

# BOOTS, SHOES, AND NOTIONS

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## BOOTS, SHOES, AND NOTIONS

A DISTINGUISHED member of this Society, celebrated in the Land of Lincoln as a historian, told us in a paper delivered here a few years ago that each of his auditors should preserve every scrap of history that might, in the future, be immensely valuable to the historical researcher. We were advised to comb our attics and haylofts for trunks containing old letters, bills, receipts, etc., all of which might cast a revealing light upon the history and customs of our time.

I no longer possess a barn or hayloft, and there is no attic in my apartment on the Near North Side. But I do possess a storehouse of memories and impressions somewhere above the brow line, and I confess to a present itch to divulge this material tonight, because the thing of which I write is not passing—it is already gone. And I was a vital part of it for at least ten years of my young life, and I feel competent to describe the history and the atmosphere and the philosophy of one small-town store.

“Boots, Shoes, and Notions”—the subject—somewhat repetitive you might think! Not so! For the word “boots” when used in this context in the nineties meant

women's shoes—the high-laced or button kind running halfway to the knee. "Shoes" meant men's high shoes (there were no oxfords then), and "Notions" meant next to everything. My story concerns the town of Kewanee, Illinois, where my father's general merchandise establishment at the corner of Third and Tremont streets carried this legend on the front windows: "C. A. SHILTON. DRY GOODS. BOOTS, SHOES AND NOTIONS." The "C" in my father's initials stood for "Christopher," a fine English name given him by his Canadian parents; but nobody else in town went by the name of "Christopher," and my parent, a shy, modest man, just used the initial "C," and I, his son, being somewhat ashamed of such an outlandish cognomen, told my teachers that the "C" stood for "Charles" but that my dad just preferred the "C. A."

First, a word about the proprietor of the store, a fairly short, stocky man with a full beard, who always wore a derby hat. He wore it in the street and in the store; in those days "the man with the hat" was assuredly the "Boss." But it was a custom not without its practical value. I can recall, very easily now, looking about what seemed to me to be a huge commercial establishment for sight of my father and be sure to find him because of the hat. In those days, while we practiced the "one-price" system, there were certain concessions to be made in behalf of a church or charity or even a favored customer, and in such cases the several clerks had to seek the hat and the man beneath it, and there they were listening to the supreme court on the matter of any possible discounts.

My father was born in Peterboro, Canada, in 1844, the eldest son of a Methodist circuit rider who traveled the

Arthur Circuit and served four churches. At the age of sixteen he had become a full-fledged lumberjack, competing evenly with the best of his fellows and meanwhile accumulating a physique which was long the envy of his three sons. At the age of eighteen he came to Chicago (this was mid-Civil War times) and worked for Bowen Brothers, Jewelers, John V. Farwell & Company, and others. Sometime in the late sixties he suffered an illness, and his doctor prescribed that he locate on the frontier in some Illinois town. This brought him to Kewanee, Illinois, and there he became and continued as a dry goods merchant for forty-six years. My father died in 1928 at the age of eighty-four, and at his funeral our Congregational pastor made the unusual pronouncement that we were witnessing the passing of an epoch. This deceased had lived to see the Canadian and American frontiers opened and the settlement of a continent and had yet survived into the heyday of invention and progress as exemplified in 1928. It is a little scrap of that history that I wish to relate tonight—the part about the general store for ten years, the people who worked in it, the customs of merchandising near the turn of the century, and the coming of the end of that era.

Physically, I should guess that the store, on a corner, was perhaps thirty feet in width by a hundred and twenty-five feet in depth, with a metal ceiling at least fifteen feet high. This latter was composed of steel squares, perhaps three feet in each dimension, each deeply embossed in an arabesque design. From the center of every sixth or eighth square hung a long, twisted green cord with a light socket and electric bulb at the bottom. I believe that each of these lamps carried all of

40 watts of current, and, to enhance their blinding brilliance, there was, about the rim of the socket, a concave, fluted glass shade which was the devil to keep free of fly-specks.

On each side of the corner entrance were display windows extending perhaps thirty feet in either direction; they were high and very shallow windows. The display space could not have been more than three feet in depth, and the fronts themselves, although of plate glass and framework, were broken up into relatively small sections, helping not a bit to display the wares within. In that day the art of window-trimming was unknown in a small town; our job was usually given to an elder brother who was reputed to have an artistic sense. He did the best he could with the "iron maidens" that bulged themselves lumpily into the "Women's Ready-to-Wear"; shoes made an easier display, and there was a lavish use of cotton batting for the floor and background—a circumstance which led finally to a disaster, later to be related.

But the store itself—it was the grand emporium as I first glimpsed it at the tender age of six. Ours was a "practical" family, and it had been decided at home that I was large enough to enlist in the cause. It therefore became my job on Saturdays to open the big, oaken front door to the farm women with bundles and babies. Some of them must have wondered at the mystery of that softly opening door; the stile was so wide and I so narrow that very often a head would appear around the edge, and I would hear, "Oh, it's *you*, little boy!" But, between serving as the motive power to the big, front door, both opening and latching to banish the winter

winds, I had a moment now and then to revel in what I saw. I have never known a more satisfying view.

There I stood at the end of a far-reaching grand aisle, flanked everywhere with the most fascinating objects for small-boy exploration. The floor boards, probably of maple, slightly stained but well waxed by the continuous use of sweeping compound, stretched to infinity. To my right and left were long counters with tops of alternate strips of walnut and maple, brown and white; these too ran to nowhere. At the inner edge of these counters, the edge where the clerks held forth, were brass nailheads driven in every quarter-yard, with two nails to indicate the yard end. These were of course for the measurement of "piece goods." At the end of the long counters were rolls of heavy, brown wrapping paper set in a metal stand, each a tier of three rolls, with the narrower paper on top, then the medium, and, finally, the wide stuff that wrapped the blankets and such-like.

Below these endless counters were long, white-pine drawers that held the "white goods": sheets, pillow cases, and muslins in bolts; all of these required protection from the dust. On one side of the store behind the counter were many shelves reaching from the floor to a height of ten feet, serviced with rolling ladders, and these shelves were crowded with hundreds of bolts of "dress goods." Still above the dress goods was a wide ledge extending to the outer wall and lit by large windows of what was known as "prism glass," a really clever invention which caught the sky shine without and directed it sometimes in a blazing glory to the objects scattered along the ledge. These were none other than wire forms sculptured to resemble the torsos of human

females and attired in such arresting garments as long and ample corsets and even the balbriggan, long underwear then affected by the feminine population.

The center aisle was not entirely clear; here and there along its expanse were scattered showcases of glass containing toiletries, and there were various small bins filled with notions.

On the other side of the store, behind another long counter running halfway down the building, was the full notions department; and this, of the whole phantasmagoria, was the treasure chest of later exploration. Notions were such things as ribbons—hundreds of widths and colors of silk and satin, all on spools and largely confined to drawers with glass windows in the front, a protection against the prairie dust. There was thread of every description from size 8 to 80; it was mostly "J. & P. Coat's" thread, but there was also a brand known as "Mile End Spool Cotton" (to this moment I have not discovered what the name "Mile End" meant). The silk thread, like the ribbon, was also behind glass, but in this case the container was a hexagonal chest, about two feet high, rotating on a spindle. The containers were little, pie-shaped drawers with glass windows in the front, and one could spin the whole business in a most satisfactory way while the lovely colors flashed past like a merry-go-round.

Next to the thread were the buttons—shelves and shelves of buttons. They were all in shallow boxes, but one button of each box, as an identification, was sewed to the center of the front; the boxes all were blue-black, covered with a satiny paper, and were smooth and agreeable to handle. But milady of today has no such choice in



buttons as she did in Christopher A. Shilton's palace of merchandise in the year 1900. Have you ever tried to match a button in a modern State Street store? You will know my meaning! But imagine walking down an aisle and viewing at least two thousand boxes of buttons, each species with its identity clearly established on the box. That was the place for buttons! And some of them would be practically priceless today. Indeed, I wish that I owned at this moment just one dozen boxes of the English, steel-cut buttons that winked their welcome from our shelves. They were cut in facets and whorls and squares and oblongs and circles, and the work was so exquisitely done by hand that each was a thing of beauty and one to possess, possibly at the price of five to ten cents for the most elaborate. There were bone buttons and horn buttons and a few made of the new celluloid (with a warning to keep from fire), buttons woven from braid, and steel or brass ones covered with varying shades of wool or silk or satin. There were oceans of buttons, and our efficient clerks knew them all and when to re-order.

Along the same aisle, next to the buttons, were the needles (I can recall the name "Sharp's"); they did not require too much space. I suspect that the needle needs of all Chicago could be filled for a year from one good-sized trunk. But they were fun to examine. I recall the first ones I ever saw with gold heads; the gold was there to help weak eyes in threading. Last year I purchased in a western town a packet of Sharp's needles; they are packaging them in the identical fashion of fifty years ago: a triple wrapping of charcoal-colored paper with a small inset of cloth to hold the points, then a triple fold in the

other direction, and the gold label on the nonfolded back—still Sharp's of England.

The rear half of the store was devoted to boots and shoes, boxes in white tiers rising everywhere, right to the cove of the ceiling, and ladders being pushed hither and yon by the shoe clerks. In the center of the space were easy chairs for the customers and stools for the fitters.

But the big store had a second story; it was not above the store proper but above the next store to the north and was reached by a long and steep stairway terminating at an aperture driven through the wall, with a large fire door for safety. There, in the north building, second story, above Smiley's Photographic Gallery, was the women's ready-to-wear department and the carpet stock. To me it seemed a tremendous place, but, when I calibrate by my present standards, it must have been a room about seventy-five feet square with several pillars near the center. In the carpet room stood dozens of rolls of Wilton, Axminster, and Brussels carpet, each roll three feet high and running at least one hundred feet in length when unrolled. These were very heavy to handle and had to be rolled and unrolled, snipped and pieced, again and again. It well behooved a carpet merchant to have been a Canadian lumberjack and at the same time to possess a clerk by the name of Carlson who had sailed before the mast. This carpet room had a most penetrating smell—a combination of the odors of sheep grease, jute, sisal, wool, and carpet dust. But the smell was a fresh one; it soon came to remind me of the rooms I was to enter where such carpeting had just been laid over a clean, straw matting, and the bright and spangled covering crackled to the tread and gave off this unusual aroma. I am always

reminded somewhat of that smell when I purchase a brand-new automobile with the "new-car smell" that lasts about a month.

The women's wear department was separated from carpets by a half-partition, and there hung the ready-made suits and coats purchased by the local citizenry and the farm families from miles around. These coats and suits seemed to be bulky and made of heavy woolen materials and trimmed with large buttons. All were long and mostly in somber colors. Woman in America was not yet emancipated, and I fear that the utilitarian was the major consideration of that day. During my ten years of attachment to this store, I steered clear of the coat and suit department.

Downstairs again to the crowning glory of this Arabian Night's dream! It was the cashier's cage, smack-dab in the center of the store, elevated high above the milling crowds, and from it there radiated pairs of parallel wires to what appeared to be the far ends of the earth. Of course there was one station at the head of the right counter and one at the head of the left and two more in the shoe department and a couple midway in the establishment and possibly one at the head of the long stairs. These parallel strands were of piano wire, which everyone knows is the finest and toughest stuff upon this earth. Between these parallel wires, riding on two side wheels, was the cash-carrier, a brass box trimmed with wood and having a screw bottom to be opened by the clerk at the counter station with a mere flick of the wrist. Into this bottom, which actually telescoped into the riding top, the clerk inserted his precious freight of cash and sales ticket, twisted the bottom into place, and then reached non-

chalantly to a wooden handle hanging by a stout cord from a bracket device known as a Lamson cash-carrier, with the name cast in large, golden letters along the side. The little brass box was but now reposing casually upon the wires. But, when the clerk pulled the wooden handle and the rope, a chain of events took place that, for cause and effect, beat any physicist's experiment I have ever witnessed.

The pull of the rope not only brought the cash box back to an even farther position; it also compressed a strong steel spring to the point where it surely throbbed for release. Then a trigger let go, and the box was shot as from a high-powered rifle along the singing wires to a station just above the head of the cashier. The wires did sing; they rang out joyously like a tremendously magnified mosquito's song—a high hum that filled the welkin. That's how I learned about the "welkin"—it was the place up there where the wires sang.

But that was only the beginning. As the box sped along, its brass coat flashing in the rays of the many suspended ceiling lights, it was nearing a destination above the cashier's desk. It rode in with a bang; there was a coil spring there to stop it, the same spring that would later be compressed to hurl it back to its sender. The fortunate cashier flicked off the bottom case and dumped the contents onto a green felt pad above the cash drawer. The computations were quickly checked, and either the requisite change or a receipt might be sent hurtling back through space. There they rode all day, those swift messengers of commerce, with a delightful bang at each end and all the melodious singing in between. Very early in my store career I graduated to the

job of being cashier, where I sat enthroned above the herd and was the Mercury of the cash drawer.

The little cars traveled in direct proportion to the speed with which the spring was compressed and discharged, and it was my particular delight to try to scare the young women clerks with the violence of my delivery. The posts to which these devices were attached were braced from several angles and well riveted to the ceiling, but, even so, the Lamson system, under my affectionate but enthusiastic operation, almost collapsed at times from the vicious bombardment.

I confess at this late date that I have never had more fun in my whole life than while operating this paragon of speed and motion. If God shall grant me a long life and pleasant retirement, I shall count it the height of a good time to have a Lamson system installed here and there about a ten-acre tract, with mighty coiled springs and heavy triggers and comforting pulls and flashing cars which I may send hither and yon, to my own fancy, at breakneck speeds on singing wires through the "welkin."

The cashier's throne had yet another fascinating invention—the cash drawer beneath the green felt pad—a drawer with a secret means of entrance. Extending out from the bottom were five metal fingers shaped for finger pull. Until the right two of the five were pulled, the drawer could not be opened. Our secret combination, I may now with safety disclose, was numbers two and five, and, when those were properly manipulated, the drawer came open, and a bell rang in similar fashion to a modern cash register.

Some years after my first introduction to all these admirable methods of business manipulation, I came as a

youth to Chicago and, for the first time, saw a pneumatic tube that shot containers into a basket with a cough like that of a sick walrus and no chance at all to see the box hurtling through its brass pipe. I hurriedly discounted that one; it might be all right for a post office or beneath the ground or a river or something like that, but for joy, for fun, for unrivaled emotion, give me the yank at the Lamson cash-carrier.

There was yet another part of this wondrous establishment—the huge, deep stone basement. The walls were of limestone blocks, well mortared and dry; the ceiling was of beams festooned with cobwebs; and the floor was of brick set in sand. A few of the early Edison incandescent lamps, the hairpin-in-a-bottle type, threw a faint glimmer here and there. The whole atmosphere was slightly dim and dank but delightfully cool in the summer. The walls were crowded with packing cases containing in some instances surplus or unseasonable merchandise or seldom-used fixtures, while the center was devoted to the butter-and-egg department.

We were not a grocery store, but that was the day of the "due bill," a device no longer known to the merchandising trade, although, at that time, a highly profitable adjunct to the business. Perhaps a majority of our customers were farmers, and most of them at certain seasons of the year had surplus butter and eggs to sell. These were brought into the store and carefully weighed and checked, and a due bill was given for their current market value. Often the due bill was not cashed in for merchandise for months, and meanwhile the merchant had the cash income from the produce sales to pad his bank account. I suspect that a certain small proportion of the due

bills were lost or mislaid over the years and that their loss might be reckoned as a possible contingent profit. Anyway, the due-bill system went on for years and years, and it was quite customary to see a farmer come in before winter weather and outfit the entire family from due bills saved from the preceding six months.

The butter and eggs that went into the basement had to be prepared for shipment to Chicago. The butter, after weighing, was dumped into fifty-five-gallon barrels, sweet and sour, yellow and white, prime and rancid—not much of a standard to that operation. It was just known as country tub butter and of course was reprocessed at a large Chicago creamery. But the eggs had to be candled and sized and packed into cases holding thirty dozen each, and here there arose an egg-candling job for one of the five progeny of "the man with the hat." I am certain that I candled over a million eggs in my ten-year sojourn in the store.

The process was rather simple; we really used a candle and a homemade contrivance. The latter was a small wooden box open at one end. Into the flat top were bored six holes each slightly smaller in diameter than the average egg. At the farther end of the box was set a mirror at a 45-degree angle. Slightly above this box, on a bracket, stood a lighted candle. The operator deftly set six eggs in the holes and squinted through the open end of the box into the mirror. What he saw, by virtue of the candle, was the reflection of six round, orange-colored globules, about the color of a rich, harvest moon. If any of the eggs were "ripe," there was a shadow or no translucence whatever, and that egg was rejected, and the proprietor had lost the value of one egg against his due-bill ac-

count. Since there was no federal income tax in those blessed days, little attention was paid to these slight losses; they were forgotten while the business of candling went on.

Most of the housewives in that day baked their own bread and utilized for leavening a small cake product known as "Yeast Foam," and the box that held several dozen of this confection was the ideal, basic apparatus for the business of egg-candling. The operation today is accomplished by most ingenious metal and electrical contrivances, but the end product isn't any better, and the overhead must be much greater than in the stone basement of the corner store. After all, a teen-age boy at fifty cents per day "and found" can candle a whale of a lot of eggs in one Saturday afternoon with the overhead of one Yeast Foam box and a couple of candles.

The great human aspect of the small-town store was the group of regular employees. My father, a stern Briton, nevertheless had the rare faculty of inculcating undying loyalty in his clerks. He always had one principal male clerk to handle shoes and carpets along with his help, but the rest were females, generally spinsters, who worked seemingly for a lifetime and then somehow all married good men and retired to the respectable life of a housewife. The first male helper whom I recall was one Harry Hurd, a saturnine individual but a man endowed with rare merchandising ability. This person would brook no foolishness from the youngest son of the proprietor; I walked with circumspection beneath his vigilant eye and had a deep respect for his manliness and ability. Somewhere along the line, Harry married a rich farmer's daughter and left us for greener pastures.



His successor was Charlie Carlson, a real Swede from the old country. Charlie was a gorilla of a man, short and barrel-shaped and with long and tremendously strong arms. He could wrestle a roll of carpet or a huge packing case of shoes, spinning them like so many tops, and his feats of strength were legendary about the town. All our deliveries came by means of Jake Mayhew's big drays, and, when these mountainous wagons backed up to the rear door, Charlie just shooed the help away and twirled the boxes himself to the singsong of softly whispered curses. Charlie always doubled in brass; he might be among the carpet rolls upstairs or in the basement throwing the butter barrels and egg crates about or tiptoeing down the shoe ladders with a pillar of white boxes carefully balanced on either palm. Or, if it were the lunch hour and most of the help away, he could purvey piece goods or corsets with the best of them in the fore part of the establishment.

Once, when the elder, window-trimming brother was away at the university, Charlie even elected to trim the windows. But that was fatal indeed, for he possessed not the least inkling of art, and the resultant jumble of goods and prices, piled here and there at random, was sufficient to drive the potential window-shopper quickly down the street, with his buying instincts completely stifled.

The male clerk in the store had a further duty. Each night at closing time all the clerks together pulled from some secret recess the many, long white sheets that were then used to cover all the counters and open bins and the shelves of dress goods until the entire store somewhat resembled a mortuary. Promptly at six in the morning, Charlie opened up, swept the entire space with a push

broom and sweeping compound, whisked away the sheets, and went home for breakfast. Then came the proprietor and employees to a bright and shining establishment, and the day had begun. Charlie kept up this tremendous schedule for at least twenty years—clear up to the year 1910, I know: six to six every day and open until ten o'clock on Saturday nights. I am not certain what he received for this arduous employment, but I seem to recall that his compensation was in the neighborhood of thirty dollars per week. Upon this he reared a modest family, bought his own comfortable home, and lived to a ripe and useful age. That was indeed the time of low prices and high values in America.

Of the women who worked for my father, I recall three with what amounts to affection. The first was Violet McBain, a Scotch lass and a beauty. Violet was my first love, and it is possible that a seven-year-old swain is more in love then than he will ever be again. There was something ethereal about Violet—the pure curve of her brow, the lovely soft, brown hair that swept so becomingly past her ears, the neck like the swan—a purely feminine creature with brown eyes and long, curving lashes. She captured my soul and held it in thrall for many boyish years. Like all young male devils, I liked to play tricks on the clerks but never on Violet; she was too sacred and untouchable for such dastardly plans. After a few years someone else recognized all these charms and carried her off to the altar. But, while she was there, I used to watch her by the hour from some vantage point and wonder at her perfection.

When she measured the bolts of cloth, they rippled through her hands as though she were tossing puffballs.

The ribbons that she uncoiled flowed in a colored fountain about her beauteous presence; the scissors which hung on a tape about her neck flicked hither and yon with unerring precision. Her customers were equally charmed with her grace and proficiency, and often a line of her friends waited for their turn to buy from the flower-like Violet. Such an employee was a priceless asset to any establishment.

Then there was Margaret Finlayson, another Scotch girl and one we thought would be forever a spinster. Margaret was sturdy—slightly homely but chock-full of wisdom and spunk. She was big and broad and able and always at work. In a small-town store such as ours there were many hours in many days when there were few customers in the aisles. During planting and harvesting seasons the farmers stayed at home, and bad weather might keep the townfolk away. It was during such times that the real character of a store clerk emerged. That was the moment for the piece goods to come off the shelves to be dusted with a whisk broom, the ribbons to be resized and prettied up, the shoes to get a going-over, and all the new stock to be priced and stored away for the busy time to come. In all this, "Maggie," as we called her, was pre-eminent. She abhorred dirt, she hated laziness, and she worshiped order; and on those quiet or stormy days Maggie was the fury who drove the entire working force to a frenzy with her pulling-out and putting-back and stirring-up until even the ubiquitous Charlie had to retire to the dark basement and his softly uttered curses.

But Maggie left us too! A local widower of the town's old stock, with a fine home and a stripling son to rear and educate, picked the redoubtable Maggie for his second

wife, and she did the job so well that people still comment on the noble work she accomplished in educating and training the lad who was not her own.

Finally, there was Mary Younggren, a fair Swedish girl who was the gentlest and sweetest soul I have ever known. Mary came to my father as a young girl and left him, a mature woman, to marry Nels Swanstrum, a successful painting contractor in the town. Mary was the sunshine of our store; her blonde hair was pure gold, her soft, blue eyes were what you call "sunny," and her lips were always smiling. She, like Violet McBain, was slim and lovely and gentle, but Mary gave one the feeling that the world was all goodness and that there was no evil anywhere. The years came when I went off to college, and at vacation time I came into the store, and there was Mary, the last of the old-timers, to greet me. Of course, I was still her small boy of six or seven, but I tell you it was a benison to shake her hand and look into her beaming eyes and hear her gentle talk. And years after that, when I had become a grandfather, I ran into the head of the Visiting Nurses' Association, a woman in trim, blue uniform on a Kewanee street; it was our Mary, and I kissed her right there on the main thoroughfare.

We regarded all these employees as a part of our family; they were almost family members, so close was the relationship. When they married and had families, it was not unusual to find them naming their progeny after our family names. There was never any labor trouble; things went on and on upon a friendly family basis, and the average term of employment must have been about twenty years—really a generation.

The three largest departments in the store were dress

goods, shoes, and carpets, in that order. In this year of 1954 we are apt to forget the important place played in our former economy by the dress goods, made into garments by the housewife or visiting dressmaker, and with them the "findings," such as buttons, braids, boning, etc. I believe that, in this small-town store, we had close to five hundred rolls and bolts of woven fabrics of one kind or another from which the female customer might choose. There were all sorts of woollens as tweeds, chevots, flannels, Meltons, Bedfords, alpacas, vicunas, Oxfords, etc. There were velvets in profusion, some in rich reds and purples and blues, and many of the latter bore the strange name in the selvedge, "Malines"; that meant that they were loomed in Belgium. The name "Malines" signified nothing to a youngster, but the time was to come in 1914, with the German hosts advancing through Belgium, when that name was to be splashed across the headlines of the American press.

In the year 1934 I happened to run across a handsome, retired gentleman in an Illinois sanitarium. He was none other than Jake Mayhew, our able drayman for two-score years. We got to talking about the old town, and his talk ran to the subject of our corner store. Then he told me of a velvet cape he had purchased in the eighties for his bride; it was of blue velvet purchased from this same stock of Malines manufacture—cost ten dollars a yard, even in that day. He affirmed that the same cape, over fifty years later, was still as fresh and soft and plushy as of the date of its purchase—a real tribute to the quality of the dress goods sold in that era.

Of course there was a great stock of what was known as "staples"—cottons, muslins, gingham, percales, tick-

ings, and sheetings. Each had its own useful characteristics and each its own lore. More colorful were the supplies of silks and satins, many from Italy and France, and the braids and trimmings to go with them. It was a commonplace to see one of the more affluent ladies of the town spending three or four hours seated at the dress-goods counter while ordering all the materials for an entire family wardrobe from go-to-school to go-to-Sunday-meetin' clothes. Often her dressmaker sat alongside, advising as to the yardage, color, and materials.

The business of knowing dress goods was an education in itself. My good father always carried in his right, lower vest pocket a kind of triplicate brass frame, which, when unhinged, created a magnifying glass set exactly one inch in distance from the fabric upon which it was laid and with a field exactly one inch square in dimension. This instrument had become the standard of the trade and was a commonplace from London to Singapore. With it, one measured the number of "picks" in a square inch of fabric, a pick being one thread emerging from between two strands of warp and then diving back behind the next two. One counted the picks in each direction and then multiplied to get the "square." It must be evident that the greater number of picks per square inch denoted the greater fineness of the fabric, and that was indeed one measure of the quality of the cloth and its value. It was hard to fool an old fabrics man—he felt and he smelt and he scanned and he took the material to the daylight and jerked and yanked and then counted the picks. After such scrutiny, he announced the verdict, and it was a just one.

When I recall the subject of silks, it brings to mind the actual story of Charles A. Stevens. One day in the nineties, a "drummer" breezed into the store; he had jumped

off the "Accommodation," that train that started at Galesburg on the "Q" (which *you* might call the Burlington) and stopped at every little town all the way to Chicago, loading and unloading goods and passengers. The stops were long enough for a drummer to make a call or two at each place. This salesman purveyed only dress goods, and, when it was apparent that there was no order forthcoming, he launched into this story:

"Chris, you ever been to Avon, Illinois?"

"Nope." (My father had never been to Avon.)

"Well," continued the drummer, "there is a merchant in Avon, name of Charlie Stevens, and I was in his store yesterday morning just about this time—no business. Avon's just a little jerkwater town—but, by all that's holy, this Charlie Stevens was opening a stack of letters—about fifty of them, I guess—and out of each one dropped a one-dollar bill. I was dumfounded, and I asked him where all the money came from, and this is what he told me. There was no business last month to amount to anything, and Charlie Stevens realized he was overstocked on colored silks. So he took out his scissors and commenced cutting up the bolts into two-yard remnants. Then he ran a little ad in a new magazine—it's called the *Youth's Companion*—and said he would send a two-yard remnant of the best grade of silk for each dollar he received. The ad didn't cost much—about twenty-five dollars, I guess—and that Charlie Stevens told me he had already taken in by mail over two thousand dollars in one-dollar bills and was fresh out of silk and had to go to New York to fill out his stock. Oh, my gosh! There's the whistle of the Accommodation—gotta run for it. Good-bye!"

This was like a continued story with the climax de-

ferred, but my father waited patiently, and some six weeks later the same drummer loped in, and this time he was bursting with news.

"You remember, Chris, that story I told about Charlie Stevens from Avon, huh? Well, Sir, he did go to New York the very next Friday after I saw him and got there early Monday morning, just in time for the silk market to open. It seems they put this silk in carload lots or less on big pallets, and the auctioneer strolls down the aisles and sells the separate lots to the highest bidder. Charlie had done a little inspecting and had his eye on one whole carload of choice black silk, heavy and rich—the best-quality stuff on the floor. The market was slow that morning—not many bidders. Pretty soon the auctioneer came to the lot Charlie had his eye on, and the bidding started. Charlie commenced with a bid of one thousand dollars, expecting his competitors to run it up to at least thirty thousand. Someone finally said, 'Nine thousand,' and Charlie shouted, 'Ten thousand,' and before he could catch his breath, the auctioneer said, 'Sold,' and he owned a whole carload of silk! He asked the terms of sale and was told they were 10 per cent down, with the balance due in ten days. Stevens had a thousand dollars with him and made his down payment and then sweated his way to the street, wondering about the balance. Here he had bought a whole carload of silk, had to raise nine thousand dollars, and had to sell all that silk to boot! Surely not in Avon! Not even by an ad in the *Youth's Companion*. His sole source of backing might be a brother in Chicago, and there he went on the double-quick, and sure enough his brother did produce the rest of the purchase price.



"His brother also advised him to do his selling right there in Chicago, so Charlie rented himself a little space on State Street and displayed the silk, and darned if he didn't sell the whole carload in less than a month and make himself rich. Says he's goin' to wind up things at Avon and go right back to State Street—that you can't keep the people out of a State Street store! Holy smoke, there goes the Accommodation! Goodbye!"

That was the true story of Charles A. Stevens and Brother, still merchants on Chicago's great street. Fearing that this yarn might be apocryphal, I called Elmer Stevens, son of Charles A., now the dean of State Street merchants, repeated the story as here given, and asked his comments. This was his reply:

"That story is absolutely true, but I should like to add some trimmings. First of all, we still treasure the original *Youth's Companion* in which the initial ad was run. Father did buy that tremendous lot of silk for only ten thousand dollars, but there was a reason for the low price, and, unfortunately, he didn't realize it. In those days almost every housewife in America had one best dress for parties, and it was always of stiff, black silk. What father, down in the little town of Avon, didn't realize was that black silk was going out and was a drug on the market. He could not of course sell this quantity in Avon, so he rented a narrow space on a landing in the Central Music Hall Building, on the east side of State Street, south of Randolph, in Marshall Field's present block, and there he soon sold it all at very low prices but at a big profit. Almost his first customer was a little man by the name of Cyrus Curtis, who had just begun publishing a new magazine, the *Ladies' Home Journal*; he traded

father an ad in the *Journal* for a dress pattern for his wife. Sad to say, father kept on overbuying silk and other things most of his life."

But I should say that Charles A. Stevens was a chance pioneer in the mail-order business; one small, five-line ad brought him tremendous returns and should have made him realize the hungry purchasing power latent in every country crossroads and farmhouse. If it didn't, there were a couple of Chicago men, one Montgomery Ward and a fellow by the name of Rosenwald, who were finding the truth and turning it into paths that would eventually throttle most of the business of all the little small-town stores like ours.

Running right along with the story of Charles A. Stevens was that of E. K. Warren, of Three Oaks, Michigan. In my father's store, among the findings that went into dressmaking was a large stock of Warren Featherbone. Warren had been in the dress-goods business when the home dress manufacturer used whalebone for stays about the waist, corset stays, and collar stays and other uses to glamorize the female figure. As the New Bedford whalers found fewer whales within profitable reach and the price of natural whalebone zoomed, Warren cast about for a substitute and found it within his own farm yard—the quills of chicken feathers.

He wrapped these quills, stripped of their tendrils, in a kind of thin muslin and ran them through a sewing process with an involved cross-stitch. The resultant product was a long, thin, whiplike product, similar in stiffness and resiliency to natural whalebone and at a fraction of the market price of the prime article. Soon this became a universal boning material in America, and Warren became a millionaire.

Years later I came to know all the Warren heirs well, as they dominated the resort life of our summer-home community at Lakeside, Michigan, just seven miles from the principal Warren factory at Three Oaks. Mr. Warren gave generously to his native state in museums, parks, and foundations and even donated a tract of virgin Michigan timber known as Warren's Woods, three miles inland from Lake Michigan and the town of Union Pier. As a small boy, handling Warren Featherbone in the family store, I did not of course realize that in years to come I should have a close business association with the sons of the inventor. So there *is* romance in dress goods!

But the best business for a *man* in such a store was the shoe department. There in their multitudinous white boxes lay the consummate artistry of many factories in our broad land. Each of these shoes, whether a heavy workman's clog or the slenderest boot for the slimmest ankle of the daintiest lady in the town, was a thing of great planning and skills and materials. The leather itself was a chemical masterpiece; it might be kid or veal calf or box calf or wax-calf or split-calf or even snake or lizard—yet every batch had gone through a long tanning process and was best fitted and engineered for the job at hand. The welting, lining, soling, trim, and even the fillings between parts of the sole—the fittings as hooks, eyes, buttons, laces—were all a part of the symphony that made a really good shoe.

When the shoe drummer came around twice a year and brought his trunks of samples, all displayed on the long tables in the sample rooms of the Kewanee House, my father, the best shoe man I ever knew, would ask if a given sample were expendable. If so, he was apt to call for a saw and rip that shoe right down through the

middle, clear through the sole and heel, so that he had two halves. Then, with pliers, he would dissect all the layers, pull the threads, and make a mess of the whole article. But, by piecing and pulling and examining, he knew the product to the veriest last peg, and thereafter he could expatiate on that shoe with unfailing eloquence. That was the reason we sold so many shoes. I can recall myself as a lad of fifteen selling shoes all one Saturday, and at the close of the day I had retailed a hundred and fifty pairs. A majority of these were workmen's shoes requiring but cursory fitting, retailing in the neighborhood of three dollars per pair. Women's shoes, on the other hand, required much patience and time, for in that day, at least, the women of America had one commanding conceit—one and all, they insisted upon wearing a small shoe. Even the farm wife, used to heavy labor in the fields and wearing a shoe that would size at  $8\frac{1}{2}$  or 9, would simmer somewhat if asked about size and would most likely intimate that she wore about a  $3\frac{1}{2}$  or 4.

This posed a great dilemma for "the man with the hat." He was a deeply religious person and given to telling the uncompromising truth. He never asked a female customer the size she wore; his practiced eye could come within a half-size of her requirements. With a quick flourish he would produce a shoe from its nest of paper, open it, stretch it, break the counter, and then slip it on with the aid of talcum and a shoehorn. The large customer might blink alarmingly at the huge, shiny object embracing her foot, but did she ask, "Is that a 4?" the answer she always received was, "That's the proper size for your foot, Madam." Sometimes even this gimmick didn't work, and a sale was lost.

But suddenly relief hove in sight; the manufacturers adopted a miraculous solution—"French sizes." No one but the shoe man could tell the sizes. The scheme was simplicity itself. The first number of the trio of digits was the width of the last, 1 for A, 2 for B, etc. The second digit was the real size of the shoe, and the third denoted the half-size by the number 5. If the third digit was a zero, it meant that the second was the whole size, and there were no fractions. For instance, the number 345 meant a  $4\frac{1}{2}$  shoe with a C last or width. If 340, it was size 4 with a C last. Thereafter the oversize creature might scan the innards of her shoe for the telltale size in vain, and, when she asked the actual size, my good parent was able to say, "Madam, these are all French sizes now—not American numbers. Doesn't it fit perfectly?" If lying is the gateway to hell, the French-size system has saved many an immortal soul from the burning.

Carpets at the turn of the century were not the fabrics we know now, but, as is the present custom, they were laid wall to wall. From 1910 to about 1930 was the era of room-sized rugs, large areas of broadloom or strip carpeting sewn into a rug that covered all but the borders of the room. It seemed to be thought that room-size rugs were more sanitary—there was an opportunity to roll them back and at least keep the borders of the space immaculate. Lately has come again the period of solid carpeting; the materials are still the twists and friezes of the rug era, but now the carpeting must run to the quarter-round, fill the entire floor, and become the uniform color background against which is displayed a compatible furnishing.

So the wheel has come full turn, but the basic material

is entirely dissimilar. Our carpets, mostly Axminster, were a woven material all of wool of no deep pile and generally containing bright patterns, running the gamut from cabbage roses to magnificent designs of fountains, fruit baskets, etc. Few of the floors, except in the homes of the wealthy, were of hardwood; mostly they were of soft pine and often painted a dull, golden-oak brown. It was our task to measure those spaces and cut the carpet to fit. Then Jake Mayhew, our drayman, delivered these strips to a certain Mrs. Oliver and her feminine assistants, who, with the proper instructions, sewed these strips into a whole carpet with a heavy brand of carpet warp thread. As they were finished, Jake would pick up the heavy rolls and deliver them to the place of purchase, and that is where I came in.

On a Saturday morning I might well appear at the home to be carpeted and prepare to lend a most festive air to the whole establishment. For there was nothing within my knowledge that so changed the appearance of a monotonous interior as the gay and abandoned sprinkling of its floor with giant roses. My tools consisted of plenty of carpet tacks in boxes, a magnetized hammer, and, last and most important, a carpet stretcher. It was well known that fresh wool carpeting would soon expand, and for that reason all carpets were made on the "scant." It was my task to stretch the covering into place, tack it firmly all round, and hope that it would lay tight.

This carpet stretcher was a unique steel device—a long ratchet rod with a sharp, tempered claw tooth on one end and a row of horizontal carpet teeth at the other end on a ratchet sleeve, with a vertical handle that actuated the

ratchet. The claw was driven into the floor's edge with a blow of the heel, and the claw teeth sunk into the carpet, which had already been tacked along the opposite wall. Then the handle was operated, and the ratchet device drew the carpet snugly to the tacking position. But there was always a most bothersome accompaniment—the carpet padding. There were no commercial pads such as we know today, the rubber or hair concoctions that help to make our carpets so resilient. We used either paper or straw, as the householder desired. You may imagine some of the difficulties encountered in keeping a fine straw or newspaper mat evenly in place on the floor while unrolling across it, and tacking and stretching, a heavy mass of carpet possessed of the devil and all his wrinkles. But the result was worth the effort. The room glowed with new color, the same delicious smell of wool, sheep grease, sisal, etc., was omnipresent, and the finished job actually did crackle with newness, partly because of the underlayment. I never knew a customer not to be pleased with a new carpet, and, with the exception of one other miracle material, the paint that comes in a can, I can conceive of nothing in this world that so changes the looks of our environment as new carpeting.

There was a serious drawback in all carpets in that day. The carpet wools had first been scoured in the mills, meaning a powerful bath of strong soap and alkalies. For some reason, the scouring did not remove all the lanolin, and, sadly enough, what remained generally appeared in a lone but disheartening grease spot somewhere in the beloved surface about six months after purchase. There seemed to be no cure for this dread pox until the Park Mills Company of Massachusetts devised a method that

made all their carpetings greaseproof forever. When this invention first came on the market, my father was the fortunate merchant in the town to become the sole purveyor of this magic covering, and for a decade people who knew anything of carpeting just automatically made all their purchases of us. You may be sure that the store advertisements carried weekly the tale of the wonderful Park Mills product and its guaranty, and, had it not been for other practices in the store economy not so fruitful, I am sure that the Park Mills connection alone could have made my father what is now called a tycoon.

No story of our small-town store could be complete without the tale of the amazing Mr. Fiedler. This genius was a Chicago sales expert who made it his business to conduct special sales for the small-town merchant. On one of his buying trips into the Chicago market, my parent ran across this Mr. Fiedler of captivating personality and proved sales ability. His method of attack was to visit the town, spend a week or two canvassing the local field, and clerk in the store to get the lay of the land. Shortly, from his aerie in our hostelry, the Kewanee House, the eagle would emerge with a rip-snorting sales plan. This usually involved some sort of fundamental appeal; he ran particularly to fire sales, but, since we had no fires, he had to substitute.

I can recall two of these sales. The first was in the year 1898, when I was still quite a small boy. But we as a nation were having a war with Spain, and Mr. Fiedler seized upon the patriotic motif. His client should have a war sale! First the stock should be combed for "slow" items to be slashed in price; then the owner must rush to Chicago and purchase a lot of leaders. When these had



arrived and Mr. Fiedler had completed his proper publicity in the *Kewanee Daily Star Courier*, and the outer walls of the building had been placarded and festooned to the correct state of garishness, the sale was on.

I can recall only two details of that initial cataclysmic event. First, the gigantic red and black and yellow signs and pictures spread all over the Third Street elevation, in countless yards of muslin tacked to wooden frames. There was a picture of the Spanish fleet sinking at Santiago; another of Winfield Scott Schley receiving the surrendered sword of Spanish Admiral Cervera y Topete. Whatever this had to do with a sale of merchandise I shall never know, but I do recall that the store was jammed from morn until night and that my arms ached from much opening of the big, front door.

Inside was another attraction. Halfway up to the steel ceiling, Mr. Fiedler had had constructed a floating platform about eight feet square, and here, above the gaping mouths of the customers, two black-face comedians disported themselves hours on end with banjos, accordions, etc. And they sang one plaintive song I can never forget—a new song at that time and a part of the war theme. They sang it with lugubrious voice over and over, and, as they sang, most of the ladies wept, and some of the gentlemen too. It was entitled "Break the News to Mother," the dying lament of an American boy on a Cuban battlefield.

Oh, break the news to mother;  
Tell her how *dear* I love her;  
And kiss her dear sweet lips for me,  
For I'm not coming home!

The remarkable Mr. Fiedler was right; they wept and they bought, and "the sale" was a grand success.

Came 1907 and the panic. Unlike the terrible 1893, of which I had heard heart-rending tales, that of 1907 is now recorded as the inventory panic. The year 1906 had been a brave one of expansion in America, but suddenly the bottom dropped out; prices skidded downward, and most American merchants were caught long on goods and long on bills payable. My father was among that majority, and, in fact, he never recovered from the effects of that economic blow. So it was time for Mr. Fiedler again, and he came on the run.

Just one day before his scheduled arrival, we did have a *fire!* Early in this paper, I described the store windows and mentioned the copious use of cotton batting as background trim. A short had developed in the electric wiring, and, instantly, the front window was ablaze. Being directly across the street from the City Hall and the fire station, the firemen were there in moments and had quickly and gaily shattered the glass and doused the fire. But not before the burning cotton had produced a voluminous smoke that billowed throughout the establishment, giving to every bit of merchandise that burned smell that lingers on. All this was just ducky for Mr. Fiedler. At last he had a fire upon which to expend his versatile talents.

The wondrous plan which he evolved was four-pronged. First, of course, the flamboyant signs; then a double attack by advertising, not only the local newspaper columns, but the delivery of a large poster by hand to every farmer within twenty miles; of course the usual trip to Chicago to buy leaders; and, finally, the chef-d'oeuvre, a startling window display. Only the latter was discarded by my father because of its peculiar nature. Mr. Fiedler called it a "study in black and white." Cer-

tainly it had nothing to do with a fire. He proposed to trim the entire front window in glaring white. In the very center of the floor he would erect a high pyramid of glistening, black anthracite coal. On either side of the coal pile, seated on white chairs, would be two Negro lads attired entirely in white, from white caps to white gloves, each being provided with a bucket of white paint and a brush. All day long it would be the mission of these boys, slowly and sedately, to pick up a piece of hard coal, carefully paint it pure white, and deposit it in a new pile to grow beside each chair. That was all! But Mr. Fiedler said that the effect would be tremendous; he had done this in Des Moines, Iowa, and the police had had to rope off the street from the crowds which threatened to crush the glass in their anxiety to see just what this black-and-white business meant.

"The Boss" turned thumbs down on this deal! He did so because he was most sensitive about racial problems. In our town at that time there were perhaps about five Negro families, all highly regarded. There was old Tony, a former slave of the Elias Lyman family who lived all alone and was a respected member of the First Congregational Church—our church. There was the Bailey family, and everyone knew Ackey Bailey and the fact that he was the best dash man and fullback in our high-school conference. The others were of equal caliber and greatly respected. My father, despite Mr. Fiedler's persuasions, was adamant about having Old Tony and his brethren seeing such a window in his store. But the genius was undismayed; other preparations moved apace.

The same schedule—a quick trip to Chicago to purchase the leaders, a vast preparation for publicity, and then the curtain rolled up. As a matter of fact, the in-

surance damage was only about seven thousand dollars, but Mr. Fiedler had no thought of such an inconsequential figure; to him, this had been a devastating conflagration and almost a total loss, and, by all that was holy, Kewanee was going to have a sale—shall we say a “quasi-fire sale”—to outdo all sales the continent over. Somehow he persuaded the office tenants upstairs to forego the use of their windows for a couple of weeks, and now the sign-painters really went to work. The final accomplishment was a muslin front about thirty feet high by one hundred feet in length, and the use of color, particularly fire-engine red, was amazing to behold. In the background a city was being consumed by the licking, red flames; roofs were caving in; billows of red and black smoke were gushing to the sky to be lost at the building parapet line. In the foreground stood a grizzled fire chief, a noble figure, with one gesture holding the multitude in safety and with his free hand clasping a nozzle which discharged an ocean of bright-blue water right into the maw of a flaming caldron.

Now my father, as I have said, was a good Christian, and, while he was sometimes carried away by the eloquence of Mr. Fiedler, he had demurred somewhat upon any emphasis of a big fire, particularly since most of the damage had been solely from smoke. So the genius had qualified *slightly* the legend on the huge sign. I recall it today word for word and at the same time bow to the memory of Mr. Fiedler, who assuredly missed his calling and should have been an advocate at the bar. For this was the printing:

FIRE, SMOKE AND WATER, BACKED BY THE SHERIFF, COULD NOT  
MAKE THE PRICES C. A. SHILTON DOES FOR THE NEXT 30 DAYS

That was all! It didn't say there had been a fire or even smoke or that the sheriff had served his writ; in plainest English it simply inferred that all these catastrophes, taken together, could not produce the prices offered within. But, of course, after the sign went up and the ads were run, it was a commonplace to hear upon the street, "Have you been to the fire sale yet?"

This time, when my revered parent hit the Chicago market, he found the prices at bedrock—the panic of 1907 at work—and, sadly, I must relate that, like Charles A. Stevens, he greatly overbought. The cases came rolling in—stupendous boxes of leaders. There was one packing box about six feet square (lumber was cheap in those days), and it contained nothing but papers of pins—there must have been a thousand gross of papers of common pins. There were knickknacks and jewelry and all sorts of flashy items to perk up the stock. Mr. Fiedler had been busy constructing sales bins to crowd the broad aisles. In these were piled these leaders with such signs as these: "Two packages pins 1¢"; "Any bracelet in the box 10¢"; "Any doll—all dressed in genuine silk—25¢." Of course everyone in town knew that the standard price of a paper of pins was five cents; to get ten cents' worth for a penny was unheard of. Along the counters were piled the real, standard merchandise of the store, dress goods in suit sizes, cut to one-half or just about at the real market that now prevailed since the disastrous drop in all American prices. To accompany the wall signs, full pages were taken in the local paper quoting prices on all these leaders as well as the reduced prices on standard stock.

There yet remained the distribution of sales material to the farmers, who had no rural free delivery then and

who, as a rule, did not subscribe to the local paper. That job devolved upon the three sons, each of whom spent five full days in a livery rig, on a predetermined route and schedule, calling personally on each farmer along the way and handing him or his wife a large folded bill telling the tale. Johnny Cameron provided the rigs—two horses, a surrey, and a driver for three dollars per day per rig. The task was arduous and also risky, because every farmer, living as he then did in more or less isolated fashion, possessed at least three dogs, partly for protection against marauders. There were the ever present collie or shepherd dog and usually a yellowish mastiff and, finally, a voracious black dog of some mongrel breed, snapping at one's heels as he walked toward the kitchen door. In these forays into the country none of us was ever bitten, largely I think because we had had one most valuable hint from the head merchant: "The man who walks through a band of howling dogs with his head up, looking neither to right nor left and saying nothing to the animals but proceeding as with a mission, will never be bitten." Hard medicine to take, the first few times, but it always worked. On these long trips we never suffered for food; the farm population seemed to be anxious for company and news, and we were offered countless meals, and usually our proffered pay was rejected with contempt.

The great day arrived, and the sale was on. On opening day the two local policemen had to keep the crowds from smashing the windows despite the absence of the "study in black and white," and the sale went over with a roar. The customers purchased all the pins and dolls and jewelry and quite a bit of the standard stock but not suf-

ficient to stave off the final debacle, which occurred three years later.

All this time "the man with the hat" went serenely upon his way as a merchant, a skilled merchant, an honest merchant, and a gentleman of great character and attainments except possibly when it came to the rather prosaic one of manufacturing a proper balance sheet. But in all the town he stood in great respect, and he enforced that respect even if it came to a lawsuit. In his later days he had a great lawsuit—great to him I am sure. On a certain Saturday evening an irate person strolled into the store with battle in his eye. My father had written him a note asking for the payment of a large bill for clothing for his numerous progeny. The man had become what was known as a "deadbeat" and, possibly on a bet, had decided publicly to deride the man to whom he was so greatly beholden.

So he stormed in and proceeded, in front of some fifty customers, to defame my father; he even referred to his ancestry as having a canine inheritance; he cursed and damned and threatened until the object of his wrath removed the hat and, with one swift rush, projected him through the door and onto the sidewalk upon his face. Promptly on Monday morning my father sued him in the county court for ten thousand dollars in damages, alleging defamation of character.

Our lawyer members will know that a defamation suit is touchy business. For, to prove defamation, the complainant must first prove his own character and submit to a rigorous character cross-examination; without an unblemished character, there is nothing to defame. And now occurred a most unusual thing. The moment the

suit was announced in the local press in big headlines, all my father's toughest competitors, without exception, came to him at once and offered to be his witnesses on the matter of character. S. L. Arter, across the street, a competitor in shoes, came on the gallop. Hiram Lay and William Lyman, the biggest merchants in town and in direct competition, came immediately and offered like support. Adolph Szold, women's wear, another competitor, was among the first.

The trial in the county court at Cambridge was almost a holiday event. It required three days, and each morning four or five of these merchants left their stores and with my father drove the sixteen miles in a livery surrey to give testimony. The jury retired for ten minutes and came in with a verdict for ten thousand dollars and costs against the defamer. Whereupon my father walked over to the defendant and said, "I don't want your money; I shall never seek to enforce this verdict. I just wanted you to know that a reputation of over forty years' standing is a precious thing."

But the handwriting was upon the wall for the small-town merchant. One day in the year 1909 when I had become sufficiently proficient in merchandising to be entrusted with the operation of a branch store in Nebraska, my father came to me with a paper in his hand and asked that I follow him into his office. The thing he held was a small tear-out from a page of the Montgomery Ward catalogue. It pictured a pair of women's boots, high-topped as they were and glamorized by a zinc etching and particularly the description. The wording went on to say that these shoes had a Boston vamp, veal upper, Good-year welt, oak sole, prime stitching, glazed eyelets, etc.



There were at least a hundred words in the little box surrounding the cut, and in outsize figures was the price: \$5.49.

My father sat down and said: "Son, this kind of thing is going to drive the retail merchant out of business. It is terribly smart advertising, because it works upon the imagination of the farmer's wife. Just imagine that hard-worked woman sitting down of an evening and by the light of her coal-oil lamp reading this magic book. She doesn't know a Boston vamp from a plain vamp or even what a vamp is, but she has heard of Boston, and somehow there is a connotation there that intrigues her soul. Sure, she knows that a veal is a calf, but we never called our calfskin 'veal.' All our shoes are welt-sewed, but we never told her. Oak means strength to her, but we have kept her in ignorance. The word 'glaze' is a word of art; plain 'enameled' won't do! Now we sell this identical shoe, made by Brown of St. Louis, not for \$5.49 but for a plain \$4.50, and we fit it perfectly and let her take it home on a charge account with free privilege of return for dissatisfaction. But, sure as my name is Christopher, come next Saturday morning, she will go over to George Smaling, the postmaster, and buy a money order to Montgomery Ward for \$5.49 and send it along with a foot size drawn on butcher paper, and we are out one sale. With that kind of competition we cannot win!" And my father was so right!

Came 1910, and the days of the store ended. My father, with assistance from my mother, paid off all his debts and retired to a life of horticulture. One of the assets saved from the crash was a large stock farm in northern Illinois, and somehow that grew in value and, with

other investments, gave my two parents a blessed and secure old age. After my father's death I opened an old safe and found in it certain records; among them were accounts receivable for over thirty thousand dollars, all uncollectible, all worthless. Most of these were of medium size and generally were made up of items of clothing and shoes and carpets for families who somehow forgot to pay their bills. There were hundreds of these accounts, and I studied a few for a clue as to the possible destination of these items. It became plain that many a child, and adult too, went dry-shod through wintry streets because of that establishment; that winter coats and blankets and carpets made life happier, even for those who didn't pay.

And it is my way of thinking that, besides the burden of paying taxes and hiring clerks and paying rents and rearing a family, the small-town merchant even contributed without pay toward the help of the unfortunate. In that he performed what we now call a "social service" but what was, to him, just a part of the day's business.

And I sometimes wonder if the great chain-store companies, with their imported hire, their gigantic leased buildings, and their billions in sales, are adding to the American pattern the indefinable good to the little community that sprang from "the man with the hat" and his forgotten kind!

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