

Peddlers had goods in store for yankees

By June W. Kennedy 11/10/88

Enterprising, shrewd and endearing, the yankee peddlers were the ancestors of the nineteenth century tycoon and the twentieth 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, preachers and judges — frequented the pioneers' home and were welcomed as a guest of the household. Systematically, 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 pioneer 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, a Jew's harp for 15¢, bowls and plates, cups and saucers, buttermolds, shoelaces, warming pans, cowbells and handbells, cooperage such as piggins, wash tubs and pails were among the array.

Medicinal wonders

Ward's Anodyne Pearls were a popular peddler's item. These were worn as a necklace by babies during teething. How they

'Itinerant workmen — cobblers, weavers, gunsmiths, artists, doctors, preachers and judges — frequented the pioneers' home and were welcomed as a guest of the household. Systematically, they carried the political news and gossip of the roads with them.'

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 from sight.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century a shelf of simple herb remedies was in every home. A housewife on a farm 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 from the wagon would cover up the technical errors in distilling farmer's homemade liquor.

In her "Dairy 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, camomile, 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 that 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 schoolyard or town pump. Every village had its pump to which was always tied a tin cup. No one, young or old, would pass that pump without stopping for a draught of water from the cool depths of the cup and a moment's chat with a thirsty neighbor.

On Aug. 17, 1906, May E. Day recorded 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.

'Peddler staid last night'

Let's begin with the diaries of Emma Day:

"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.

□ PEDDLERS, Page 7

Thursday, November 10, 1988 7

Latch string out for peddlers

□ PEDDLERS

Continued from page 6

"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¢.

"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.

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

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

"Sept. 1869: We put a ped(d)ler 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.

"Nov. 18, 1868: Thanksgiving Day, Mother Day took 3 hankerchief, 40¢ each.

"Dec. 23, 1869: The ped(d)ler is here. The ped(d)ler tip(p)ed 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 ped(d)lers to stay tonight.

"Oct. 25, 1871: A tin ped(d)ler came here to stay tonight. His name is John Wilcox.

"Oct. 26, 1871: The ped(d)ler went away this morn and it has rained hard since. We took four tablespoons.

"April 27, 1872: Our tin ped(d)ler put his horse here and he went 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 ped(d)lers come to stay all night.

"June 7, 1872: We had a tin ped(d)ler here to dinner and is here tonight to stay.

"June 8, 1872: Mother took a six qt. pail and we let him have our wo(o)len rags and we took a sieve and a pail for cream.

"June 10, 1872: We had a tin ped(d)ler 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."

June Kennedy is a Westford resident and author of "Westford Recollections", a collection of historical vignettes and photos.



EMMA M. DAY, photographed seated in the family farmhouse on Cold Spring Road, penned in her diary on Nov. 7, 1871: "Had John Danver here to dinner - the tin ped(d)ler - got a tin strainer for pumpkins and a quart kettle..."

(Photo courtesy of June Kennedy)