

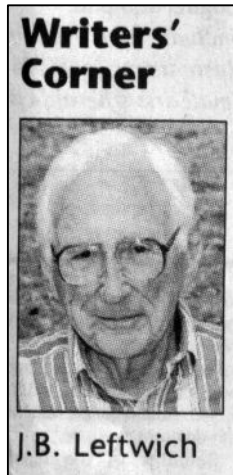
A FARM WIFE'S CUNNING GAVE US RUNNING WATER

By J. B. Leftwich

Herald-Citizen, Cookeville, TN

Thursday, 25 February 2010, Section B

In The modern world of a young century, where there is a “recent study” on almost any given subject, apparently no think tank has conducted a study of the importance of mail order businesses on Depression-era rural communities.



Montgomery Ward and Sears Roebuck were principal sources of supplies for families during the decades preceding and culminating immediately after World War II. They were vital to rural life. Our family in the hill country of western Putnam County ordered items ranging from blue jeans (then known as overalls) to books, ladies’ “bloomers” to bath towels and egg incubators to water storage tanks.

And in the last two items of the above paragraph, there lies a story detailing the ingenuity of a rural housewife and the understanding of a major player in the mail order business.

But first a bit of background on how it was during those austere years spanning the 1920s through the 1940s and how families made do without the connivances deemed as necessities in its waning decade of a new century.

Rural families in my childhood community of Rock Springs presently draw their water from a tap supplied by water district lines. There, as elsewhere on farms, need for wells, springs and storage tanks so essential in early last century diminished with the expansions of rural water systems throughout Middle Tennessee.

In my early childhood, water was carefully hoarded because the source was an inconvenient distance from our homes.

Such was the case when Dad built our four-room house about one-quarter mile from the nearest spring. Fortunately, the house stood a few yards from a creek so chickens and farm animals were usually supplied.

We made trips to the spring for drinking water with a bucket in each hand. In the summer, we rarely had cool drinking water because the water heated in trips from spring to house.

In those days, mail-order houses such as Sears and Montgomery Ward enjoyed a brisk commerce with farm families. The deliveries by the rural mail carrier of mail orders were anticipated and exciting events.

This does not imply that rural merchants – such as the Medley, Maxwell, Shank and Alcorn stores in Buffalo Valley – did not enjoy brisk trade.

The country stores were essential in an era long before Sam Walton dreamed his dream and Home Depot became a principal source of supply.

Reflecting on Depression-era commerce, one draws the conclusion rural merchants and mail order companies, albeit competitors, complemented each other in those years. The stores were there for immediate service while Ward and Sears had greater inventories but delays between order and delivery.

Mama ordered an incubator from Ward's, filled it with eggs, followed instructions and patiently awaited results that turned out to be less than successful. About half of the eggs hatched. She repeated the exercise, but the experience was the same.

She wrote Ward's and stated her problems. Ward's, quick to understand customers frustration, instructed her to return the incubator for a refund. But she had another idea. She saw an opportunity to acquire another product. She made a proposal.

Could she swap the incubator for a water tank? A great company that wanted to satisfy customers, Ward's agreed to her scheme. Suitable terms were developed, and in due course, Mama had her tank.

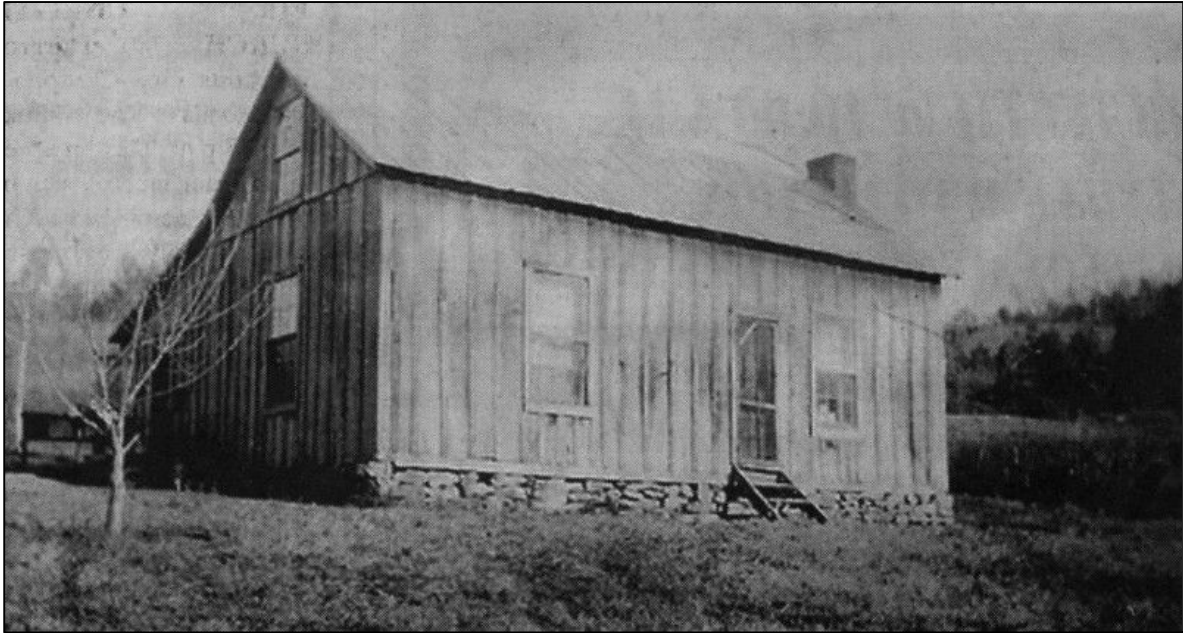
I don't remember details of how Dad transported the tank from the depot in Buffalo Valley two miles to our home in Rock Springs valley. My guess is he used a hay frame on the wagon and strapped the tank to the frame.

Dad mounted it on a platform at the rear of the house, fashioned a gutter that fed the tank during rains, and installed a line to the kitchen sink. Ergo, running water, but in one room only. An outhouse served other needs. As did the Montgomery Ward catalog.

I am not sure of the sequence here, but we dug a well after Dad negotiated with a well digger and traded a cow or a steer for his services. The well brought drinking water and eliminated trips to the spring.

Excitement was electric when the digger struck a strong stream. Dad installed the well casing and a windless crank. Pure limestone water and cool drinks in hot summers added new dimensions to our rural life.

Footnote: Saturday night baths in washtubs were not eliminated. But the convenience of drawing bath water from the storage tank gave a wee sense of luxury. Shower baths were to come later. I experienced my first shower bath in 1937 in a dormitory at Cumberland University.



The home J. B. Leftwich lived in as a child. The house, which was built by his father, Lewis Cass Leftwich, in 1928, was located on what is now Rock Springs Road and no longer remains on the property.

Lewis Cass Leftwich (1892-1961) married Lela Belle Bates (1899-1970) on the 1st of September 1918. They had four children: J. B. Leftwich (1919) who married Jo Doris Prichard; Doris Christine Leftwich (1921-1922); Lillard Calvin Leftwich (1923-1985 married Nellie Jane "Nell" Jernigan (1925-1999), she later married Willie "Bill" Thurlow Walker (1921-1991) and Thomas Clifford Leftwich (1927-1979) married Mary Elizabeth Erwing (1928-1980).

*See J. B. Leftwich stories at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>



Family of Lewis Cass & Lela Belle (Bates) Leftwich

Cass and his family in the late 50s or early 60s. From Left to right: J.B. Leftwich (son), Lewis Cass Leftwich, Lela Belle Leftwich (wife), Clifford Leftwich, son, and Lillard Calvin Leftwich (son).