

Rolling stores were lifeline for country families

By Rebekah Davis
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I have a friend who likes to tell the story of having to share a piece of penny candy from the rolling store back in the days when such a treat was a luxury.

My friend grew up out in Limestone County during a time that wasn't so far removed from the Great Depression, and folks around here still didn't have money to spare for any extras. He remembers that when the rolling store would come by while he and his cousins were out playing in the yard, they would run in and ask his mother for money for one hard-earned penny to buy a lollipop. They had to bring it back to her, though, so she could Whack! it with her big spoon and then divvy up the candy shards among all the children.

The way my friend tells it, he typically got the raw end of that deal because his mother always taught him to give the big pieces to the company. It wasn't until he was grown that he finally discovered that sometimes, it's OK to keep the big piece of candy for yourself!

For my friend and many others who lived in Limestone County years ago, the peddling truck or "rolling store" was their lifeline to supplies in a time when few even had cars, much less could afford the gas to drive to town on a regular basis.

Peddling trucks sprang up in the area in the early 1920s and became a family necessity during the Great Depression, when families depended on them for the food staples and supplies they couldn't raise, grow, or make for themselves. Customers paid by barter as much as by cash, trading live chickens (locked into coops on the side of the truck), eggs, nuts or fruit for items like flour, nails, cheese, kerosene, or of course, penny candy.

V.M. "Tootsie" Leonard opened one such rolling store, a spinoff of sorts from the country store he had established in the 1920s in the Cartwright community. His truck was a welcome sight on routes throughout the county until 1961, when his son Jack was activated to military service during the Berlin Crisis and sent to France. Leonard had to park the truck so that his driver, Buford Sulcer, could cover the grocery store and filling station while he was tending to the farming operations in Jack's absence. Other rolling stores or peddlers in Limestone County's history included A.J. Blair, Robert Lappington, Marvin and Leslie Elmore, Reynolds Brothers, Sidney Powers, R.F. Carlock, John Moore, the Whitts, Ed Shelton and Robert Earl Harvey.

As Limestone County's residents became more mobile – and upwardly mobile – the peddling trucks rolled their way into the pages of Limestone County history, leaving just a memory of penny candy shared with cousins.

About the Archives:

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