

*r. f. d.*  
*and*  
*the*  
*party*  
*line*

There must have been some sort of a code among the Syrians, the Italians and the Jews, the itinerant peddlers who traveled the country roads and lanes in the early years of this century, for they all seemed to know that our farm was one at which they would be permitted to stay overnight. Often it was after dark when one of these swarthy merchants drove in our yard, always

with the plaintive story that he and his old horse could not go a step further. My folks never turned them away, though I know my mother was often uneasy with these foreign-looking men in the house.

A light wagon, usually rickety, carried their entire "stock" of shoe strings, pencils, bright-colored handkerchiefs, small rugs, and perhaps a bolt or two of gaudy calico cloth to catch the eye of the farmer's wife. We watered and fed their horses and bedded them down for the night. Then the peddler himself was asked into the house, given a place at the supper table if the meal was not yet over, or if it was late at night, my mother set out coffee and bread for him which he invariably wolfed greedily and noisily, while my brother, my sister and I watched timidly from the shadows of the adjoining rooms. We knew it would not be long before our visitor brought samples of his wares to spread out on the sitting room floor for us all to see while he tried to explain in his halting English what wonderful goods they were and what bargains.

We kids, of course, always wanted Father to buy everything the peddlers brought in, for, shoddy as the articles must have been, we seldom got to see such things at all. Dad liked to haggle with them over bits of merchandise, knowing full well they expected it. No peddler, we learned later, ever counted on getting what he first asked for anything he offered for sale. Nor did they ever pay in money for their lodging but offered instead a handkerchief or two or a few yards of calico. In the morning they were often up and on their way at

dawn, and as we stirred sleepily in our beds, we heard their carts clattering out the front gate, past the orchard, and over the little wooden bridge that spanned the tiny brook in what we called "the hollow."

No year went by without two or three visits from bands of those summertime nomads of the midwest prairies, the gypsies. No one ever knew from where they came. And no one ever knew where they went. They seemed to migrate with the birds, and every spring we knew they would soon be along, riding in perhaps a couple of grimy, covered wagons, the only prairie schooners we actually ever saw. One of their favorite camping spots was the roadside close to the willow grove that sheltered the John Moule homestead a quarter of a mile east of us. We watched them warily as they halted here, turned their sad-looking horses to graze along the road, unloaded dozens of ragged children, and started their campfires from which the gray smoke soon rose to hang lazily in the tops of the willows. We knew they wouldn't bother the Moules for there was always a big, tough watch dog on guard there. But we knew they would soon show up at our place, the women to beg and offer to tell fortunes, figuring to keep us occupied while the gypsy children stole anything they could. Once my mother and I were home alone when a delegation from the camp arrived. We stood in a screened porch we then had at the back of our house, being careful of course to hook the screen door securely from the inside. This was a vantage point where we could keep an eye on the whole back yard. One of the gypsy

women, evidently the leader of the crew, when she found we were not going to let her in, tried subtle flattery. She salaamed before me with a great show of humility, kissed the screen at my feet, and went into a dramatic plea about what she could do for "the young master."

My mother was not taken in by this nonsense and told the gypsy she could clear out at once, "or I'll call the menfolk." Mother was bluffing for the menfolk were miles away, but the threat had the desired effect. The woman called to the children, who had been peering into the woodshed and the milk house, scowled darkly at us and muttered what were probably swear words in the gypsy language, and marched off toward the camp.

The gypsy men seldom appeared at our place. They loafed about their campfires, smoking, and eating out of the great pots that always hung over the constantly smoldering embers. Their business was to trade horses with anyone unsuspecting enough to risk dealing with them. Their horseflesh was the sorriest, and you wondered how such emaciated animals had strength enough to pull those creaking covered wagons from camp to camp as these strange people, whose past is still almost unknown wandered through the summer, following the sun as it slanted southward and the autumn days grew shorter.

Four miles southeast of our farm the little village of Portland clung stubbornly to the bank of the Lime Creek River, even as it does today. Here, a half century



ago, was conceived and put into action a merchandising idea many years ahead of its time. It was the unique and remarkable store on wheels that we perhaps wrongly called the "egg wagon," and which was sent out on daily trips to the surrounding farming country by the general store in the village. Unlike the peddlers and the gypsies, the "egg man" was a most welcome visitor at our farm, to which he came every Thursday afternoon. We watched for him expectantly as he drove slowly down from the O'Donnell place, turned the corner at Moule's willow grove, and presently pulled up at our front gate.

We were always out there waiting for him, with a few eggs if we had them, or a little cash if we didn't. As the egg man swung down from his seat where he sat high up behind his team like the driver of a circus wagon, and opened the brightly painted red doors that protected the many shelves, drawers and compartments that filled every inch of the interior, what entrancing smells of spices, candy, fruit and cookies sprang forth. Once, when my mother had bought an especially big order, the egg man handed me a package of gum, the first I had ever seen. I chewed up the whole business within fifteen minutes.

Full crates of eggs were slid under the main part of the wagon, just in front of the rear wheels, while up on top, higher than a man's head, there was a little iron railing that kept brooms, mops and empty egg crates from falling off. There was a canvas top which could be raised or lowered to keep the hot sun or the rain off the

driver. How his team ever handled that heavy load on those Iowa dirt roads when a summer shower came along I have no idea.

The egg man and his wagon called on us for many years, but the coming of the automobile along about 1910 finally stopped his visits. I missed them both for a long time.

Nearly every summer a cream gathering route was started, only to die out when winter came. Sometimes it was a driver from Plymouth, or from Portland, or from Mason City who arrived with a team and a light wagon, promising to make regular stops and to pay a good price for what cream we had. I suppose the men who started these routes found them too expensive to operate, or prices fell and put them out of business, or the patrons along the route thought they were being cheated on the butterfat test of their cream and refused to sell.

Most of the time we hauled our own cream to Mason City and for many years we sold it to Higleys. During the years that I drove a horse and buggy to school in Mason City it was my job to deliver a five-gallon can to the creamery about twice a week. I detested having to carry that cream can in my buggy, not realizing, of course, that the income from it was probably keeping me in school. The town kids laughed at me and yelled derisively, "Look at the old farmer and his milk can!" I wish I hadn't been so thin-skinned at that age, for I can see now I should have just grinned and yelled back louder than they did. I was thoroughly ashamed

of that old cream can. I tried to hide it by throwing the lap robe over it, but it still looked like a cream can. In later years when I was in the dairy business on my father's farm I was glad to haul a whole truck load of milk cans to town. Nobody ever yelled at me then.

One day in the early summer of 1902 a man appeared at our place and introduced himself as a representative of the United States Postal Department. My father was working in the garden, while I hung around nearby, probably doing as little as possible, though no doubt I was supposed to be weeding the carrots, the parsnips or the beets, for we seemed always to have interminable rows of these vegetables. As I edged closer to hear what the visitor had to say, I heard him tell my father that he wanted the full names of every member of our family so the post office could tell where to send mail when any arrived. I felt terribly important when he wrote down my name. Just imagine me, ten years old, getting mail and having it delivered. It was almost unbelievable. We were a little skeptical about the whole thing. We didn't see how we could expect anything much better than picking up an occasional letter or a copy of the *Chicago Record-Herald* on Saturdays when we took the eggs and butter to town.

But on July 1, 1902, the R.F.D. came to our front gate, where we had carefully set a sturdy post with a metal mailbox securely fastened to the top and my father's name boldly lettered in red paint on each side of the box. Close beside the mailbox stood another post with a small blackboard nailed to it, an advertising



idea of one of the Mason City furniture stores. One side of the blackboard had the word "Wanted" at the top, while the other side was headed "For Sale." We were appalled and mortified one morning when we went out to admire our mailbox and our advertising sign-board to find that during the night some barbed-wire humorist had scrawled in huge letters the word "beer" on the "For Sale" side of the board for all passers-by to see. This struck me as being very funny, but I do not think my father, most certainly a teetotaler, was pleased.

Rural mail delivery and the name of B. C. Waughtal were practically synonymous so far as our family was concerned. "Bash," as he was called by nearly everyone, started as a substitute carrier on that first day of July, became the regular carrier later on and continued on the job until 28 years later, when, at the age of 72, he retired. "Bash" was a contraction of his first name of Bashford, though for quite a while, until I learned better, I thought it might mean he was a handy man in a fistfight and had actually "bashed in" somebody's face.

Carrying the mail on the 20 miles or more of the average route was not what you would call a highly paid job in those early years. The pay was \$600 a year, certainly no bonanza, but those first carriers managed on it somehow. They had to own and feed several horses, for on a daily trip of 20 miles or more a change of teams every few days was necessary. I think Mr. Waughtal did a little horse-trading on the side for he owned a great variety of horseflesh from time to time, none of it choice. More than once we saw him stop



to visit at the gypsy camp, and I have a notion that he could hold his own in a deal with the gypsy men.

Winter driving was the worst, with the roads almost impassable at times. But the farmers were so eager to get their mail they often got out their teams and sleds to break a track for the mailman. Often we watched for Bash until nearly dark, when at last he would appear, riding in an old swell-backed cutter, muffled to the eyes in a coonskin coat, with scarf, fur mittens and fur cap, with the lines around his neck so his hands were free to get at the mail pouches beside him and at his feet. Then, too, he needed to slap his hands together continually to keep them from freezing. His horses and his fur cap and collar would be white with frost for it was often 20 below zero with a wind blowing. I never saw him the least bit downhearted no matter how bad the going was. He would visit a minute or two as he handed out the mail, then slap the lines on the rumps of his tired horses and go on.

Some of the carriers used a rig that was a box-like affair, entirely enclosed and with small windows on all sides, and which could be mounted on wheels in summer and on a light bobsled in winter. A small oil-stove was sometimes installed in these cabs so that the driver could be fairly comfortable. These outfits had disadvantages however. They were heavy for a team to pull, upset rather easily, and so could not be used on badly drifted roads. Always I wanted to ride the route in one of these cab-like affairs, but I never got to do it. I think there was something in the R.F.D. regulations

anyway against carrying passengers, especially small boy passengers.

As the bottom fell out of the country roads in the early spring when the frost had to give way to the warming sun, we saw a mail carrier on another route discard his cutter and his buggy in disgust, throw a saddle on one horse and his mail bags over another, and, like a prospector heading for Deadman's Gulch, travel the weary miles to reach those lonely mailboxes. The R.F.D., once started, never gave up.

Much has been written slyly poking fun at the rural telephone party line. Everyone who has ever lived on a farm is familiar with, and in fact almost expects to hear, the telltale click of receivers being quietly lifted from the hook within a few seconds after he has finished cranking out the ring of central or someone else on the line. It's part of the fun of living in the country, and you guard your conversation accordingly, knowing full well that the entire neighborhood would like to know how much you are going to get for that truck-load of hogs, whether you are out of feed and want some delivered, or whether you stayed out too late at that party the other night and are now paying for it with a fine cold in the head. You learn not to gossip over the party line and are embarrassed to death when someone from town calls and, forgetting the lack of privacy on the country line, proceeds to rake somebody else over the coals. Once a good friend of mine, a preacher, called to tell me about something that had gone wrong with the plumbing in the rather ancient house into which

he had just moved. When I admitted mildly that the house didn't look like much on the outside, he exploded, "Well, it looks like hell on the inside!" Several curious ears must have backed away from their receivers in stunned surprise.

We were connected with our first party line within a year or so after mail delivery began. Most of the others on the line lived well to the southeast of us and we did not know any of them well, so our ring, which was four longs, seldom came over the wire. We always wished it would ring more often, and when a series of long rings started we waited breathlessly, hoping it would be ours. When it turned out to be two or three rings we were much disappointed.

Later on, however another line was organized among the farmers who lived closer to us, and then our ring, which was a long, a short, and a long, came fairly often. My father installed most of the telephones on this new line for, apparently, he was the only one who knew how to do it. Where he learned the trick I don't know, but he made them work. He was the first trouble shooter for the line. My brother, Roger, who was later to become associated with the Bell Telephone Laboratories in New York City in research work, must have inherited this knack with telephones.

The farmers on a party line did all their own construction work. Some hauled poles, wire, brackets and insulators to the proper places; some dug holes and set the poles, while still others took over the job of unreeling the wire, stretching it and fastening it to the in-



sulators. I liked to watch all this of course, for it meant getting away from the duller jobs around the farm. I heard lots of talk about lightning arresters, grounds, dry cells, generators and so on, but unlike my brother, I never did know how the darn things worked — and still don't.

We often made good use of that party line for an evening's entertainment. With no radio, no television, no record player, no car to dash to town in, and no movies to see if we did get to town by team and surrey, a one-legged peddler who played the jew's-harp was the sensation of the neighborhood. "Pegleg" Roach made a sort of hand-to-mouth living in the county by selling linens, laces, piano scarfs and other odd bits of dry goods. No one seemed to know much about his past, but he was more readily received in the farmers' homes because he was not of foreign descent as were the peddlers who often stopped at our farms. He was friendly with the Dennis O'Donnells, and often stayed with them for a spell in the winter time when the roads were bad and it was hard to get around.

At such times we could expect to hear the general ring over the party line along about the time supper dishes were out of the way. It would be Dennis, his wife or his son, Eddie, calling to let everyone know they had persuaded Pegleg to play his jew's-harp close to the transmitter of their wall telephone. Every receiver came down at once, and at our place, where there were five of us to crowd closely around that little instrument, reception was somewhat difficult to say



the least. There was a good deal of shoving and scuffling and anguished cries of, "Mother, make him let go of the receiver, it's my turn now!" But we thought the music was wonderful, we who were so hungry for diversion of any kind, and when Pegleg came to the end of a piece we applauded loudly and happily into the transmitter. It was entertainment, and it was coming mysteriously over that slender thread of wire strung on poles along our fence lines. The angry northwest wind might be whipping the snow into six-foot drifts outside while the frost imps nibbled away at doors and windows trying to drive us closer to the glowing base burner in the sitting room, but Pegleg Roach and his jew's-harp were coming in with the faint but twangy notes of "My Old Kentucky Home." What more could you want on a wintry night in Lime Creek Township?

