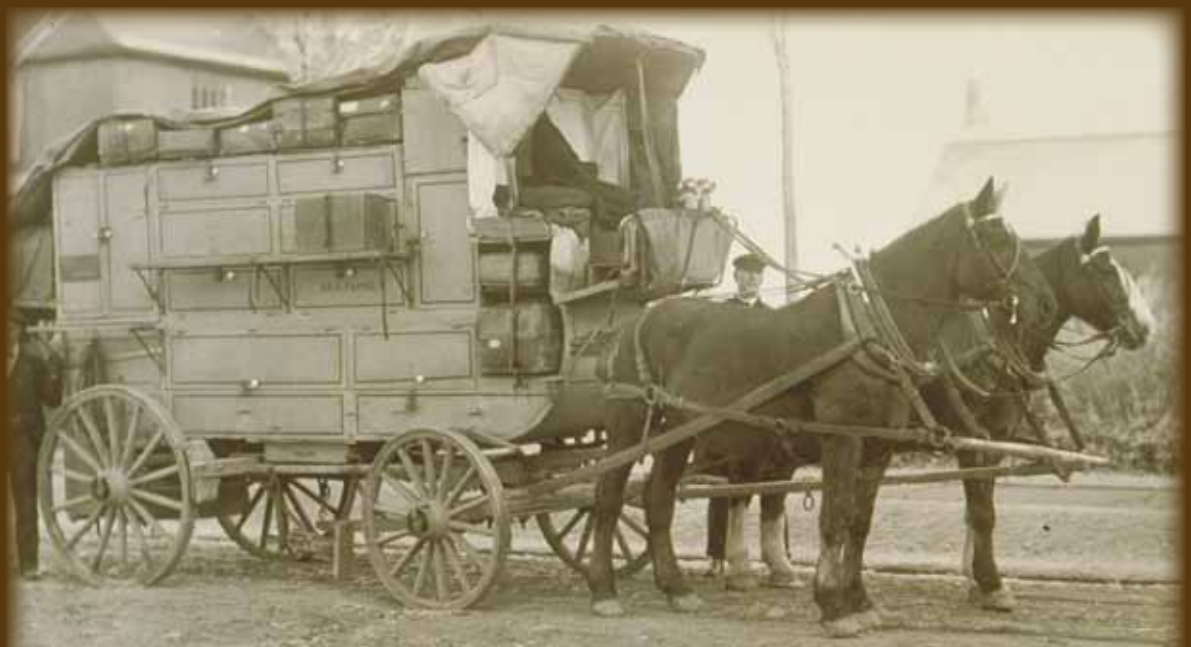
Era of the American Peddler

By Gregory LeFever



During the final years of America's itinerant peddlers, some of their wagons were as fully stocked as small stores. This circa 1900 photos shows the many drawers, compartments, and trunks this Connecticut peddler drove from place to place in search of customers for his wares. By this time, peddlers also were selling wholesale to the many small shops in towns and villages along their routes. (Connecticut Historical Society Photo)

WHETHER HE CARRIED MERCHANDISE ON HIS BACK OR IN A WAGON, THE ITINERANT PEDDLER WAS A VITAL YET CONTROVERSIAL FIXTURE IN THE SETTLING OF THE NATION.

Perhaps no figure in American history was quite so colorful and, at the same time, so controversial, as the itinerant peddler.

Brash and brave, the peddler pushed commerce deep into the wilderness, yet the growth of new communities eventually put him out of work. Though many a peddler was a welcome guest in isolated homesteads where he provided essential wares and entertained families with tales of his travels, other folks viewed these wandering salesmen as cheats, scoundrels, and seducers.

Still, for three hundred years, the American peddler was immortalized in our folklore, poetry, songs, and even appeared as an eccentric character in several European novels. From the mid-1600s to the late 1800s, peddlers sold a remarkable variety of goods to customers from New England and into the Deep South, all the while moving steadily westward to help open the frontier.

A peddler's route could be long and hard, sometimes logging more than a thousand miles in a single year. But the pay could be good. During the peddler's heyday in the 1800s, he could invest in a trunk, cart, or wagon full of merchandise and then sell it off for at least three times the amount of his investment – a healthy profit even by today's rigorous retail standards.

Escaping the Farm

It's tough to imagine the hardships early peddlers faced when the American colonies were young. Even the main stagecoach routes connecting towns and taverns were crude, with long and lonely stretches. For peddlers, the endless forests often held the threat of wild animals and hostile Indians.

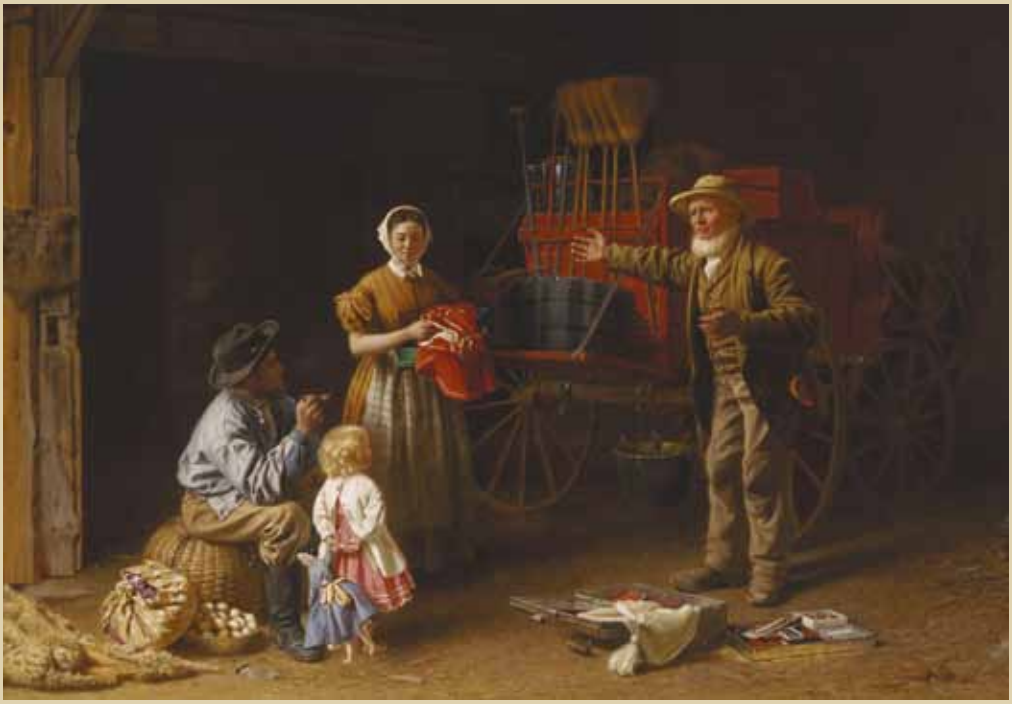
Accordingly, most of the men first drawn to the profession were young, strong, and often reckless. Many sought escape from the toil of the family farm. To most of them, a peddler's life meant freedom, adventure, and the opportunity to earn a decent livelihood based on their stamina and smarts.

In fact, selling his merchandise was vital to the peddler's way of life. Without sales, he would be destitute and unable to restock his inventory – much less buy food, lodging, and life's necessities. As a result, many peddlers honed their sales skills and became roving reporters and entertainers who delighted the folks in distant communities.

"From house to house the peddler went, from town to town. And quite a flutter he caused when he appeared on the village green and opened his pack," wrote author Richardson Wright in his 1927 book, *Hawkers & Walkers in Early America*. "Women dropped their chores and men their work, and they gathered about to hear gossip of the neighborhoods the peddler had recently left and to see his wares."

From Trunks to Wagons

Peddlers selected their merchandise according to the ease of getting it in front of customers. Early generations of peddlers lugged their goods on their backs, usually in trunks with straps slung over their shoulders, while some used horses to tote heavier containers. Their goods had to be small, with buttons, pins, shoelaces, lace, knives, scissors, razors, combs, and woodenware the early peddler's stock in trade.

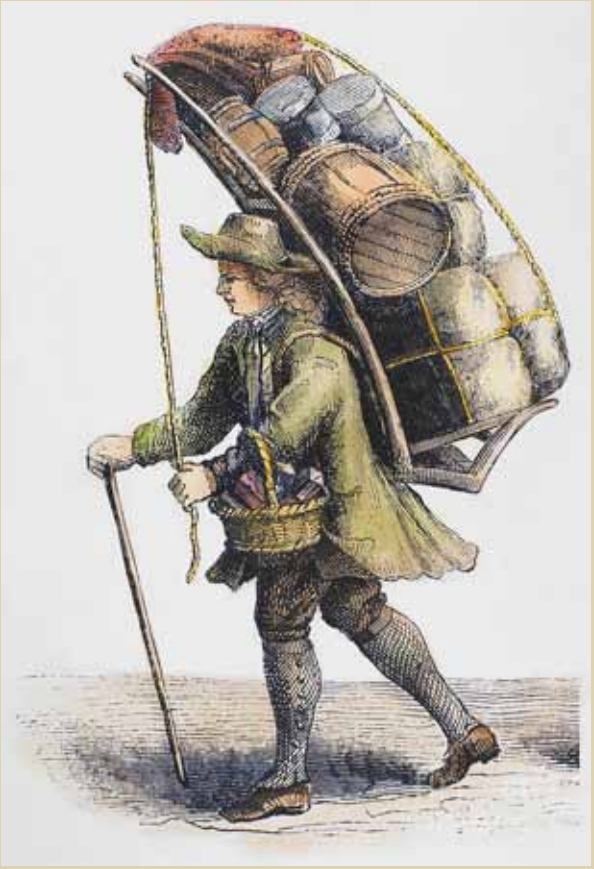


Itinerant peddlers from New England were vital to the expansion of America. With their wagons loaded with household goods and capable of delivering a good sales pitch, many of them earned hefty profits and became celebrities in the regions where they traveled. The spirit of the peddler is captured in this 1872 painting, "The Yankee Pedlar" by Vermont artist Thomas Waterman Wood (1823-1903).

With the growth of villages and better roads, peddlers relied on well-stocked carts and wagons to greatly expand the variety of items they sold, especially from a growing number of small American factories and home-based industries. Settlers living in remote areas now relied on peddlers to provide an array of tableware, textiles, tools, and similar domestic necessities that had been scarce in earlier settlements.

For enterprising peddlers, the rapid growth of homesteads and communities in the early 1800s ushered in an era of specialization. Some peddlers concentrated on selling chairs, clocks, or spinning wheels, as examples, while others focused on woodenware, tinware, pottery, or books. Itinerant butchers helped fill family smokehouses each autumn in exchange for the fats and tallow for making candles they could sell. And by 1800, peddlers were carting New England oysters and fish – packed into ice-filled kegs – inland as far as western Massachusetts, Vermont, and upstate New York.

Pointing to the importance of the peddler's trade, a song popular in 1799 in New England was titled "Come Buy My Woodenware."



Itinerant peddlers began walking American roads in the early days of the colonies, some of them traveling several hundred miles a year. Here is how these peddlers managed to carry an abundance of merchandise strapped to their backs.

Less Than Scrupulous

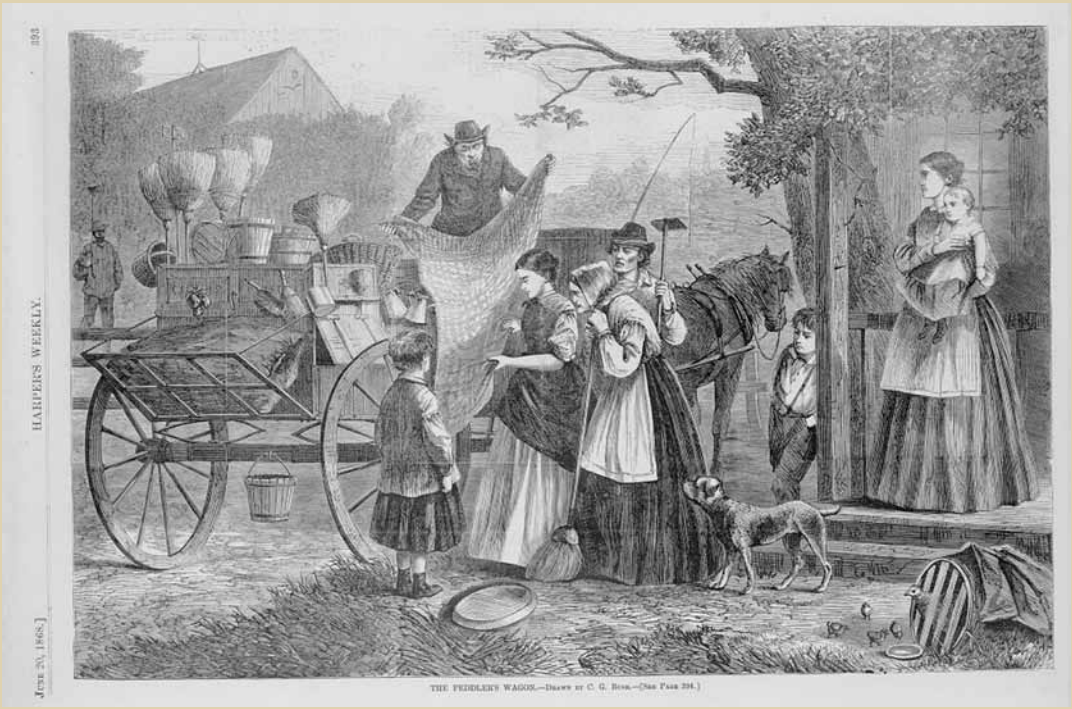
For some peddlers, the all-important need for sales provoked unscrupulous behavior that tainted the entire profession. Fast-talking peddlers swindled families with fake hams made of painted basswood, cigars made of oak leaves instead of tobacco, cheeses made of white oak, and crop seeds made from tiny chips of wood.

In one case, a peddler sold a woman a tortoise-shell comb for her hair. One day, she got caught in a rainstorm and her beautiful comb dissolved into a sticky glob. It took her nearly a month to remove all of the glue and gum Arabic that had constituted the counterfeit comb.

When a peddler made a fraudulent sale, he'd quickly move on to the next house or town in search of new victims to swindle. Even the reputations of honest peddlers suffered to the extent that a common label of the period for any act of deception was "a Yankee peddler's trick."

As peddlers extended their wintertime routes into the South – a land of fewer towns and an economy based on large, self-sufficient farms – such devious behavior further fueled the overall distrust southerners had for northerners. By 1829, the phrase "Damn Yankees" originated as the southerner's reference to all peddlers based in northern states.

"Even the Americans themselves do not estimate very highly the character of their peddlers," wrote a commentator in the early 1800s in a London magazine, "owing, no doubt, to the many ingenious frauds and deceptions which some of them have, from time to time, been detected in."



This etching from an 1868 issue of Harper's Weekly depicts a typical peddler displaying his wares at a rural homestead. The arrival of the traveling peddler was a greatly anticipated social event because he brought not only his merchandise, but also news and gossip of far-flung towns and cities.

End of the Road

By the mid 1800s, America was experiencing development far and wide. Roads and turnpikes crisscrossed the Atlantic seaboard and then turned west to cut through Appalachian passes to the rich farmlands of the Ohio River Valley and beyond. More than a hundred thousand pioneers traveled the Oregon Trail and other routes west, with countless peddlers joining them to provide merchandise for the new homesteads.

In time, being young and strong – some would add foolhardy – was no longer a job requirement for peddlers. Older, more professional peddlers loaded their wagons with items for stocking the new hardware, dry goods, and general stores springing up across the land.

Companies producing household goods benefited from hiring itinerant peddlers to cultivate larger sales territories. The companies paid them salaries plus commissions on anything they sold above and beyond the cost of wages and inventory – a compensation model that has lasted for nearly two hundred years and given birth to the corporate sales force.

But this relentless commercial growth dramatically changed the nation's economic landscape in the period following the Civil War. With even more roads and railroads connecting cities, and the rivers busy with boat and barge traffic, companies could ship merchandise easily from factories to population centers, where the goods were then distributed directly to merchants for sale to eager residents.

By the late 1800s, countless shops lined the streets of American communities, selling the same items that had been the mainstay of the peddler's livelihood. The peddler survived a few more years by selling low-priced items in thinly populated areas, but eventually turned his wagon toward history's setting sun and faded from sight.