

Door-to-Door Nostalgia

When I was a kid, I earned enough money going door-to-door selling garden seeds to earn a Red Ryder BB Gun. It had a lever action with a handsome rawhide loop on the stock, well worth me being a pest by nagging those without gardens to buy seeds. I also knocked on doors collecting newspapers. I would bring them home piled on my wagon and stack them in the garage. When the garage was full, Dad would call a truck and they would load it up with the newspapers and pay me. I believe the sum was twenty bucks or so, which was a significant sum for a kid in those days. It wasn't long before people were calling my house and asking when I was going to pick up their papers.

Door-to-door salesmen were common then. There were fuller brush men, vacuum cleaner men and others. At a higher level were the people who performed a service. We had a vegetable man, Mr. Carpenteri, who would knock on the back door toting a wicker basket with a selection of his vegetables artfully displayed. My mother would make her selections, and Mr. Carpenteri would return to his truck and assemble the order. We had a knife sharpening man, a bread man, a milk man, an ice man and a fish man, too. On the occasional Saturday, Mr. Mandeville, the milk man from Hoods Dairy, would permit me to ride in his open doored truck and sprint up to the houses with the milk, the kind where the cream would separate to the top of the bottle. The most popular with the kids was the ice cream man, whose tinkling bell could be heard a few blocks away. This would cause any game being played to immediately disperse as the kids ran frantically home to plead with Mom to contribute enough money to buy a grape popsicle, fudgicle or creamsicle. The ice cream man and the knife sharpening man were special. They had no need to go door-to-door. They proceeded slowly down the street ringing a bell. That was enough to bring customers out of the house.

When it snowed, we'd go door-to-door selling our services to shovel walks or driveways. You could earn big money this way, and we knew well the frail old people whom we could charge the big fee. Later in life, I had a friend who sold encyclopedias door-to-door in the summer. He claimed the most fertile ground was the very poor neighborhoods because the parents wanted their children to excel in education and rise above their present economic level. They were suckers for his sales pitch.

In some churches, the elders used to deliver communion cards to homes of the members, both to

remind them of a communion service coming up and to solicit attendance. I think, theoretically, if you didn't go to communion for some period of time, you were kicked out, an empty threat if there ever was one. I used to deliver these cards in the city, but people became increasingly reluctant to open the door. At one home, I remember leaning down and attempting to converse with the occupant by screaming through the mail slot. It wasn't very effective, and that experience convinced me to stop doing it.

Bill, a friend of mine, called on a family in a three story apartment, the kind with a bell and intercom on the ground floor. As he was entering the lobby, a couple was leaving and they were engaged in a pretty heated argument. The elder rang the bell, and over the intercom heard, "For God's Sake, you can't have bought more beer already! You've drunk most of mine, so you're not getting back in here without a dozen!" My friend cleared his throat and announced he was a church elder with a communion card. There are times when you just don't feel the welcoming hand will be extended.

Today, because any knock on the door can be interpreted as a threat, door-to-door selling has become extinct. Once in a great while a religious person will

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