

Merchandizing in the Early 20th Century

By Ethel M. Henning

Editor's Note: The following information was written by Ethel M. Henning, who passed away in 1997. Although it does not have a date, the story gives a glimpse of how items were purchased prior to the appearance of shopping malls and supermarkets. Ethel graduated from Walworth High School and Brockport Normal School and taught in the Syracuse and Webster areas for many years. She was a charter/life member of the Walworth Historical Society, trustee/secretary of the Walworth-Seely Public Library, and lived at 1283 Plank Road, Lincoln. Excerpts from her story are printed below and will continue in future newsletters.

At the turn of the century, there were many men and some women who canvassed the countryside selling their wares and satisfying the needs of the area.

One such person was "Jew Jake". He had a small horse-drawn cart with a cupboard on the platform from which he dispensed kitchen utensils – good heavy enameled basins, pitchers, all sizes of kettles and other kitchen needs.

He had special places where he would spend the night and could buy sweet butter, for his way of life frowned upon salted food. After the evening meal, he put on a little black cap and his prayer shawl around his shoulders and said his prayers before retiring. He paid for this hospitality by giving the housewife something from the cupboard. The housewife could order any article that was not available, and he would deliver it on his next trip.

I remember his coming to my grandparents' farm when they lived on the Kelly farm on Downs Road. It was an experience I have never forgotten.

Then there was the rag man. Everyone had a rag bag into which were put discarded clothes and other such items. Regularly an aging man came through the area driving an old horse hitched to a small wagon. He called "Ragman, Ragman", and the residents exchanged the rag bag for which he paid according to the weight of the bag.

Editor's Note: Below is a continuation of a story written by Ethel Henning, a charter member of the Walworth Historical Society, who passed away in 1997. The first segment appeared in our May issue.

A man canvassed the area collecting old iron to be recycled. No piece was too small for him to be willing to buy.

People were glad to have the scissors grinder come through the area, for he was very capable of sharpening shears, scissors, or knives.

The fish peddler who came every week was very welcome. Ward Arney lived at Bear Creek Harbor in Ontario. He fished in Lake Ontario and had a route that he traveled regularly to sell his catch. He had a big box on a wagon (later on a truck) that was filled with big chunks of ice among which he packed the fish. He delivered as far south as Jacobs Road. He brought only the best fish – big white fish, salmon, walleyed pike, and other varieties. They were so fresh they often flopped among the chunks of ice.

Of course the housewife depended on the meat man and the grocer who stopped at each home once a week. It was possible to give an order for next week's delivery if the desired item was not available immediately.

When a person realizes the limitations with this kind of merchandizing, one can appreciate the privilege of shopping in the supermarkets of the later part of the 20th century.