

Walter A. Friedman

Birth of a Salesman

**The Transformation of
Selling in America**

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To my family

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Prospect: “My old car is worth at least \$100.00 more than you offer me.”

Salesman: “Your old car, Mr. Prospect, has given you a lot of pleasure and service. You are thoroughly familiar with its condition and I can understand how it may appear to you to be worth more. But the price of a used car, just like anything else, is determined by the demand for it. It is impossible to offer you more for your old car, much as we would like to do so, but we can offer you many quality features that cannot be duplicated in any other car at or near the price of a new Chevrolet.” (Show him features and ask for the order—often.)

From General Motors’
*Selling Chevrolets: A Book of General
Information for Chevrolet Retail Salesmen*
(1926)

Prologue, 1916

The First World's Salesmanship Congress

On the morning of July 10, 1916, over three thousand salesmen, managers, and executives from many industries gathered in Arcadia Auditorium in Detroit for the first World's Salesmanship Congress. President Woodrow Wilson, the keynote speaker, urged his audience of salesmen to travel the globe and promote the goods that, he believed, had come to symbolize prosperity and the promise of America itself. "Lift your eyes to the horizon of business," he began. "Do not look too close at the little processes with which you are concerned, but let your thoughts and your imaginations run abroad throughout the whole world. And with the inspiration of the thought that you are Americans and are meant to carry liberty and justice and the principles of humanity wherever you go, go out and sell goods that will make the world more comfortable and more happy, and convert them to the principles of America."¹

The event was the brainchild of D. M. Barrett, editor of *Salesmanship* magazine. The previous September, Barrett had organized a Detroit sales club, which operated under the slogan "Business betterment through betterment in salesmanship." He hoped to build a national organization and gained the support of Norval A. Hawkins, Ford Motor Company's sales director, and Edward A. Woods, head of

Equitable Life Assurance's largest agency.² The event's "constitution" pledged to "promote the dignity of Salesmanship by the elevation of the rank of the salesman to a higher plane" and to "encourage contributions to the science of Salesmanship in the form of books, lectures, courses and publications."³

The Salesmanship Congress brought together some of the best-known businessmen in the country. Henry Ford met with Wilson on the morning of the president's talk. Not surprisingly, many of the businessmen attending the Salesmanship Congress came from companies that relied on salesmen. The audience was made up of representatives of Burroughs Adding Machine, National Cash Register, and other office-machine manufacturers; automobile makers, such as Packard and Cadillac; and insurance and real-estate companies. The weeklong event offered a wide selection of lectures, covering everything from the daily tasks of management to the qualities of good salesmen. Demonstrations of expert sales ability were provided. Edgar F. Roberts, a local realtor, overcame an obstinate buyer onstage to sell a Detroit property for \$4,925 in fifteen minutes. In the evening, attendees listened to sermons on ethics and salesmanship at local churches, watched boat races, and enjoyed the melodies of the Studebaker band.

The speakers at the weeklong event included sales managers, like Richard H. Grant of Dayton Engineering Laboratories (later head of Chevrolet) and Frank H. Dodge of Burroughs Adding Machine, and company presidents, like William R. Malone of Postal Life Insurance, Harry M. Jewett of Paige-Detroit Motor Car, and Alvan Macauley of Packard.

Academics, consultants, psychologists, and advertising executives shared the stage as well. James Samuel Knox, president of the Knox School of Salesmanship in Cleveland, Ohio, spoke about how to teach modern sales techniques. Charles Wilson Hoyt, author of *Scientific Salesmanship*, discussed ways to make selling more efficient. Walter Dill Scott and Walter Van Dyke Bingham, both of the Carnegie Institute of Technology, performed "mental alertness tests" on twenty-five young

salesmen at the Statler Hotel to predict which ones would most likely succeed.

Some “experts” at the World’s Salesmanship Congress were of dubious merit. The phrenologist Grant Nablo instructed his audience of managers to look for a high forehead when hiring, as this supposedly denoted imagination, and to avoid applicants with “a flat back head” because they would be “quick starts but slow finishers.” “Look around you,” said Nablo, in what must have been an uncomfortable moment. “And you will see heads like that.”⁴

Like many other public celebrations of the Progressive Era, the World’s Salesmanship Congress was both a celebration of the past and an effort to gain distance from it. Speakers—businessmen, academics, and politicians—expressed enthusiasm about a new era of salesmanship, in which selling would be conducted according to systematic principles.

The days of the backslapping, hard-drinking drummer were over, speakers proclaimed. No longer the pursuer of farmers’ daughters, as depicted in popular jokes, the modern salesman was, one business executive argued, “a man of stability, character and regular habits—he must be married.”⁵ Salesmen now exhibited loyalty to the employing “house” and a good relation with “the boss.” Moreover, salesmen of the new era were expected to play a beneficial role in society. They would “overcome obstinacy, soften prejudice and let the light of reason into dark places,” said a representative from the National Cash Register Company.

The Salesmanship Congress revealed the cross-section of individuals fascinated by salesmanship and its possibilities in the early twentieth century—a mixture of businessmen, politicians, scientists, pseudo-scientists, and promoters; they were organization-builders, reformers, managers, entrepreneurs, researchers, theorists, and motivators. They ushered in modern salesmanship and its consequences, both economic and cultural, creative and destructive.⁶

Introduction

The Science of Selling

The development of modern sales management is a uniquely American story. The intense effort to standardize salesmanship distinguished the growth of capitalism in America from that in other countries. All European nations had peddling networks, some of which had existed for hundreds of years, but none created organized sales forces to the same degree as did the United States. There are several reasons for this. First, the emergence of salesmanship depended on a stable currency, the rule of law, the protection of private property, and the availability of credit—all aspects of the American economic system. More important, the scale of American firms was greater than elsewhere. The massive manufacturing concerns of the early twentieth century, which produced tremendous numbers of business machines, appliances, and cars, hired salesmen in the hundreds (and even thousands); and these goods, all pushed by aggressive salesmanship, distinguished the American economy by their early appearance and widespread purchase. British industry, which produced on a smaller scale, and German manufacturers, which were rooted in craftwork traditions, seldom exhibited a similar interest in mass selling campaigns.¹

Organized selling in America flourished also for cultural reasons. In a country that, from the outset, held dem-

ocratic elections and had no established church or hereditary aristocracy, salesmanship provided political and religious groups with a way to compete for followers. Moreover, with more fluid class boundaries than in European countries, the skills of salesmanship, especially beginning in the late nineteenth century, seemed to offer a pathway to personal success. In the early twentieth century, Americans read how-to-sell books and turned Bruce Barton's *The Man Nobody Knows* (1925), which portrayed Jesus Christ as a successful sales and advertising executive, into a best-seller.

The birth of modern salesmanship occurred in the decades around the turn of the century. Entrepreneurs at the vanguard of selling, who developed modern sales techniques, created procedures for management that paralleled those of the new science of mass production. With the rise of mass manufacturers in the United States, salesmanship became of interest to psychologists, economists, ministers, and politicians. The country, as envisioned by the pioneers of modern selling, now comprised sales "territories." Citizens were not steelworkers, bankers, or housewives, but "prospects." Other nations around the globe were not allies or enemies, but trade "opportunities."

In 1904 businessman P. W. Searles, writing in *System* magazine, summarized the changes he had seen in selling over the past several years—changes resulting from the imposition of managerial systems at large manufacturing companies. Earlier, as he put it, a salesman traveled "as his own boss." Now his routes were planned, his customers evaluated before his departure, and a trail of sales slips and reports established a record of his every move.² Sales managers at large corporations assigned salesmen specific territories and gave them monthly or weekly quotas to meet. They aimed to make salesmanship uniform, predictable, and capable of being taught to new recruits. They even instructed salesmen on such minutia as how to stand while talking with a customer, or how to hand over the pen at "closing."

Managers also tried to redefine the image of their sales force by adopting a new vocabulary. Only after the turn of the century did the terms "salesman" and "salesmanship" come into vogue, carrying with

them parallels to “workman” and “workmanship,” but also signaling that selling was a male-dominated occupation.³ While the late nineteenth century had had a small tradition of female book canvassers, most large companies in the early twentieth century hired only men for their sales forces. Managers wanted the members of their sales force to appear professional, neat, responsible, and masculine.

The revolution in selling had consequences beyond the firm. The growth of systematic methods of sales management gave rise to a number of products and services that supported sales managers, including trade journals and popular magazines, such as *Salesmanship* (founded in 1903), *Salesmen* (1909), *Salesmanship: Devoted to Success in Selling* (1915), *Sales Management* (1918), and *Salesman's Opportunity* (1923). The Dartnell Corporation of Chicago began collecting empirical data on selling and produced scores of reports for sales managers on topics ranging from “Modern Methods and Tendencies in 259 Different Lines of Business” to “Plans for Building Up a Spirit of Loyalty in a Sales Organization” and “Enlisting the Cooperation of Salesmen's Wives and Families.”⁴

The creation of methods of sales management also opened up new branches of academic inquiry, such as marketing, consumer behavior, and industrial psychology.⁵ After the turn of the century, economists and professors of sales management at business colleges analyzed costs and methods of distribution. In 1913, Harvard's Bureau of Business Research published its first bulletin, which concentrated on the selling of shoes. The bureau followed with studies of the grocery trade, retail hardware dealers, and department stores.⁶

Psychologists sought to make sense of the way that salesmen created demand in the minds of customers. In *Psychology in Personal Selling* (1926), A. J. Snow attempted to explain the physiological changes that occurred to nerve cells in the brain when customers made a decision to buy: Were consumer wants largely instinctual? Were they built up through habit and suggestion?⁷ In 1916, the Carnegie Institute of Technology (now Carnegie Mellon University) founded a Bureau of Sales-

manship Research to create psychological tests for salesmen.

The embrace of sales-management systems by large corporations encouraged new ways to make sense of the role of salesmanship in the economy. The promoters of modern sales techniques described an economy in which demand was malleable, language was expedient, and enthusiasm—demonstrated by salesmen selling products—was a powerful economic force. Charles Bennett, whose book *Scientific Salesmanship* (1933) grew out of a doctoral dissertation at the University of Missouri, referred to salesmanship as the “expansion of meaning.” Bennett argued that salesmanship, rather than merely gaining a greater share of the economic pie for one company or another, increased the size of the pie overall.⁸

All the transitions in selling methods—organizational, strategic, and ideological—were central to the growth of the U.S. economy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Sales and marketing were not afterthoughts to the coming of industrialization, but were part and parcel of the same phenomenon. Large firms were capable not only of production on a great scale, but also of persuasion, pressure, and the fostering of an evangelical exuberance. The “visible hand” of management, to borrow a phrase from historian Alfred D. Chandler Jr., could not have succeeded in many industries without the “visible handshake” of a team of salesmen out on the road.

This book highlights the work of entrepreneurs and managers who were especially fascinated by selling and who devised innovative and effective sales strategies. It emphasizes the entrepreneurs, managers, and system builders, rather than salesmen themselves. In relating the story of salesmanship “enthusiasts” and the rise of modern sales management, it follows a rough chronology, from the years following the Civil War to the end of the Great Depression.⁹ Each chapter offers an example of a particular type of salesmanship: the selling of General Grant’s memoirs by book canvassers; the wholesaling of hardware by traveling drummers; the beginnings of sales management by mass-manufacturing companies like Singer Sewing Machine and Heinz; the formation of

a comprehensive system of management at National Cash Register; the development of methods to analyze selling at the Carnegie Institute of Technology; and the building of consumer marketing strategies at Ford, General Motors, and Fuller Brush. Together, these examples illustrate the growing scale of sales organizations and the increasingly sophisticated implementation of sales strategies.

Among the people featured in the book are Albert (“Fine and Dandy”) Teetsel, a sales manager at Fuller Brush and an exponent of positive thinking; Saunders Norvell, a long-time traveling salesman for the nation’s largest lumber company and editor of the *Gimlet* newsletter; Walter Dill Scott, an industrial psychologist who became director of the Bureau of Salesmanship Research; Norval Hawkins, author of several popular books on selling and head of sales at Ford; and Arch Shaw, who lectured on marketing at Harvard Business School, published *System* magazine, and advised the Hoover Administration on how to conduct a national survey of distribution methods. While emphasizing business strategists, I also look at economists and other academics who examined the role of salesmanship in the larger economy, such as Thorstein Veblen, Charles Bennett, and Harvard Business School professor Harry R. Tosdal. At the center of the book is a chapter on John H. Patterson, president of the National Cash Register Company, who did more than anyone else to systematize salesmanship.

The work of entrepreneurs and managers at large manufacturing companies is given the most attention. The firms that these businessmen built, like Burroughs, Coca-Cola, and General Motors, operated with resources far beyond those available to independent peddlers or petty canvassers. They employed a range of new technologies to facilitate communication with salesmen in the field and to gather information about the marketplace that helped them predict future demand. They also used new advertising outlets—newspapers, magazines, and, after 1920, radio—to complement the work of their sales forces. These resources enabled them to launch strategic sales campaigns and create demand on a scale unseen before.¹⁰

The focus is on mass producers because they devoted the most attention to standardizing methods of selling and techniques of sales management. The firms that created modern salesmanship included office-machine manufacturers, automobile companies, and makers of soap, canned goods, and paints and varnishes. Companies that made these types of products hired sales forces to conquer their markets and take trade away from competitors. Manufacturers that sold branded goods in great quantities, or made perishable products or complex machines that were difficult for independent wholesalers to handle, also tended to build their own sales forces. They generally manufactured a high volume of output and sold their goods across a vast geographic area.

Salesmen for these companies knocked on doors, waited outside offices, dropped off samples, shared good stories, offered special rates, and in other ways informed, persuaded, and cajoled “prospects” as they ceaselessly promoted their goods. They pressured customers to compare, buy, and then “trade up.”

Salesmen were trained to answer specific questions about a product and were often able to grant credit to buyers and make arrangements for delivery. They were particularly good at promoting new products—they played an essential part, for instance, in the introduction of cash registers and adding machines. Through their demonstration of products, relentless sales pitches, and ability to sell goods on credit, highly managed salesmen encouraged a shift in the type of items that consumers purchased by urging them to buy appliances, cars, and other expensive products.

As manufacturers of cash registers, refrigerators, and many other goods knew, low prices did not always create demand. People bought for a variety of reasons, including their own rational decision-making and the preferences of taste. They also bought because they were “sold.”¹¹ Sales workers played a role that was both informative and persuasive. They worked to overcome what they saw as the inertia or procrastination of buyers.

In designing and rehearsing their sales pitches, sales managers, and salesmen themselves, mastered the mechanics of persuasion: What

types of arguments worked best on prospects? What emotions triggered a “buying impulse”? When were logical appeals most effective? Manufacturing companies invested a great deal of money in standardizing methods of selling, because they felt that salesmen could lead “prospects” to make purchases that they might not otherwise have made, or that might have gone to the competition. As *Fortune* magazine observed in the mid-twentieth century, “Mass production would be a shadow of what it is today if it had waited for the consumer to make up his mind.”¹² Salesmen persuaded customers to make purchases. They also gathered information, wrote credit reports, and often even serviced products.

The most ardent believers in the power of salesmanship were those, around the turn of the century, who tried to make selling a “science.” Since the earliest days of trade, selling had been viewed as something of an “art.” It had been the province of peddlers who endured the hardships of life on the road and used wit and skill to make sales. In the years following the Civil War, however, selling had become increasingly systematic, as publishing houses organized teams of canvassers to sell popular books, and large wholesalers such as Marshall Field’s sent out traveling salesmen to stock general stores throughout the nation.

With the coming of mass production and the formation of highly managed sales forces at Heinz, National Cash Register, Burroughs Adding Machine, Ford, General Motors, and other firms, entrepreneurs and businessmen began to refer to a “science” of selling. Entrepreneurs at mass-production companies set up sales departments to systematize the promotion and distribution of their products. Makers of inexpensive goods, like soap and condiments, used salesmen to promote brand-name products. Manufacturers of sewing machines and of office machinery, such as typewriters and adding machines, hired salesmen to explain their products and to provide credit so that customers could purchase these items. Companies that sold to consumers often had large sales forces, larger than those that sold to businesses. In 1923, Fuller Brush had 3,400 salesmen going door-to-door.¹³ That same year, Ford Motor Company sold its cars through a network of 9,451 automobile dealers.¹⁴

Like their colleagues in production, the pioneers of modern salesmanship followed the ethic, if not the methods, of Frederick W. Taylor's scientific management movement, whose aim was to divide work into efficient routines and place the pace of labor under the control of managers. In *Scientific Sales Management: A Practical Application of the Principles of Scientific Management to Selling*, Charles Wilson Hoyt explained, "Scientific Sales Management believes in the proper training of the salesman. This training even goes down to the individual motions and work of the salesmen. It goes so far as to insist upon the substitution of exact methods of work by the individual salesman for scattered efforts. This is carried out even to the matter of standardizing, in some propositions, the salesman's talk, his manner of approach, etc." Hoyt described the transformation from independent peddlers to manufacturer-controlled employees as one from the "big me" salesman to the "little me" salesman; at mass-manufacturing companies, the manager was in charge.¹⁵

More generally, Hoyt's use of the word "science" revealed the increasingly common urge to systematize and standardize methods of selling. It also indicated the direction for the future: the need to gather ever more empirical information about sales costs and gain a greater understanding of consumer behavior. NCR, Heinz, Coca-Cola, Burroughs, and other mass-manufacturing companies did indeed develop comprehensive and systematic methods of sales management. They devised procedures to recruit and train sales workers and published large sales manuals and newsletters (*Pickles* at Heinz, for example) to keep salesmen informed and motivated. They also established systems to gather information from salesmen about specific customers and relied on public and private sources for statistics about individual credit ratings or overall economic conditions.

Not all manufacturers developed highly managed sales forces, however. Many salesmen in the early twentieth century acted with little or no managerial oversight and with the independence of a peddler. Hucksters sold items along the boardwalk in Atlantic City, and horse traders carried out deals in Mississippi.¹⁶ Many manufacturers, operating on a

The Independent Peddler

Leaving his native Vermont in 1818 at age twenty-one, James Guild decided to pursue life as a peddler, trading in a seventy-dollar bank note for a pack and some merchandise. He wanted to escape the drudgery of his Vermont farm life, just as later in the century others became traveling salesmen to avoid factory labor. “My disposition would not allow me to work on a farm,” Guild confided in his diary.¹ He went wherever he could find goods to trade and customers to take them, traveling for several years through New England and upstate New York and then venturing as far south as Charleston, South Carolina.² During his career, he sold a number of different items and performed a variety of services, serving stints as a tambourine player, silhouette cutter, portrait painter, and teacher of penmanship.³

Guild’s diary reveals the independence of peddlers in early America. He traveled on his own, formulating sales strategies to overcome the suspicion and hostility that greeted him when he approached a farmer’s home. Exchanges were not always pleasant: “Get out of my house in a minute, or I will horse whip you, you dam profitters and pedlers, you ought to have a good whipping by every one that sees you,” said one farmer.⁴

Guild was one of a number of Americans who, in the

decades following the Revolution, were eager to travel and to engage in commercial activities, and looked to advance themselves through competition in the marketplace.⁵ Peddling was a popular occupation among young unmarried men, for it required little initial investment. Bronson Alcott and other Americans took to the road to learn the rules of trade and to explore the country.⁶ Peddlers carried trunks filled with goods; some pulled a wagon or traveled on horseback. Those with skills for entertaining played music or told stories.

Guild had doubts about taking up work as a peddler, for it required long treks down dirt paths and crossing woods and rivers in all kinds of weather. Moreover, peddling was not a highly respected trade. “I not only had the disagreeable sensations of leaving my friends, but I wondered why I should stoop so low as to follow so mean a calling,” he wrote. Despite days of cold and isolation, Guild persevered, writing: “You must know it was awkward for a farmer boy who had been confined to the hoe or ax to put on a pedler[']s face, but I believe I was as apt as any one, I got my things in rotation pedler form, so when I went into a house, [I asked] do you wish to buy some harecombs, needles, buttons, buttonmolds, sewing silk, beads?”⁷

Peddlers had to gain the trust of farmers and other buyers. This was not easy, for peddlers were, essentially, strangers coming to town to make a series of trades and then leave. Unlike door-to-door salesmen of the twentieth century, they did not represent well-known companies or sell brand-name goods. And because peddlers would likely only see a prospect a few times, they were eager to make a sale on their first encounter and were less concerned about any future consequences if buyers were dissatisfied with the purchases. The goal of such peddlers engaged in “transactional” selling differed from that of salesmen working for companies later in the nineteenth century, who called upon the same customers repeatedly, often over many years.

Guild found that customers bargained to get the lowest possible price. Bartering and bargaining were a common part of antebellum New England merchant culture. Three-fourths of the American labor force worked on farms in 1800, where bartering was a way of life. While

there were tobacco plantations in some southern states, most Americans at this time cultivated crops for their own consumption.⁸ Many produced their own soap, candles, leather, beeswax, and furniture, trading the surplus to local merchants for other goods or services. “If they [the customers] wished to purchase, they would want to banter until they could get it for nothing,” Guild complained.⁹ The constant bargaining and persuading led some peddlers to want to leave their occupation, especially as the size of the peddling population grew in the antebellum period and trading became more competitive. The U.S. census listed 10,669 peddlers in 1850 and 16,594 in 1860; most came from the states of New York, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and Ohio.¹⁰

Guild worked out his own methods to overcome the resistance that greeted him—and he delighted in the process. Wit and humor were his allies when visiting farms. He discovered numerous ways to make his pleas successful, including playing to people’s rising social expectations and their desires to own decorative goods. He altered his approach according to the type of person he met. For example, in Troy, New York, he attended a dinner party with the city’s wealthy citizens. At first he felt conspicuous but then realized that he could pass himself off as one of the elite. “I was capable of niping and twisting and deceiving them by affectation,” Guild wrote. “Soon I was waited on in great style.” He adopted a philosophy: “Now I begin to learn human nature. I find people are not always what they seem to be . . . I find by experience if a man thinks he is something and puts himself forward he will be something.”¹¹ Guild’s sentiment of projecting confidence—of “putting oneself forward” in a bold way—became common advice in how-to-sell books of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹²

The techniques he gathered were based on his own observation and experimentation and on hints passed along to him by other peddlers whom he met on the road.¹³ He realized that there was economic value in entertaining and in using less orthodox ways of sparking interest. He even traveled with a bison at one point to attract attention.

Guild also saw selling as a form of seduction. Peddlers were almost exclusively men, at least until the emergence of women book agents by

mid-century; but historians have suggested that selling was traditionally viewed as something effeminate because it required skills that had long been associated with femininity, such as courtesy and politeness, verbal dexterity, and a familiarity with decorative and stylistic aspects of objects.¹⁴ Guild flirted and joked with his female customers, who saw an opportunity to trade their rags, food, or currency for tinware and other goods. He managed to sell one woman a portrait of herself, even though he confessed in his diary that it looked like a “strangle[d] cat.”¹⁵

Traveling through New England one winter, Guild hoped to sell scissors quickly at the low price of twelve cents a pair. To his dismay, he found customers reluctant to purchase them. Most felt that, at the price he was charging, the scissors could not be any good. Guild tried an experiment. He divided the scissors—all of the same quality—into two packs, keeping some at twelve cents and raising the price on others to twenty-five cents. This improved his sales, as he found when he sold a pair to a mother and daughter who chose the higher-priced scissors:

When I went into a house it was, do you want any tin cups tin pans tin or puter dishes of any kind mended and do you want to buy some sissors? Yes, if you have got some good ones. Well, marm, I have got some good ones and some poor ones; my best come at 25 cents and the other at 12 cents. So I would show them, to them, and they would look of them. Now mother you must get me a pair of sissors for me, for you never got me a pair. O well dear child I suppose you must have a pair or I shall be teased to death. Now the girl would say mother which is it best to get 12 or 25 cents one? O it is best to get a good pair if any; so they would try them by cutting out paper, and if they cut wet paper, they were good; and in this stile I was spending my time which I thought was a meaner caling than I deserved, but I felt at this time as mean as my employ.¹⁶

The passage revealed the peddler’s keen awareness of the nature of the relationship between the mother and daughter and how to cater to it through his price. He found that the way he presented the scissors determined their price, rather than some objective sense of what they were worth, or, in other words, that a good sales strategy could trump logic.

The value of the object depended on how it was “sold.” This was something that Guild felt uncomfortable about, or “mean” as he put it, and this issue, of what constituted the actual value of a good, is one that recurs throughout the history of selling.

Peddling Clocks and Other Inventions

The knowledge that Guild gathered—knowledge of how to talk about scissors, books, tin utensils, and other items, and how to present oneself in commercial exchange—occupied a growing place in American culture and economy in the nineteenth century. Peddlers like Guild traveled with no training, making observations on their own about how to sell and gathering tips from more experienced itinerants. Their work was not easy, for they had to overcome the hazards of hard traveling and the difficulties of bartering in a country without a national currency. They also encountered the antagonism of shopkeepers, who resented their arrival in town and pushed for taxes on out-of-state traders, and they met cultural hostility in the form of folklore that portrayed peddlers as swindlers and cheats.¹⁷ The issues that confronted Guild, such as how to overcome suspicion, how to talk to different types of customers (such as women or children, northerners or southerners), and how to make sense of the occupation itself, also challenged other peddlers.

Despite these problems, peddlers and peddling networks flourished in America. During the colonial period, peddlers often obtained manufactured goods directly from urban merchants and artisans, or from sailors who smuggled them to shore. Others received goods to trade from rural storeowners, who had purchased items from importers or manufacturers.

In the years after the Revolution, Americans increasingly pioneered new enterprises and expanded overseas trade—traveling as far as China. Entrepreneurs took risks, settling land, borrowing, bartering, and manufacturing.¹⁸ And printers helped spur a literacy revolution and a passion for reading. In addition, methods of transportation and communication improved in early America. Canals became a principal method

of moving freight in the 1820s and 1830s. The Erie Canal, the most extensive inland water route, allowed passage from Lake Erie to New York City by 1825, and an extensive system of other, smaller canals served cities like Akron, Ohio; Lowell, Massachusetts; and Chicago.¹⁹ Railroad mileage also increased, so that by 1840 the United States had 2,800 miles of railroad track.²⁰

Peddlers were an indispensable part of early America's market revolution, carrying manufactured goods, imports, books, and broadsides. They formed networks that tied together the agricultural areas, hinterlands, and cities. Peddlers and artisan-entrepreneurs were partners in the transformation of rural life. They not only brought manufactured goods to farmers and townspeople; they also introduced a market culture. They carried buttons, cloth, brooms, chairs, clocks, books, paintings, and decorative objects—all of which served as “emblems of affluence.”²¹

There were three types of peddlers: those who traveled independently, like Guild, purchasing goods with a bank note or bartering for them; peddlers who worked for an artisan-entrepreneur or storekeeper on some kind of salary or commission; and a third type, who were hired by peddling organizations that distributed manufacturers' or merchants' goods. These organizations could be as small as two people and as large as more than a dozen, and were operated under the direction of a master peddler. Morillo Noyes, working out of Vermont, employed twenty or, at times, even fifty peddlers. Peddling networks were important, for they brought together artisans, banks, shipping and transportation companies, and warehouses into an effective distribution system.

While some peddlers carried a wide range of goods, others specialized in selling a single type of item, such as tinware, clocks, or books. Tin-smithing had its origins in Connecticut before the Revolution and remained concentrated there for several decades. Peddlers sold pots and pans and introduced farmers to new devices that saved time or made life and work easier. Throughout much of the antebellum period, the sole means of power for tinware production came from human and an-

imal labor, or from waterpower. This limited the scale of production, but as small factories were founded, the rate of production outgrew local demand, and artisans and manufacturers looked for ways to distribute their goods to new places.

The tin peddler became a quintessential “Yankee,” carrying pots, pans, boxes, pails, and utensils. Morillo Noyes was both manufacturer and general wholesaler. Selling tinware and other items, his peddlers were middlemen, connecting farmers and factories: they brought manufactured goods to customers and, at the same time, carried reusable products back to factories.²² Wages for successful tin peddlers in the early nineteenth century ranged from about \$25 to \$50 (\$360 to \$730 today) per month, with their annual employment running from six to nine months. This rate was higher than agricultural laborers, who might earn \$8 to \$15 (\$120 to \$220 today) in the summer months.²³

Specialized peddlers also carried goods that were relatively new or that required some explanation or promotion, such as clocks and, after mid-century, sewing machines. Clockmakers turned to peddlers to distribute their wares, especially after Eli Terry began factory production of clock mechanisms, or movements, in the early nineteenth century.²⁴ Beginning around 1802, Terry used waterpower to manufacture his wooden clocks and was able to make several hundred annually. Using peddlers to hawk his clocks throughout New England, Terry was able to expand his production to about four thousand clocks per year by 1806. In 1816, Terry invented the shelf clock, which was easily transportable, being less than two feet high and attractive, with decorative scenes painted on the casing and face. It was also relatively inexpensive for a clock then, selling for about ten dollars (about \$125 today).²⁵ Clock peddlers preferred to get bank notes or coins for their goods, while peddlers of lower-priced items, like tinware, were more likely to receive barter.²⁶

With improvements in design and production methods, Terry and the other regional entrepreneurs produced a total of 15,000 clocks per year by 1820, establishing Connecticut as the clock-making center of the country.²⁷ Producing in such volume, manufacturers were depen-

dent on peddlers to distribute their timepieces throughout the country. Some were shipped to shopkeepers or master peddlers in other states, who then sent canvassers around to sell the clocks to local farmers and townspeople. Other peddlers traveled out from Connecticut in early autumn, making new sales and collecting unpaid notes from the previous season before returning home in the spring.

The lightning-rod peddler also became a familiar figure beginning in the antebellum period. The device, invented by Benjamin Franklin, was common on rooftops by the mid-nineteenth century, particularly in the Midwest and regions prone to thunderstorms. The rods were made of brass or iron, adorned with decorative glass balls, and were mounted on the highest part of the roof in order to attract lightning and direct the bolt's current through a connecting wire safely to the ground.²⁸

One of the largest lightning-rod manufacturers was Cole Brothers, of Mount Pleasant, Iowa. The company was founded by four brothers in 1849 and was originally known as the Franklin Lightning Rod Works. Cole Brothers hired teams of salesmen to comb farmlands and sell lightning rods, eventually securing representatives in Iowa, Missouri, Indiana, and parts of Nebraska, Kansas, Kentucky, and Texas.²⁹ Salesmen worked in the spring and summer, when rainstorms threatened and barns, filled with livestock and crops, were vulnerable. The newspaper *Prairie Farmer* commented on the seasonal nature of the job and revealed the popular image of the lightning-rod peddler as a man on the make: "In autumn, when muttering thunders retire southward . . . the lightning 'regulator' calls in his forces, his traps, his wagons and horses, disposing of the latter, or putting them out to board for the winter . . . But as soon as the zigzag streams of light dart athwart the spring clouds, and awaken the fears of the nervous, he, like the circus man, gathers his retinue and takes possession of the field of operations decided upon."³⁰

Book Peddlers and Evangelicals

There were various other "hawkers and walkers" in early America whose work prefigured modern salesmanship. The selling, promoting,

and preaching of ideas had an important place in a country with no established religious institutions and in which competition between political parties was intense. Traveling preachers, in particular, promoted the theme of self-transformation that would also be taken up by patent-medicine salesmen and peddlers of self-improvement guides.

Pamphlets and books, especially the Bible, were popular items for peddlers and preachers to carry. Evangelical preachers pioneered many techniques that salespeople would later adopt. George Whitefield, a famous eighteenth-century preacher, was indeed a “pedlar in divinity,” as one of his contemporaries called him, traveling the country giving impassioned sermons and circulating his message in newspapers, pamphlets, and journals. Whitefield exploited the commercial revolution, made possible by improvements in printing and transportation, to advance his evangelical goals.³¹

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, populist preachers revolted against the formal church hierarchies and polite styles of preaching.³² Religious leaders used techniques of publicity and advertising to appeal to citizens.³³ Methodist circuit riders, in particular, invented a form of traveling salesmanship that had immediate commercial potential. By 1800 Methodists had established remarkable networks to spread their message. Their strategy relied on an army of over three hundred traveling salaried preachers, each working a circuit.³⁴

The published reminiscences of James Erwin reveal the similarities between the Methodist circuit rider and the peddler, for Erwin preached as well as sold books on his travels. He started out as a traveling preacher in the early 1830s. “A ‘plan’ was given me [by church officials], which called for at least *thirty-six sermons* in four weeks, beside *extras* and *funerals*,” he wrote. “This plan gave the name of each appointment, . . . the class leader’s name at each place and any other church officer living there.”³⁵ Erwin received an allowance for food and transportation and was given a standard salary of one hundred dollars; if he had been married, he would have received twice that amount. He earned additional money, as traveling preachers often did, by selling books on his trip.³⁶

Circuit riders thought deeply about how to reach and convert souls in ways that foreshadowed how salespeople would talk about gaining customers. In his memoirs, which were intended to guide young missionaries, Erwin described his techniques. In one case, his fellow preachers encountered a farmer who was hostile to their cause. The preachers “opened their batteries” against him and challenged him to repent and pray, but they failed to persuade him. Erwin took another path, choosing to conquer the man with kindness. “One morning I went to visit him; found him alone working in his hayfield,” Erwin wrote. “He gave me rather a rough reception, but I paid no attention to his ravings, inquired about his farm, how much hay he cut to the acre and so on. I told him that I needed physical exercise, and if he would get me a rake I would help him while I remained.” Erwin worked hard until evening, and then was asked to stay for dinner. After eating—and gaining the man’s confidence—Erwin then asked the man and his wife to pray with him, which they did, and so gained a follower.³⁷

Erwin even sought to teach more general principles of persuasion, or conversion, in his book. At one point, a fellow minister told him that to convert souls it was better to go about his sermons with care and less impassioned rhetoric—that it was best to “catch fish” with “a silk line and a small hook” than a splashy large one baited with worms. Erwin, however, was an experienced fisherman who realized that “different kinds of fish required different” approaches: “If I wanted trout I would move quietly, but if I wanted chub I would splash in the water, because noise attracted them to the place and they preferred substantial bait.”³⁸ Such commonsense lessons were similar to those in popular secular how-to-sell books published later in the century.

Some of the best-organized booksellers were those who worked for Bible societies. Both the American Bible Society and the American Tract Society maintained large sales forces that sold or gave away their publications. Russell Salmon Cook (1811–1864), an itinerant preacher, directed the activities of the American Tract Society for many years. Cook joined the society, which had been founded in 1841, and carefully trained a force of salesmen to sell religious publications. In 1856, the American Tract Society had 547 colporteurs working full-time.³⁹

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