

THE PEDDLER

by Tammer Jerry "Gus" Denny Sr.

Tuesday was a special day.

In the 11th district of Putnam county, Tennessee at a little settlement called Rock Springs Tuesday was a day of excitement, at 10:30 a.m. a much waited event would happen over the hill would come a clamor of smell and noise that would arise the whole neighborhood and called the residents to attention. The rolling store was not a pretty sight as far as art goes but it was a sight that was much awaited from week to week. To the nice ladies and hungry sweet tooth kids, that had trouble containing themselves. This iron horse (mostly a tin box on wheels) came out of nowhere at approx 10:30 each Tuesday. It was not painted carnival red or flowery colors because it needed no decorations to attract attention. It arrived with a clamor and a dust cloud. The coal oil had its own smell along with the chicken coops it carried and when the friendly peddler opened the rear doors a world of the unknown became real and the world of barter opened its doors to the most rural people. Even though it came from only eighteen miles away it carried the news of the world. It was the social event of the week and the information system that was much more informative than our modern TV. But more than any of this it brought things that were needed by the eagerly awaiting customers. There were bolts of cloth, coal oil, sugar, flour, salt, baloney, crackers, and for the wild eyed kids there was penny candy, both peppermint and horehound. And yes there was this new fangled thing called canned goods. In short the rolling store was our Wal Mart on wheels.

The peddler was always a friendly man and trustworthy because he had to come back next Tuesday. He was knowledgeable of the local conditions because he lived in them, but most of all he knew all the local news and events that had been and the ones upcoming. He truly loved his customers and they in turn gave that feeling back to him. It didn't matter that he drew coal oil with one hand while wiping his nose and slicing baloney with the other. He was their friend and contact with the outside world.

The rolling store had its hay day in the thirties and the forties. Although some small settlements were within a few miles from a store, when you are walking that is a trip with a bag of groceries on the way back home. To us the rolling store was like the pizza delivery man of today.

The preparation for the peddler started on Monday. There were eggs to gather, walnuts and hickory nuts to gather, chickens to catch, hams and shoulders to be selected for sale. A lot of this depended on the economical conditions of the last few weeks.

The women were very much aware of their exposure to the outside world. They had their baths, hair in shape and their clean dress that would have been accepted for Sunday wear. Even the men played a part in this "so called" women's and children event. After all the peddler did carry smoking tobacco, chewing tobacco, shotgun shells and I do know of a few events where the peddler "might have a little nip for his very select men customers. At a few "select" stops it has been said that a bag of flour has been handed to the man for a quart fruit jar that contained a beading liquid.

The peddler wore many hats. He was a transportation system for on many occasions he provided a ride for kid and older folks to visit others in the family on down the road. At some stops families that lived up in the holler away from the road would meet at a certain place for a social gathering to await the peddler. I don't know of anyone dying as the results of the things we might consider unsanitary today, but I do know some happy kids.

It was a blessed day. News, exchange of goods, gossip and much needed supplies. When the peddler closed his squeaking back door a little bit of the world shut with it but as they walked back up the path to the house with their baskets of "goodies" the feeling that god had surely been smiling at them on that peddling truck and they would not have this feeling again until Sunday.

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