Callers at Farmers' Doors

EARLY EACH SPRING THE "assessor" with his flat tin box filled with tax papers appeared at the farm. He was an elected township official, usually a well-known neighbor. He and Dad listed together grain, hay, livestock, and other property that was subject to taxation. Together they arrived at appraisals on which county officials would later levy the tax. Since both were disposed to be fair and honest, there was no disagreement, no haggling.

Occasionally, a nursery salesman appeared soon after the assessor. He also carried a flat tin box. It contained catalogs and circulars with gorgeous pictures in color of amazingly large and perfect peaches, apples, pears, plums, etc. The man would talk expansively of the high quality of his stock and point out just where certain choice varieties should be planted. He would dwell at length upon the landscaping improvements that would accrue from having them there, and picture in glowing terms the enjoyment that would come to the entire family when the trees and vines came into bearing. His customers heard him with respect, because he was regarded as an authority on fruit growing. He did some grafting occasionally, using a grafting wax
that he made by combining wax produced by his own bees with tallow and linseed oil. He carried a huge pruning knife and, at times, as he talked, trimmed water sprouts from our big apple trees. Now and then, he would seize an ear of one of the listening youngsters and pretend playfully to cut it off. This was rather exciting for we were never altogether certain that he was jesting.

Salesmen with lightning rods appeared often. Some were clearly swindlers, with tricky contracts and decidedly inferior products. Actually, some of the rods, due to improper construction and installation, were worse than none. Peddlers with heavy packs suspended by shoulder straps came trudging in, half a dozen or more of them every summer. People generally called them "Arabs." They had a strange, foreign appearance; all were dark-skinned with black beards, and all had difficulty with English. Each carried a varied assortment of trinkets and notions, all cheap and tawdry. Occasionally, one would offer to exchange a few baubles for a night's lodging; but in all cases these offers were rejected—most people were suspicious of them. Generally, it was believed, they crept into haymows or stacks and bedded down there.

Occasionally, a peddler would come with his wares in a spring wagon drawn by a decrepit horse. In addition to notions and cheap jewelry he carried scissors, harmonicas, spectacles, shawls, and an assortment of tinware. He tried to sell for cash but, failing that, would trade for bags of rags, metal scraps, dry bones, or other junk material.

Three or four book salesmen—all "agents" to local people—worked through the community every year. The real salesmen among them must have found it a lucrative business. Their books were generally of the subscription type,
planned and produced to be sold by door-to-door salesmen, who carried only a glowing "prospectus" and took orders for later delivery. Some were religious works; others were represented as educational books, crammed with the latest important, essential information and therefore of the greatest value to both adults and children in school.

Many of those books were quite mediocre and often of questionable authenticity because they had been compiled from obsolete sources by writers who knew little of the subject treated and apparently cared less. A few were really good, yet any intelligent person could have selected much better ones from the catalogues of standard publishers and saved money by so doing.

At that time books as sources of information and entertainment faced nothing like the competition that came later from magazines, the daily press, the radio, movies, and finally television. A goodly number of people were aware of their own educational deficiencies and had a real thirst for knowledge. The appeal to parents who were deeply interested in having their children progress educationally was well-nigh irresistible. Because they didn’t know how to choose and buy books through regular channels, and because for a long time no public library was available, many farm people welcomed the salesmen who brought books to their doors.

One year, salesmen covered the area and talked almost every family into buying a stereoscope with an assortment of views. The instrument and the pictures for a long time occupied a respected place on parlor tables. Traveling photographers with equipment in darkrooms built into their wagons persuaded many farmers to have their buildings, livestock, and families photographed. They visited
the district schools, got teachers to line up the pupils, and
turned a few honest dollars by photographing the groups.
Occasionally, salesmen covered the territory taking orders
for life-size enlargements of album photographs. The most
promising prospects were relatives of recently deceased
persons. The pictures they delivered, though rather crude
crayon portraits, were generally accepted as satisfactory.

One day a salesman demonstrated to us a combination
device that could be used for stretching wire, erecting
fences, or hoisting. Convinced that the tool—well designed,
compact, and handy—would be useful, we ordered one.
It turned out to be totally worthless because the manu-
facturer had used cast iron instead of cast steel for vital
parts. We found that out when one of the castings snapped
like glass under a load of only a few pounds. Since it
would have cost only a few cents more to make the
parts of steel, we figured that either the maker was far
too intent on low-cost production or he didn’t know any
better.