

Documents

The Hoosier Huckster

*John Frank Turner**

I am a native of Putnam County, Indiana, where I spent my childhood and early youth on a small farm near the old village of Fincastle, located twelve miles north of Greencastle, the home of DePauw University. I do not know positively how the village of Fincastle received its name, but believe the name was given by some of the early settlers of that region who had come by covered wagon about 1820 from the vicinity of Fincastle, Virginia, a few miles north of Roanoke. The west central part of Indiana is still dotted with many such inland villages, which in my boyhood were important trading centers for the communities in which they are located.

The villages usually included a post office to which the mail was carried by "star" route from the nearest railroad station, which in our case was Raccoon Station, about three miles north of Fincastle on what was then the Indianapolis, Decatur, and Springfield Railroad and is now known as the Indianapolis and Springfield line of the Baltimore and Ohio system. The station was named by its location near Big Raccoon Creek which flows nearby. The post office in these inland villages was usually located in the corner of the general store, with the merchant holding the title of postmaster. His pay was based on the amount of stamp cancellations, which rarely averaged more than a few cents per day; but potential customers were brought into his store to call for mail or to mail their letters.

These village stores were so "general" that they carried stocks of staple goods which included groceries, dry goods, work clothing for men, boots and shoes, notions, and shelf hardware. They also provided a market for poultry, eggs, and butter from the surrounding farms, which small produce was brought in and exchanged at market price for its value in merchandise.

Some of these country stores operated over established routes in the surrounding country what were commonly called peddler wagons or huckster wagons. The wagons made trips over each route on regular days every two weeks, or in

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some cases every week, as was thought profitable. It was in such a store that I had my first business experience.

The store at Fincastle in my earliest recollection was operated by Robert L. Bridges, who was the largest landowner in the community and who "kept store" while his four sons did the farming. When I was a small boy Mr. Bridges sold an interest in his store to Thomas L. Grider who was his nephew. Mr. Grider had grown up in the community. After he had become familiar with the business as a partnership affair he bought the entire interest of his uncle in the store, making it an individual business.

The Grider family were near-neighbors of our family and when I was about ten years of age Thomas married my oldest sister, Carrie, who was then nineteen years of age.

The little store at Fincastle under the management of Mr. Grider had prospered, and in the summer of 1890, when I had reached the age of nineteen and had previously received a "degree" of eighth grade from the country school, Mr. Grider decided to add a peddler wagon to his business. He asked me to become a member of his force, driving the wagon a part of the time, selling merchandise from the wagon which for the most part was in exchange for country produce which the customers had for sale.

But this road outfit of Mr. Grider's was no homemade or ramshackle affair, as were many of those which were being used over routes through the country. On the contrary, he made a drawing of plans for a wagon to his liking and took it to an Indianapolis firm which built a heavy spring wagon according to his own ideas. His wagon had a heavy canvas top on stationary bows, with roll curtains on both sides and at the rear so that it could be closed up in bad weather.

To accommodate the merchandise to be hauled in the wagon there were two movable boxes the full width of the bed, which was about twelve inches deep. One of the boxes for the rear of the wagon had shelves for accommodating yard goods and this box was well filled with calicoes, gingham, outing flannels, muslins, and such other goods of that nature as were kept in the store. This box was closed by a door at the rear, hinged at the bottom, and with a "leg" hinged onto the door, so that the door when opened downward formed a counter on which the dry goods could be pulled out for examination by the customer.

The other box, of flat dimensions, occupied the space in the wagon in front of the rear box and extended up to the

driver's seat in front, providing considerable room on top of the box for egg cases, brooms, tin ware, and other light bulky stuff. On one side of this box were drawers stocked with small notions of all kinds, while on the other side of the box and wagon were small doors opening into bins for groceries of a staple nature. Swung under the rear axle of the wagon was a coop for hauling poultry purchased on the trips.

As motive power for this small traveling store, Mr. Grider purchased a team of two good horses which was fitted with a nice set of expensive harness, so that when ready to go on the road we had a fine and substantial outfit.

At that time only a small amount of the groceries received by retailers were in packages as they are today. Sugar was shipped by the wholesalers in wood barrels with a capacity of approximately three hundred pounds. Rice came in one hundred-pound bags as did "green" coffee, but there was beginning to be some roasted coffee shipped in one-pound packages, with one hundred packages to the case, with "Ar-buckles" being the favorite brand. Spices of all kinds also came in bulk to the stores, to be weighed out according to the wishes of the customer as to amount. So there was always a big job on Saturday in the store of weighing up and packaging groceries for the wagon's two-day trip starting on Monday morning. We used paper bags, putting up sugar in fifty-cent packages, which at the average price then meant ten to twelve pounds. Spices and smaller groceries were put up in ten-cent packages or in amounts usually called for in the store.

A few years previous to the time I went into Mr. Grider's store there had broken out in west-central Indiana a rash of building gravel roads and also of purchasing by the counties, through taxation of adjacent landowners, many sections of gravelled highways, which had been constructed and operated as toll roads by stock companies. These gravelled roads at that time were tops in the way of all-year-'round highways. There are still to be seen some of the old tollgate houses for the toll roads now occupied as homes along those routes. In mapping out trips for our wagon we made an effort to follow the gravelled roads so far as possible; but that idea was not practical in all cases and there were times during the winter and early spring weeks when it was necessary to hire an extra team and driver, using four horses on the longer trips in order to drag the wagon through the mud on sections of unimproved roads.

As before stated, each Monday morning brought the

beginning of a two-day trip for the wagon; Mr. Grider made the initial trip on each of these, taking me with him over roads and into territory with which I was entirely unfamiliar. As these trips were to be a part of my duties I carried a memorandum and made careful notations as to every turn in the roads, the location of every house at which I was to stop, the name of the occupants, and whether there was a bad dog, so I had no trouble in locating our customers when I made the next trip alone.

On one of these Monday trips I left Fincastle, traveling south and west alternately until by noon I had reached the home of the Samuel Rambos, which was a short distance west and south of Morton, another inland village, and which was my dinner stop for myself and horses. Continuing south and west, by evening I would reach the home of a family by name of Roach, a short distance south of Hollandsburg in Parke County, which was my overnight stop. The Roaches, being good farming people, could always furnish good accommodations for our horses as well as ourselves and I think were as fine an example of the really happy family as I have ever seen. The owners of the farm, James Roach, who was married and had a family of three boys and three girls, ranging in age from about eight years of age to grown-up young people, and his brother Thomas, who was a single man living in the same house, were both sons of the "Old Sod." Their land and farming equipment and live stock, I was told, were all held in partnership by the two brothers. A few years previous to my acquaintance of the family they had built a new house adjacent to the old house in which they had resided; but they had left the old house standing, using it as the place for cooking and serving the family meals and maybe also for sleeping quarters for extra work hands when necessary.

The living room in the newer house was heated by a wood-burning fireplace and in cold weather the family gathered there along with any visitors after the evening meal was over. It was the practice of the two Roach brothers, James and Thomas, to place their chairs at one side of the fireplace, as near to each other as possible, and carry on a conversation about their work and affairs in general as earnestly as if they had not been together for months. Both had a definite Irish brogue and an abundant supply of the native wit of their old homeland which often brought forth quaint sayings by them.

The younger Roaches were bright and quick to notice the

amusing points in the conversation of their father and uncle; it was a common thing to see one of the children pass a wink to the others and then all would burst out with peals of laughter which the older ones did not appear to notice. If the logs in the fireplace appeared to be burning low James would say to one of the boys, "Billy, hadn ye better get another sthick?" Whereupon, Billy, as the obedient son, would immediately step out on the front porch and bring the "sthick" of hickory or oak from the supply that was regularly kept there and place it on the andirons.

On one occasion when I was expected at the Roach home for the night the young folks of the family had invited a group of the young people of the neighborhood, including a "fiddler," to come in for an evening of square dancing on the floor of the old house, which was always spotlessly clean but entirely devoid of carpets or rugs. But I had been brought up by parents who were members of a village church of the sect which called themselves Campbellites and they had a very honest and sincere conviction that people who indulged in dancing were just traveling a few steps on the march to eternal perdition. In deference to their wishes and belief I had never learned to trip the light fantastic and so was compelled to pose as a wallflower while the others danced; but through all of the sixty years that have passed since that time I have had a feeling of regret that I could not qualify to "Salute your partner! Circle four! Swing your partner! Promenade!" with those Parke County belles, while John Roach called the figures.

Following the night's rest and with breakfast over, horses fed, curried, harnessed and hitched to the wagon, the women came out to the wagon, bringing their produce, to do their trading. When they had finished we were off for the start of the second day on that route, which extended a few miles farther to the west and south, until we were at the top of a steep hill where we could overlook the village of Ferndale in the valley and where we turned back toward the home store via different roads than those on which we had come out.

Working north and east the dinner stop was sometimes made at the home of Daniel Shonkwiler and at other times at the home of a family by name of Scott, depending on the time we were making. In the afternoon we reached a point on what we then called the Rockville and Danville Pike, a gravel-surfaced road which has since been paved and is now a section of U.S. Route 36 through that part of Indiana.

Following that road east we came to the intersection of the Greencastle and Crawfordsville Pike, another gravel-surfaced road that has since been paved and is a section of Indiana Route 43. Both of these graveled roads were originally constructed and operated as toll roads and their intersection was known for miles in all directions as the Double Toll Gate, from the fact that a single toll house collected tolls from travelers on both roads. Both of these pikes were among those which were purchased by the counties and had been converted into free gravel roads. The intersection was called Hannah's Crossing, as the large farm of George Hannah, who was a member of the state legislature, was on the northeast corner of the intersection.

About four miles north of this intersection, we reached the home store at Fincastle with a much lighter load of merchandise but a rather heavy load of poultry, eggs, and butter.

Just before reaching Fincastle via this route we crossed Ramp Creek over the old two-way covered bridge, which has since been moved to Brown County Indiana State Park, where it now stands as one of the entrances and a relic of the covered bridge days. This old bridge carries a special interest for me; my father, the late John A. Turner, who was born in 1838 and spent the entire ninety-seven years of his life as a citizen of Putnam County, told me that his father, Greenville P. Turner, one of the early settlers of that county, hauled with ox teams, from the quarry to the site of the bridge, the huge stones with which the abutments to the Ramp Creek Bridge were built. I am not sure where the quarry was located but believe it was an outcropping ledge of limestone from a bluff on what I knew as the William Hartman farm, about one mile down the stream from the bridge. The new paved route crosses Ramp Creek a few rods below where the old covered bridge stood, but the stone abutments on which each end of the bridge rested stand apparently as firm as when they were built.

Another two-day route for Monday and Tuesday of the alternate weeks was established, on which we started directly west from Fincastle and worked west and north, went over into Parke County, and finally reached an overnight stop with a family by the name of McCutcheon, also a rather large family, who lived in a comparatively new, large two-story frame house. I distinctly remember a circumstance which happened to me there.

It was late in the autumn when the daylight hours were short and came late in the morning. After the evening meal

we sat in the living room, visiting and munching freshly-picked apples from the large orchard at the rear of the house, until time to retire for the night. I was assigned to a room upstairs and given a kerosene lamp and as usual after being on the road all day was soon soundly asleep and did not awaken until someone pounded on my door and announced breakfast. When I arose in the pitchy darkness I found the lamp had been taken away; finally, groping around, I succeeded in getting myself dressed. Then when I tried to find my way out of the room it appeared as if the walls were all doors; after opening the first one I found myself in what appeared in the darkness to be a clothes closet. But I kept trying, and after opening two or three more doors I found the one that opened out into the hallway; there I could see a light shining in from another room below, and I made my way down.

That route proved to be unprofitable from the fact that there were too many long stretches of road with no potential customers residing along them; we soon changed it so that we reached the village of Brownsvalley, over in the edge of Montgomery County, where the overnight stop was made at the home of one of my uncles, Winfield S. Goslin, who was a brother of my mother; and so we combined business with a very pleasant bi-weekly visit.

We also established wagon routes nearer home for days and parts of days other than Monday, Tuesday, and Saturday. Mr. Grider, the owner of the business, frequently drove over one of the routes himself, by way of getting out of the store for a short time and meeting people. These shorter routes were for the most part among what we called "home people," who were regular customers at the store but who very much preferred to have their farm produce called for at their door to taking it to the village store themselves.

I especially remember one of these short-route customers by name of George Hartman, who was a retired farmer and house carpenter. "Uncle George," as he was familiarly known in the community, was a German, stocky of build, with a wide, square-trimmed beard, twinkling eyes, a keen sense of humor, and a disposition which enabled him to enjoy a joke which was poked at himself as much as one that was the other way around, for he always had a "comeback" ready. One afternoon I had stopped the wagon at his gate and he was sauntering leisurely out toward the wagon, a basket of eggs on his arm, when one of his neighbors drove by in a farm wagon and yelled at him in a joking way, "Getting hard up, Hey, and had

to sell your eggs?" Without hesitation the answer came, "O, yes, yes, the old hen sot on 'em all summer and they wouldn't hatch, so I thought I'd yust as well sell 'em."

This fine old gentleman traded with us on a book account basis system, sometimes having more produce than the value of his purchases and at other times the balance would be the other way. When there were book entries to be made, his stock remark, with a chuckle, was invariably, "An honest man don't care if you watch 'im, and a tamdt rascal needs watchun, so I'll yust look on," and he would stand near and "look on"—a good philosophy and good business practice.

Prices that we were able to pay for the farm produce in those days were very low as compared with the present time. As I remember, the average price paid for live chickens was about five cents, and six or seven cents was a top price. Fifteen cents per dozen for eggs to the producer was about the average with the top price in the winter season, when they were scarce, around twenty-five cents and the low price in the spring laying season sometimes dropping as low as eight and one-third cents per dozen.

We carried large tin cans of fifty-pound capacity, commonly called lard cans, in the upper part of the wagon in which butter was taken in. "Butter was butter"—all of one grade, so the country producers thought, and there was no way to classify the good from the inferior, with the price per pound ranging from ten to twenty cents paid to the makers, depending on the demand from shippers. Incidentally, I lost all appetite for butter and did not care for it for a period of several years following my huckster experience.

Adjacent to the store we had a chicken house in which poultry brought in was accumulated and fed until the flock was disposed of. The cases of eggs and cans of butter were stored in a wareroom of the store until converted into cash.

There were some wholesale buyers and shippers of produce who sent their wagons through the country to pick up the produce at the village stores, for which they paid cash; but if they did not visit us before we had enough for a wagonload, a wagon was sent either to Greencastle or Crawfordsville where the old-time Arthur Jordan firm of Indianapolis had branch houses. Havens Brothers of Ladoga, Indiana, was one of the firms that made regular collection trips through the country and shipped to central markets in carload lots.

In addition to the stock of goods carried on the huckster wagon, it was our custom to take orders from patrons for

many things which were too bulky to haul regularly and which were to be delivered on the next trip or on a special trip. I recall very distinctly that on one of the Monday trips when I found a large number of the women doing their family washings by hand, I took orders for three washing machines of the hand-operated, rocker pattern. In the fruit-canning season I took orders for enough crates of tin fruit cans to make a bulky but light load to be delivered the following Saturday. Just prior to the small grain harvesting season, with the "self binder" the newest thing in the way of harvesting machinery, it was an easy matter to take orders from farmers on the routes for enough binder twine to make a load for special trip delivery or to be called for by the farmers. It was not unusual for a farmer with a large family, or one who kept extra farm hands with a good capacity for food consumption, to order a three hundred-pound barrel of sugar, usually to be called for by the purchaser unless we were making special trip deliveries of items in his territory.

On the wagon route we found the counterpart of the present-day window-shoppers who wanted to see everything on the wagon and bought little. There were places where there were two or three grown-up young women in addition to the mother and they would all come out separately, one after the other, to take a look. But it was all in the day's business and sometimes a little patience with such customers resulted in a good sale even though it caused us to be late for the dinner or overnight stop.

In retrospect I can see the poultry and egg business as being in its infancy at that time as compared with the present time, for it has certainly grown up. Where members of a farm family came out to my wagon with a market basket or a three-gallon milk bucket filled with eggs when I stopped at their front gate, I now see farmers coming into town with cases of thirty-six dozen or more eggs in their pickup trucks or the baggage compartments of their automobiles. If a family had a dozen or more chickens cooped up for sale at the time of my visit that was considered a rather good sale of poultry; but now it is a common occurrence for a farmer to telephone a poultry dealer to come out to his place and pick up a hundred or more young "fries" or non-laying hens that have been culled from his flock. If a farm woman had succeeded in foiling the weasels, minks, foxes, and weather, and raised a flock of fifteen or twenty young turkeys in a season and had them ready for market at Thanksgiving time or Christmas, we

would make a special trip to get them at a price of ten to fifteen cents per pound on foot; but now we have special turkey farms, where flocks of the young toms are numbered in thousands, and brought up from the poults with equipment and special feeds that represent a large investment.

As for home butter-making, that seems to be practically a thing of the past. We had as customers a good number of farm women who took great pride in their skill at making butter, which was of a lovely yellow color and made up in one-pound prints, which always weighed out in full or frequently would overweigh. Now, as a rule, the farmer who is not in the special dairy business, and who keeps more than enough milk cows to supply the family needs for milk and cream, runs the fresh milk through a mechanical cream separator and brings the butterfat in large cans to a cream station in town. There a shipper pays him in cash more per pound for the cream than the farmer could get for the butter he could make by hand from the same amount of cream. Most of the farmers then buy creamery-made butter or oleomargarine for their own use, thus relieving the farm housewife of the labor and mess connected with home butter-making.

As cashier in a bank in an Illinois county seat town during the depression days of the thirties, I took notice that most of the farmers who came to town on Saturdays with a basket of eggs and a can of cream, for which they received sufficient returns to pay for their groceries and maybe a few other necessary living expenses, were the only ones who pulled through the depression; while a good many of those who seemed to think "poultry, eggs, and butter" were matters too small for their consideration, even lost their farms.

Improved highways and motor transportation have practically eliminated the small rural trading centers as such, along with the hucksters traveling out from those places. In my huckstering days the twelve miles to Greencastle or the sixteen miles to Crawfordsville by horse and buggy, or if necessary by farm wagon and team, meant getting an early start and getting back home after night, especially if there was much business to be transacted or a load to be hauled either way. Under present conditions the people of the same community are only thirty minutes away from either of these county seat towns and it is a common practice, except in the busy farming seasons, for them to motor to either place after the day's work is done, attend a movie, and be back home by their usual bedtime—all of which sums up to: Times do change.