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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Salesman's Job 55 Years Ago

By NEIL A. MATHESON

THE LIFE OF a commercial traveler was much different 50 years ago than it is now, I found from a talk with Ralph Balderson, Charlottetown who retired several years ago after 41 years of travelling and selling to stores in the province.

He started making the rounds about 1923 or 1924, started selling for Nelson Rattenbury and used to drive a horse from Robinson's Livery Stable which was located on Kent Street, in the vicinity of the old North American Hotel. For younger readers that was somewhere in the area of where the Provincial Bank is now, or probably a bit nearer to Queen Street.

I was interested in how Ralph used to choose the horse he wanted for the weekly trip.

Older Horses Hardier

HE'D CHOOSE a strong blood, a large blood. The late Hugh Walker told me once that a traveler would be wise to choose a horse that was 10 or 11 years old, they had better staying power, Hugh told me. Mr. Balderson agrees that was correct.

"We'd take the horse out on Monday morning and get back to town about Thursday. We paid \$1.50 a day for the horse and fed and cared for him on our own."

A lot of places where you stayed overnight would be happy to give you a feed in those earlier days. They would also have feed, including oats for your horse, he said.

Indeed I remember myself in my boyhood days at Rose Valley that the worth of a man was sometimes measured by how generous he was in feeding your horse when you visited him.

Ralph tells me that you paid 25 cents extra when you took the horse and sleigh, if you wanted chiming bells.

Box, Or Pung Sleigh

HE'D TAKE a box or pung sleigh, never the more stylish, built not nearly so practical jaunting sleighs, or cutters as they were sometimes called. The pung would dip into the pitches and always come out, he observed.

Then there was the buffalo robe, the fur coat and fur cap to keep the traveler warm.

"A good fur coat cost about \$70 to \$80 in those days. L.E.Prowse sold me my equipment for travelling," Ralph recalled.

He recalled his days at selling tea and how Mr. Rattenbury instructed him in the selling technique before he started out. You would take a handful of tea out of the box, squeeze it in your fist and suggest to the store owner "just sample that aroma".

You never sold a 25-pound bag of flour in those days; it was usually the barrel which contained 196 pounds of flour. You took the orders for spring delivery.

Recalling that Louis MacPherson, North Wiltshire told me some 10 years ago or more that Island merchants in former years had to lay in their supplies in the fall to last through the winter. That was in the days before the Prince Edward Island car ferry started in 1917 making her way across the strait from Borden to Tormentine and return.

Ralph recalls that MacLeod in the Halliday's Wharf area always made sure of getting in his supply of molasses. The huge barrels would weigh perhaps 500 pounds.

Selling Easier Then

SELLING WAS not so tough in those days. You made your trip twice a month. You came into a store, took off your coat, made yourself comfortable. You talked with your people; they looked forward to seeing you. Selling in those days was not a turmoil, not a rat race.

If you got storm stayed, as you sometimes did, you stayed where you were. Your boss told you "never try to travel in a storm".

"Contact the office, if possible, and stay out. Don't try to travel in bad weather" were the instructions.

There were plenty of good houses where you could stay overnight. They were very comfortable and gave you great service, Mr. Balderson recalled.

Ralph recalls a Scot who kept a store in the area where the Johnston's store is now at Fortune Bridge. Mr. Balderson recalls one day in particular when the Scot welcomed him warmly and said "Come in laddie, you're the Only Drummer who called today". I have heard that word use for salesmen myself, but only rarely. The man's name was Paton, but the first name slips Mr. Balderson's memory. He tells me the word "drummer" came from Scotland.

10 Miles A Day

YOU MAKE about 10 miles a day, counting the stops at stores. If there was really good sleighing or wheeling you probably made 15 miles.

On selling tea, Mr. Rattenbury's teaching was effective, Ralph tells me. "Tea sales were always high on my list."

"One never thought of packages of tea in those days, it was always chests, I think about 60 pounds," he said.

"One big sales item I remember was Hickey and Nicholson's Twist tobacco in hardwood caddies, six to 10 pounds to the caddie.

"The Balderson brothers, Alex and Benjamin, at Melville, made the caddies. When they would have a carload they would ship them to Hickey's factory at Charlottetown."

The twist tobacco is still manufactured, I understand, on Prince Street, not far from the Guardian – Patriot office, where I am writing this.

"I always had the feeling one had to be honest and sincere in his selling. One day a Mr. Roddie MacDonald, Pinette Bridge asked me if the twist was fresh and strong.

Hickey's Twist Was Strong

“FOR FRESHNESS I had to trust to the manufacturer, for the strength I would go back to my boyhood days that I well remember as I was with a neighbor in the woods on a very cold wintry day. He was a great chewer of Hickey’s twist, and when he had his fig out for a bit, I asked if I could taste it.

“The man cut about one-half inch off with his axe and gave it to me. In about 20 minutes I was falling asleep, and the neighbor got scared and kept me awake. What I do remember was that I was violently ill for some hours.

“After that I could truthfully tell any customer, “Yes, Hickey’s twist is strong,” Mr. Balderson recalled for me.

My warm thanks, Ralph, for this interesting glance at yesteryear.