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Life of a Carolina peddler often a struggle

John Gary Anderson wrote his autobiography in 1937. One of the stories he told was how his father, who was from Lawsonville, N.C., in Stokes County, happened to end up in this area. His father peddled tobacco to country stores.

Louise Pettus



NEARBY HISTORY

Using a covered wagon pulled by two mules, father Gary Anderson traveled with a companion, John Chambers, and a wagon dog. The wagon carried boxes of chewing tobacco, feed for the mules, blankets, a few tools, a frying pan, coffee pot and camp stools. They always stopped at a spot that had water, whether in town or alongside a road.

At night after supper (ham, eggs, bread and coffee), the hay was patted down, and they slept under the stars. If it rained, a heavy duck covering was pulled tight and the back flaps closed. The mules, tied to the back of the wagon, had heavy, warm covers. The dog slept inside and served as a foot warmer.

Anderson described what he remembered as a boy of 7 when he was allowed to go along on a round of visits, which generally lasted about two weeks before the

men headed back to North Carolina for another load of tobacco. The year would have been about 1877, the year after Reconstruction ended in South Carolina.

The boy recalled their crossing over creeks without bridges. After a heavy rain, the creek was likely to be up. The mules would swim across, and more than likely the hay in the bottom of the wagon got wet. This necessitated spreading the hay on the ground to let it dry before they went on in quest of customers. Some of the stores were so small (and so poor) that they could not afford to invest in a whole box of tobacco but got whatever fraction of a box they could afford.

Anderson remembered Chambers, the wagon boy, as a master banjo picker. He loved to camp with other tobacco wagons and pick and sing songs such as "Old Dan Tucker," "Gwine Down Town" and "Mississippi Sawyer." The vaudeville-type show was a characteristic of the life of "tobacco boys," and Anderson never forgot being entertained by them.

End of the token

In 1941, the S.C. legislature passed a law making it illegal for a person to buy or sell tokens. In one fell swoop, that ended a system of exchange that went back at least 50 years. The origin of the system is uncertain, but it may have originated with the company store that was a part of the cotton

mill system.

The company store carried everything any general store of the time might: groceries, kerosene, cloth, patent medicines, toys, coffins, shoes, chicken feed, etc. The store was usually built across the street from the mill. The company store would "carry" the customer by crediting him until payday, when the paycheck was reduced by the amount due.

Company store profits were high. Some mills made as much as 50 percent profit. Leroy Springs set his profit level at 20 percent at his Lancaster Mercantile Co. and boasted that no mill owner could best him. Indeed, his store was the largest between Charlotte and Atlanta.

The tokens generally were made of metal, although some were of wood or cardboard. The name of the mill and the city was stamped on them. The Springs tokens were about the size of a 50-cent piece. The mill workers called them "loonies."

Tokens were advances against the worker's paycheck. If the worker cashed them in before payday, they were discounted. Leavi Deese of Lancaster remembered years later that he would give people \$4 cash for \$5 worth of loonies. That way, he had an extra dollar for his groceries (which rarely exceeded \$3 a week).

Tokens circulated outside the mill village. Town merchants could always trade them back to

the mill. At least one railroad accepted the tokens for riders having certain destinations.

Probably if the circulation of the tokens had been confined to the mill villages, the legislature would never have acted. If Gresham's law, "bad money drives good money out of circulation," is true, then the token system is a good example of it.

Frequent flies

Back when most families, whether they lived in town or the country, had a family cow, horses, mules, chickens and pigs, they also had flies. Lots of them. Combating the flies called for swatters, fans, fly traps, poisoned molasses and a number of other ingenious methods.

Local funeral homes provided unscreened churches with plenty of fans.

The fans were a means of advertising services or products.

Lucky was the family that had a mechanical fan. There was one model that sat in the middle of the table that would like an alarm clock. It would run just long enough for the family to finish its meal. Another version of a mechanical fan had a pedal that kept the fan blades moving.

Were those really the "good old days"?

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