

Sales on the road

■ Peddlers were the mobile mall of their time.

A peddler with a pack on his back was a familiar sight to our ancestors.

Storehouses were few and far between. Roads were rough. The peddler with his needles, thread, combs, quilts and other sundry items was made welcome.



Nearly history

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was not a single store in town. He spread his wares on planks under the trees in front of the courthouse.

Latta made a quick ascent from rags to riches. By 1799 he had accumulated enough money to build a combination store-home opposite the courthouse. The imposing brick structure remained in the family until 1931 and still stands. Latta prospered and his son, Robert Latta, became a "merchant-prince" with additional stores in Camden and Columbia.

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With time there were variations in the peddling routine. While many peddlers remained independent of stores or financial backing, others were employed to sell goods on commission.

In Yorkville during the 1840s there was a firm doing business as a co-partnership under the name of McElwee and Sutton. Jonathan McElwee and Alexander C. Sutton employed at least a half dozen men to work at the combination trading of clocks, carryalls and slaves. Covering a geographical area that extended from North Carolina to Alabama, the "peddlers" roamed the countryside to show their wares.

The carryall in many ways resembled a small Conestoga wagon. It had shelves with planking placed as a restraining device to keep the goods from sliding out on rutted roads. The carryalls were manufactured locally.

Joseph Herndon, a Virginia native born in 1806, moved to Cleveland County, N.C., and started his business career as a peddler on horseback. He graduated to doing business out of a carryall.

In 1847 when he had enough money he moved to Chester and became a partner of W. Dixon Henry. In 1854 he moved to Yorkville and set up two businesses, a tannery and a grocery store. Herndon not only became successful, he also was noted for his generosity in helping other aspiring young men rise in business.

In the 1880s, Leroy Springs of Fort Mill, who had just dropped out of the University of North Carolina as a sophomore, took a job with Burwell and Springs, a wholesale grocery firm in Charlotte, as a "drummer." He took a wagonload of groceries through the countryside, sleeping in barn lofts at night, and when he had sold the goods he returned to Charlotte for another load.

Like Latta and Herndon, Leroy Springs prospered and moved into merchandising. In 1895 he took the profits from his mercantile company (the largest store between Charlotte and Atlanta) and built the Lancaster Cotton Mills. Springs eventually controlled mills in Fort Mill, Chester and Kershaw as well as Lancaster. He is another example of a shrewd, ambitious young man who started as a peddler and became wealthy.

Over time, country stores dotted the countryside. Gradually, opportunities for peddlers diminished, but they did not completely disappear until sometime in the first quarter of this century.

Bessie Rodgers Pettus, 91, of Indian Land remembers when she was a small girl:

"Mr. Jack Ashley had a wagon with shelves built around the sides and a top on the wagon. It was pulled by one mule. Built in the outside were chicken coops ready for the chickens he traded," she recalls. "He also traded cloth, needles, pins, buttons and thread for eggs. Mr. Jack lifted me up so that I could see the cloth. I picked out white eyelet."

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