

**RURAL PEDDLERS OF LONG AGO  
ARE NOW ICONS OF AMERICANA**

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Four score years ago when I was a lad, the arrival of the peddling wagon – later the peddling truck – usually was the most exciting event of the week in my little valley in Putnam County.

Peddlers were slices of rural Americana.

Only the ice truck in the summer months rivaled the thrill and expectations of the peddling wagon, which to rural children was a super-market on wheels.

In those days, we visited the wee commercial center in Buffalo Valley only on Saturdays. On one day in the middle of the week, the peddler, a merchant welcomed by farm families, made a stop at our house.

The peddler bought our eggs and frying size chickens, and we bought his flour, kerosene and peppermint candy.

A visit with the peddler also was a social event for farm families, most of whom had no radios, telephones or automobiles or other implements of communication. We learned who was sick, who had had an accident, who had moved out of the community and, occasionally, who was having an affair.

The rural peddler was more than an exponent of our little commercial center. He was an institution. But, in the lore of rural communities of the early years of the last century, the peddler has never received recognition he deserved.

The above thoughts surged through my memory as I realized there are few days in our lives when we make no visits to grocery stores. We make lists and stock items on each senior discount day, but the following day we return for the can of jelly or tube of toothpaste we forgot.

So, I wonder what the residents of Buffalo Valley and its surrounding communities do when they suddenly discover the soda box is empty or the reserve package of sugar is just an illusion. Do they drive several miles just to buy one needed item? Or maybe borrow from a neighbor, as was the custom in day so of yore?

I wonder if a peddler in the style of those olden days could thrive today in rural communities of Middle Tennessee. I suspect volume of sales would never compensate for overhead. Furthermore, rural housewives are employed in urban centers, leaving no one at home to buy from peddlers, even if they returned to the scene.

'Tis true, we survivors of the era had no electricity, drew our drinking water from wells and read at night by the light of kerosene lamps, but we had thrills, including the peddling wagon and the ice truck, both unknown by modern youth.

And the absence of electric lights was not as grim as it appears. We went in bed shortly after night fall and up from our beds by the crack of dawn, diminishing the need for artificial lighting.

County stores also were social scenes. In Buffalo Valley, the stores operated by R. L. Maxwell, Zina Medley, Walter Shanks and Thurman Alcorn not only were thriving commercial enterprises but also social centers, especially on Saturdays when farm families gathered to buy supplies and to exchange tidbits.

The social aura of Buffalo Valley stores continued into another generation when sons of storeowners assumed the mantle. As much as any other factor, World War II and later the transition from the

agriculture to manufacturing signaled the end of a unique era. Historians, pointing to modern transportation, evolving social structures and abandoned traditions, have chronicled the demise of village commerce.

Certainly, these elements are valid in the cause and effect equation but not the only culprits.

Perhaps as much the cause of diminished rural commercial centers and transformed rural communities is quasiurbanization of rural life through transportation and communication advances that lifted barriers, dissolved country customs and equated opportunities.

Buffalo Valley was never Camelot where, by law, the rain never fell until after sundown and by eight, the morning fog had disappeared. But the community had its knights and knaves, who added flavor to daily life.

Even in my era in the community between the two world wars, it was hard life and most of us opted for other scenes.

And like long departed friends, Buffalo Valley of the '20s and '30s lives in the minds of its survivors who embellish pleasant memories and soften images of the hard times.

A few of us survivors would like to go back to the life of those years, and to welcome the iceman and to buy a peppermint stick from the peddler.

But only in our dreams.

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\*See more Cumberland Tales, Buffalo Valley, TN & J. B. Leftwich stories at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>