Lowell sold bolts of cloth. He took his scissors and cut off what you wanted. The ragman from Lowell collected iron, paper, rags and bottles (Jakey Bottles - Jamaican Ginger). He paid one cent for two of them. About once a year an Indian from Groton came to town and sold medicines and herbs. I remember he carried a snake in a cage. He was also a horse-trader."

Yes, the Yankee peddler was still a common sight in Westford in the early days of the 20th century. Several residents still picture the wagons laden with baskets and ladders for apple picking, pans, pails, kitchen goods and tea at five cents a pound. The following June 1911 account from *The Westford Wardsman* newsweekly provides an amusing facet to the peddling trade.

Vexatious predicament

"During the heavy shower last week Thursday, a junk peddler from Lowell overturned his wheel junk shop on the Lowell Road. The overturn was cause by a contraminded cow tied to the rear of the wagon, who having spied a pasture with the bars down, made a dash for it, while the driver and horse were dashing towards Lowell in the dashing rain. The horse, driver, wagon and variety show aboard were dragged towards the pasture and in the mix-up of opinions as to whether it was to Lowell or pasture they were going, the team came forth — ironware, tinware, pewterware, brassware, leadware, ragware, live poultry with-



A J. B. FLETCHER LIBRARY PHOTO FROM THE WESTFORD RECOLLECTIONS SERIES

In her diary of Westford (1847-1937) Kate Hamlin recalled that 'drugstores being unknown in the country, many herbs must be gathered and kept for winter use. They were hung on the attic rafters to dry.' Featured is the Westford Center home of Kate Hamlin. Present owners are the Glenns at 2 Hildreth St.

out feathers and feathers without poultry. Several roosters started a crowing match, and two others started a fighting match. The shafts of the wagon were broken and the horse went to grass. With the thunder and lightning, dashing rain, crowing, fighting roosters and the ragtime music of the show generally, it was a better show in some respects than the Buffalo Bill upset the day before at Brookside (Nabnasset)."

Still later, and well into the 1920s, old-timers tell of Bert Hildreth's peddling fruits and vegetables in his wagon throughout the village; Mr. Webb, the fisherman from Lowell; Henry W. Ewing, the meat man from Littleton; another meat wagon operated by Hartwell & Hosmer; the Socorelis' wagon with bananas; and, of course, W.W. Johnson, the local ice man.

Local produce came to one's back door via horse-drawn vehicle too, Ben Prescott from Chamberlain Corner tells us: "Everyday through the season, Mother and I would put 3, 4, or 5 crates of strawberries onto the Democrat wagon - hitch up the old 'hoss' and go to Graniteville and Forge Village. I ran around to the houses; she tended hoss. We'd sell 'em 3 boxes for 25 cents just to get rid of them - 10 cents a quart usually."

"Children's haircuts were given

by the traveling barber from Graniteville. He had a car and toured the village on Sunday," recalled Mildred Robinson (1902-1986).

And who doesn't remember the Raleigh man in his early "beach

wagon" selling spices, vanilla, lineaments and grandfather's aftershave favorite, Bay-rum!

— This is the eighth article in the continuing Westford Recollections Millennium Series.