

A Hoosier General Store in 1847

I. M. McFADDEN

John Vestal's store in Bedford, in the eighteen-forties, was a center for the economic life of the community. It was not only the supply house for the manufactured goods of the community, but it was also the purchasing agency that handled the products which the pioneer farmers had to sell. Further, the store served as paymaster for the men in the community who hired others, and as a bank for those who had money to deposit or who needed to borrow. When tax-paying time came, individuals finding themselves a little short of cash, it was to the store that they went for the amounts needed, the advances being charged to the accounts of the borrowers. When a citizen wanted to transfer funds to a distant city, it was the general store that expeditiously accomplished this by a simple transfer of debits and credits with a firm in the far-away place. If a housewife needed a stamp or an ounce of some drug from the apothecary's shop, it seems that she often went first to the store, obtained twenty cents in cash, and then hastened on to make her other purchases.

The most interesting facts gleaned from the pages of the old journal of John Vestal are those which picture for us the details of home life among the early settlers. The entries examined were for the period from February 15 to April 16, 1847. The record is, therefore, somewhat seasonal, but yet fairly complete as winter goods were yet in demand while the coming season was being prepared for.¹

As one might expect, the article which found most ready sale in the pioneer community was iron. Bar iron, selling for five and six cents a pound, constituted most of the entries, although special kinds and qualities sold as high as eighteen cents and English Blister Steel was even higher. There were twenty-eight entries for iron in the sixty-day period.

Calico and tobacco ran almost neck and neck, with the former winning by a slight margin. Presumably, both should be classed as luxuries. Even among pioneer folk, the women must have had certain things they wanted. Cof-

¹ The data for this article were taken from the business journal of John Vestal, who operated a general store in Bedford from 1841 to 185—. The journal has been used by Mr. Vestal's descendants as a scrapbook, but a few of the entries for 1847-48 are intact as the clippings have not been mounted that far.

fee was another much sought article appearing eighteen times in the two-months. Strange to say, the pioneers bought their coffee for less than the cost today—eleven cents per pound. The only other articles bought more than ten times in the period were harness, thread, linen, shoes, sugar, and saleratus. Shoes were evidently made by the local shoemaker as he was credited in one place with \$24 for thirty-eight pairs of shoes. The cost to the consumer was from fifty cents to \$1.25 for a pair of shoes, and forty cents to ninety cents for slippers. Of course, it must be remembered that the purchasing value of money was considerably higher than it is today. Saleratus may mean little to the present generation, but it was actually plain baking soda that a few housewives were learning to use.

The items bought fairly often but not as frequently as these above mentioned are quite varied. Those appearing in the journal from five to ten times are handkerchief-pins, needles, combs, carpenter tools, buttons, sheetings, and cornmeal. These seem to have brought about the same price as they do today. For instance carpenters' saws were fifty cents to \$1.25, which, considering difference in exchange value, compares favorably. Cornmeal selling for fifty cents per bushel² is, of course, an exception because it was a home product.

Items occurring more than once, and less than five times were dishes, onion sets, gloves, copperas, white flour, molasses, socks, nails, candlesticks, silk handkerchiefs, tea, spelling books, powder and lead, brown muslin, cotton yarn, tumblers, plow lines, jeans, sweet potatoes, cotton edging, gingham, red flannel, hoes, and children's stockings.

It is in this last list that some of the most interesting information is to be found, some haphazard bits of which should be mentioned. That all the cloth used was not homespun is evident. Pioneer homes were not dry or warm enough to keep sweet potatoes over for seed. Only one family could use white flour bought at the mill. In the busiest repair season of the year, it seems as if more nails would have been bought. The purchase of copperas probably indicates that it was to be used for dyeing. Only two families bought store socks for the men, and only one had the taste or pocketbook for tea, which was one dollar per pound.

² This probably meant the amount of meal made from a bushel of corn.

Forty-eight other items appear in the journal as purchases made by the pioneer community, but once during the sixty-days. This list includes turpentine, suspenders, cotton-batts, fishhooks, razor-strop, apples, thimble, fur hat, potatoes, brass-kettle, boots, window-glass, matches, tin-bucket, candlewick, dried apples, ribbon, tin-cup, grindstone, almanac, Bible, lace, Italian cravat, spinning wheel, bed-ticking, and tea-pot. It seems significant that cotton-batts, matches, tin-bucket, thimbles, and potatoes should appear in this list of things which evidently were the luxuries of the period. The Bible at fifty cents may be understood, but the almanac being sold at a nickel is something to ponder.

In this journal, the articles bought by the store are also recorded. From February 15 to April 16, the store bought eggs only once, paying three cents a dozen. One of the entries listed hens bought at one dollar a dozen, and chickens at eight cents each. Sugar was bought six times as this was the maple season. Eight cents per pound was paid for it. Fifteen yards of flax-jeans brought some pioneer a credit of \$3.75. Apples were bought twice, molasses three times, the former at two and one-half cents per pound and the latter at sixty-two and one-half cents per gallon. Meal was procured six times, wheat twice, and feathers three times. The prize purchases were butter, nine purchases being made, totaling almost 100 lbs. at ten cents per pound. It must have gone hard to have traded fifteen yards of flax-jeans at twenty-five cents for seven and one-half yards of gingham, but we must consider how the hearts of pioneers were gladdened with "store" goods. The man who sold thirty dozen eggs for ninety cents bought a fur hat costing \$2.50.

These prices coupled with the extremely low wages are ample proof that a dollar was worth more than it is today. There are dozens of entries that vouch for the fact that men carpentered, cut briars, put up hay or repaired rail-fences for seventy-five cents a day. Others furnished timber, cut the wood, and hauled it to town for thirty-five, forty, and sixty cents a cord. These were the old, genuine cords, 8x4x4 and not our ricks 8x4x1½, which are but one-third of an actual cord.

Yet these people found time and inclination to enjoy life as much as we do. What a world of dreams is hidden