

## Chapter 2

### DELIVERING THE GOODS

OUR STORE did not advertise. No small store did. There was a neighbourhood paper, The East End Echo, but I do not recall that we ever used it to call attention to our goods. Our only advertisement to attract the eye of a new customer was the store window in which things were arranged with some idea of charming a wandering eye. In the winter there would likely be a barrel of herrings set on the sidewalk beside the door, and perhaps a cask of oysters. In the fruit season, various fruits were displayed in baskets set on sloping shelves along the shop front, and especially on Saturday evenings my uncle, myself or an extra clerk would patrol this little display, quick to fasten on any pedestrian who hesitated for a moment to take a closer look.

Shortly before Christmas every year our store bought a hundred or so calendars, with the name of the proprietor, the address of the store and "Choice Groceries" specially printed. We gave these calendars away and always ordered more calendars than we had customers, because we knew that strange youngsters would be sure to wangle some out of us. The unknown urchin entering the store and saying "Calendar please, mister?" presented a little problem. Should we give him for nothing something that had cost us something? On the other hand, it was probable that he would take the calendar home and his mother would hang it up and there she would have our name and the address of the store before her eyes.

So, especially if we had more calendars than we could distribute among our old customers, we used often to use this bait. I doubt if we ever made a dollar out of it; and over the years I suppose that the few hundred dollars we spent, in the aggregate, on calendars of no economic benefit whatever to the store, added their little weight to a ship that was destined to sink, not, however, until all its little crew had made port safely.

Not only did the store not advertise, but most of the goods we sold were never advertised. We bought our tea in bulk, our coffee in the bean, and most of the other staples came to us without any trade name to distinguish them from others, any more than if they had been potatoes. But a change was taking place before we left the store. Things were being packaged. Creamery butter had come in, and the first I remember was that of the Locust Hill Farm. It was a novelty.

I remember being down at a wholesale butter dealer's on Front Street and being invited to look in a glass jar at what had been taken from the butter in the process of turning it into creamery. It was horrible and suggested decomposed oysters. This must have been an optical illusion or a plain fraud on the part of the wholesale merchant, for certainly creamery butter tastes no better than the old fashioned tub butter. But here was creamery butter in a neat cube, wrapped in paper with a name on it. It was easy to handle. There was no waste. Nor was there any time lost in weighing, nor in calculating the price of one pound one and a half ounces of butter selling at 37 cents a pound that

used to attend the cutting, weighing, wrapping and calculating of bulk butters to a customer's requirements.

In the tub-butter days there was a useful implement which I suppose most of my readers have never seen. It was called the tester or tryer and was in the form of a long narrow metal cylinder, cut in half lengthwise, This was plunged into the tub of butter, penetrating for a distance of several inches. Then, it was given a quick half turn and the core of butter could be withdrawn. The expert would run his nose along the butter, and perhaps taste a bit here and there to make sure that the butter was all of the same even quality from top to bottom. This fact ascertained, the tryer would be reinserted in the hole and the core returned to its original position.

It was about this time that packaged tea appeared. The first brands I remember were Ram Lal and Mazawattee, which were teas from India or Ceylon in lead covered packages and destined to take the place of the China teas which had previously dominated the market. The proprietors of these teas had something to advertise, and they also sent around to the retailers little metal or enamel covered signs which we used to tack up inside or outside the store. They too were a great advantage to both the grocer and the customer, if, as I take for granted, they afforded him the same normal percentage of profit. There could be no loss in weighing. There could be no waste. They were swiftly handled and the tea would retain whatever special virtues it was supposed to contain in the hermetically sealed package.

Before the packaging of tea was invented to make the fortunes of Lipton, Larkin and a host of others, the grocers bought tea in large chests, weighing perhaps fifty pounds or more. They were lined with lead foil, and the outside was formed of a thin layer of wood. It was one of the arts of the grocer to blend the tea he retailed from two or three different chests. We remember Young Hyson, but never heard of an Old Hyson or a Hyson Sr., and there were Pekoe and Souchong.

Our Uncle John prided himself on the taste with which he blended his teas, and I think with justice, for we sold a good deal of tea in the store. When packaged tea began to appear on the market it had the advantage of taking up less room than the bulk tea in the chests, and this enabled the grocer to stock more goods in the same space. But our Uncle John had no enthusiasm for the innovation. He perceived that one of his arts was becoming outmoded.

There was one staple commodity on which no small grocer ever made a dollar; yet if he did not stock it he might as well put up the shutters. He couldn't afford to sell it; and he couldn't afford not to sell it. I am speaking of white granulated sugar which for many years sold at an unvarying price of five cents a pound. What the wholesaler charged for it I do not remember, but I do know that the retail price was five cents a pound, as if it were a law that a pound should contain sixteen ounces. It is possible that the refiner or the wholesaler set the price. No little grocer ever dreamed of altering it. Yet when one considers the fact that out of a 200 pound barrel of sugar he had to sell 200 individual pounds, or rather forty smaller bags containing five pounds, had to weigh them and put

them up in paper bags tied with string it was simply impossible that he could get the separate units to amount to the whole. There must have been a loss of at least a fraction of cent on every five-pound bag, to say nothing of the time spent in weighing and parceling.

There came a time when some of the large stores offered to sell sugar at twenty-one pounds for a dollar, the idea being to lure customers with this palpable bargain, and then make up the loss by selling him something else, like a pair of boots or a suit of clothes. This has since become known as the loss leader, and is considered sound merchandising. It hastened the death of many a little grocer in Toronto; and perhaps was a kindness in disguise.

Another commodity, whose price did not vary, if I am to trust my memory, was coffee. We sold it for 40 cents a pound, two of the ounces being composed of chicory. There was no deception here. Everybody knew chicory had been added, and everybody was glad that it should be so for the chicory was supposed to add desired body. We had a small coffee mill in the store and here the coffee was ground fresh.

The best tea sold for sixty cents a pound, and I suppose that of all commodities the price has remained most constant for sixty years past; but whereas when we sold bulk tea it was sold by the pound when the packaged tea came in the custom of selling by the half pound and quarter pound entered also.

The price of bananas I do not recall, but I know that it was after I had ceased to be a grocer that the yellow variety came in. Before that time the only bananas were red bananas, slightly shorter and thicker than the yellow kind, and it seems to me of a more luscious flavour.

If there was any packaged cheese sold in those days the shop did not handle it. Our cheese stood in a large tub shaped box which was kept on the counter, covered by a muslin cloth. It

was cut with either a large knife or by means of a thin wire with a handle about the size and shape of a clothes peg at each end. Customers would nibble at it absent-mindedly.

It strikes me somewhat belatedly that we always spoke of our shop as a store, or rather as the store. Nowadays I should not think of calling it anything but a shop. There was one exception that I remember. If two or three customers happened to be in the store at once, which happened now and then, and only one clerk was waiting on them, he would be likely to run up the three or four steps to the dwelling part of the premises and cry "Shop!" which meant that extra help was wanted.

Another oddity, in retrospect, is that I do not remember having seen a cheque in all my years at the store. The day's receipts would be taken upstairs by Aunt Polly and probably concealed in her bedroom, though we did have a somewhat imposing safe somewhere or other. Then when accounts were to be paid the money would be

withdrawn and handed over in cash. I am afraid that our little store did not run to a bank account. When the store did finally collapse after a dreary couple of days when an uncomfortable looking bailiff sat about trying to appear unobtrusive, a claim for back wages was filed on my behalf. I received a cheque for perhaps \$70, which I no doubt handed over to Aunt Polly. At least I hope I did. It was the first time I ever saw a cheque, except those issued by the Dominion Government to my father when he had completed his report of a survey. I must have supposed that the issuing of cheques like the printing of bank notes was the exclusive prerogative of the government at Ottawa.

Uncle Aleck<sup>1</sup>, a tall, bony Ulsterman, with a fair complexion, high cheek bones and a jocular manner, was the owner of the store for a short period, and in that period it probably made more money than in any other comparable stretch of time in its history, for he had the Ulsterman's shrewdness and thrift. It became a legend in the neighbourhood that once he chased a boy half a mile to recover an apple snatched from a basket in the front of the store. Uncle Aleck thought nothing of it. He said it was a good apple. He could imitate noises made by domestic animals and we thought him excruciatingly funny.

Undoubtedly, he had a sense of humour, and we remember one occasion, an April Fool's Day, when we were all aroused by shoutings that seemed to proceed from the cellar. William, the hired man, yelled up that a water pipe had burst and the cellar was being flooded. Uncle Aleck was the first to rush down into the cellar. There was a moment's silence and then a crash and a yell. He had evidently fallen heavily. William, who was waiting to join in the laughter appropriate to a first class joke, turned pale. Then he too hurried down the cellar stairs.

"Are you hurt, man?" he gasped anxiously.

Uncle Aleck was lying on the cellar floor groaning.

"I can't get up, William," he moaned. "Can ye give me a hand?"

William, though a shorter man, was not much less than six feet, weighed more than 200 pounds and was as strong as a bull. He heaved up Uncle Aleck in his arms and staggered up the cellar stairs. He carried his load into the little room behind the store and laid him on a sofa. "I'm that sorry - "he began, when Uncle Aleck suddenly burst into a roar. "April Fool!" he shouted, and William looked abashed, but at the same time relieved.

In the regime of Uncle John it used to be the Saturday night custom for the family and the help in the store, augmented at certain seasons of the year, to have a late supper

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<sup>1</sup> "Uncle Aleck" was Alexander Hutchison. He married Elizabeth Fleming, born in 1853, younger sister of Aunt Polly, first child born in Canada to William and Jane Fleming. Their daughter Margie, was adopted by Aunt Polly and Uncle John Verner, then became part of the household of her uncle, R. J. Fleming and his wife Lydia.

after the day's work. In the winter there was always an oyster stew. Uncle Aleck continued this family tradition with certain modifications. He added a prayer to the oysters, for he was a religious man; but when business was not good he withheld the oyster stew, for he was first of all a man of business. But we could count on the prayers anyway and they may have been better for some of us.

Uncle Aleck owned the store for perhaps a little more than a year. Then his wife died in childbirth, and he sold the business back to Uncle John and went to California where he also prospered as a grocer. While he owned the store the family arrangements remained as before. Nobody moved out. Only Uncle Aleck moved in, and when he was gone the store population remained as it had been before his coming, one man and a beloved aunt the fewer, one baby the more.

As I think of it the store seemed to have almost an elastic property. Probably the normal number of people living there would be nine, but at times it must have been fourteen or fifteen. I looked at the place the other day and from the outside it did not seem capable of housing more than half a dozen people, though when I peeped through a window that used to belong to the parlour I saw that it was being used as a bedroom.

William was added to the staff in the days of Uncle Aleck. Probably they were friends in Ulster, and in the days of the new drive and enterprise the takings of the store could easily afford another able-bodied man, who was a competent grocer in his own right. William remained on but the store showed a tendency to revert to a lower plane of prosperity, and William, himself, a shrewd Ulsterman, perhaps saw the writing on the wall before the rest of us. He did the sensible thing. He married a relative of the family and opened a little store of his own, a quarter of a mile away.

This we all considered a most dastardly act. God knows, we said to ourselves, and maybe to others, that we were having enough trouble keeping the store going as matters were. But here was William moving out and naturally taking some of our customers with him. Probably he had come to regard them as his customers since he had waited on them and established friendly relations with them. It is true that we were relieved of William's weekly wages, but we were convinced that William would have remained to draw his weekly wages had he not seen an opportunity of increasing them. And at whose expense?

The result was that none of us spoke to William or his wife for years. They too had their grievance. Wasn't William entitled to make his little profit from the customers who had been weaned away? How was a man to advance himself if he did not set up in business for himself? And where would a man set up in business who had built up a connection around Parliament Street? In Ulster, for God's sake? Why naturally in Parliament Street, where he was known and respected. Moreover, hadn't he married into the family?

One other former employee moved three or four blocks away and set up his own little store. We remember well that our aunt used to pay him \$8 a week, and that the only thing he would buy in our store was a pound of creamery butter each Saturday night.

One Saturday night when my aunt paid him she said with some hesitation, "I don't know how I'm going to be able to do this," for undoubtedly the clerk was making more money out of the store than

the owners. So he too, seeing the writing on the wall, gave notice of his intention of renting a small store not far away.

Neither this store nor William's ever expanded to any extent. Both of them remained small, barely providing a livelihood for their owners, but still enabling them to keep afloat, for there were no children to feed and clothe. There was no bitterness mingled in our parting from this clerk. Being a married man and living elsewhere he had never, so to speak, become a member of the family, and we felt that his right to start a business of his own and take whatever customers were willing to follow him was unchallengeable. But William, we felt, had been guilty of something like a betrayal. I had grown up before I realized how unreasonable was this attitude.

Nobody who was a small merchant in Toronto fifty or sixty years ago - unless he was destined to become a large merchant as time went by - ever thought of the cost of doing business. In our store it was unheard of for example that we should ever keep track of the amount of groceries we took out of the store for our own household. Nor, when we were taking our rent out in the form of meat from the butcher, did we calculate what this was costing us in the matter of the money it represented. We probably reasoned that, as we should not get the money anyway, it was unnecessary to make it the basis of computations. Neither Uncle John nor Aunt Polly ever set aside any particular sum as wages. None of us calculated that our time was worth anything, and no doubt its commercial value was small.

We did of course know how much we owed the wholesalers; the rapacious clergy reserves, whose property we continued to improve, knowing that finally when the leases fell in we should be allowed nothing for the improvement; and the amount of fixed charges like mortgage payments and any insurance that was carried, which must have been small. We knew also how much our customers owed us, and how far behind in their rent our tenants were. If these things roughly matched, we were under the impression that we were doing all right. Certainly, we seemed to be in a larger way of business than our nearest competitors, with the exception of Radcliffe. And there was no considerable loss from wastage. Aunt Polly was too skillful a cook and too wise a manager to see anything lost to the store that could be used in the house.

But we did not think of our delivery system as a waste. Yet, according to strict business standards, it was a most alarming waste. It involved the keeping of a horse, a wagon and a sleigh, a stable and a driving shed. It involved our uncle spending two mornings a week making calls and taking orders, and it involved my delivery of the orders on two other afternoons. I was not old enough to be entrusted with the taking of orders in which some diplomacy and persuasion were supposed to be involved. Uncle John was very good at order taking.

But, here was our little store on Parliament Street delivering goods to points as far distant as Callendar Street and Delaware Avenue, with only one other customer in the west end of the city, and he on Windsor Street. If the time spent in taking, filling and delivering these three or four orders was added together it would amount to not less than an afternoon's work, and I cannot suppose that the total weekly profit on these customers, leaving aside all costs involved in supplying their wants, would amount to more than a couple of dollars a week.

It seems, plain on reflection that all we needed were two or three customers in Rosedale, and two or three east of Pape Avenue, to have brought the store to its doom a year or so before it actually collapsed. But our principle, like the principle of every other struggling little merchant, was never to lose a customer because God alone knew where one would be found to take his place. The longer he continued as a customer the more valuable he became.

One lady on River Street never, so far as I remember, bought anything but a pound of tea each month and a pound of butter each week; but, as she always paid cash, she was considered one of our most valuable patrons, and an example to others. It is true that River Street was less than half a mile away, and that it would have been easy enough for one of us to obtain the order and deliver it on foot. But we had a horse. And what in the name of commonsense was the use of having a horse if we did not use him? Horse shoes were less expensive than shoe leather anyway.

What should have been done in self-defense by the hundreds of little grocery stores scattered over Toronto in the 'eighties and 'nineties was plain enough. But how it was to be done is not so plain. We should have exchanged customers. When a customer who used to live in Madeira Place moved to Callendar Street, we ought to have traded him to some west-end grocer who would have given us in exchange a customer who had moved from Callendar Street into Madeira Place.

The need for co-operation was plain, but nobody cooperated. Nobody knew how to co-operate. We only knew that if we lost our customers every time they moved we should be losing a lot of customers and that failure would be the end of it. We did not know that failure was to be the reward for trying to keep them when they became economically unprofitable.

It is true that we had a telephone, though perhaps not in the earliest day of the store. But I do not recall that any of our customers had telephones, so the telephone was useless in soliciting orders and, of course, wholly impracticable when it came to delivering them. Our telephone only provided us with the dangerous facility of ordering from the wholesaler, although as a matter of fact Uncle John used to like to visit the wholesalers in person and make quite a ceremony of examining and choosing what he would take. We do not recall that he made any disastrous miscalculations, though his natural tendency would be to act rather grand as an important customer considering with the eye of a connoisseur the various grades of cheese and butter and tea set out for his inspection.

A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, but it is plain that a good many of our customers were in the bush, so far at least as distance was concerned.

Next door to the grocery was a flour and feed store kept for many years by another Uncle John, my grandmother's brother<sup>2</sup>. He was something of a giant, perhaps six feet two or three inches tall, and weighing perhaps 250 pounds. He had a plentiful crop of grey hair, gray whiskers and beard and a clean shaven upper lip. This was a quite general practice in those days of men of his age, and we have heard that it had something to do with the communion service- a hygienic precaution when several worshippers took a sip out of the same cup. Otherwise I do not seem to associate Uncle John with religious observances; though like almost everybody else in those days he went to church occasionally.

He was a man at this time in his sixties, but very erect, very broad and square in the shoulders; and, as he stood in a doorway, there seemed to be a small frame around him rather than around a space. We never remember him without thinking of what was then called a cardigan jacket, now a sweater coat, which he always wore.

He was a genial man, as big men generally are, and only on one point was he ever irritable and dictatorial. It appeared that no inconsiderable part of a feed dealer's profit was in his bags. Customers were supposed to take their own bags when they went for a sackful of grain. Often enough they turned up without bags, and Uncle John<sup>3</sup> would grumble a little as he had to supply them. Quite a few of his customers were the market gardeners who were then plentiful north of the Danforth and east of Pape Avenue, and more than once I saw my uncle, after having tossed a few bags of feed into the wagon of one of them, stop and peer into the rig. "These are mine," he would say removing a large fistful of bags, and there was no one to say him nay; for, while everybody was aware of his good-nature, nobody wanted to see what he acted like when seriously annoyed. He used to take a bag full of grain, swing it from the floor to his knee, give it another heave, and then toss it into the wagon with the motion of a man putting a shot. It seemed altogether probable that he could have treated a full sized man with the same smoothly flowing action.

He kept himself in good physical condition by baling hay. The flour and feed dealer of the day bought his hay by the wagon load, or sometimes by the car load. He would store it in a loft, whence it would later be fed into a large hay press. The loose hay was then compressed in the four walls of the machine by a long handle operated like a pump. The result would be a bale of hay, secured with wire. The longer one pumped, the more tightly packed became the baled hay; and, when one of them left Uncle John's hands, it was virtually a solid mass. This used in turn to be handled by a large iron hook.

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<sup>2</sup> "Next door to the grocery was a flour and feed store kept for many years by another "Uncle John."

<sup>3</sup> "Uncle John" was Uncle John Cauldwell (Caldwell in Ireland), brother of Polly's mother, Jane Caldwell Fleming. He was probably the first in the family to come to Toronto, where he started out as a licensed carter.



Men who are now old have told me that as boys they used to buy peas for their pigeons at five cents a small measure and that Uncle John used to fill them a measure until it overflowed. He did not sweep it level as was the general custom. Oats, bran, shorts and Micah axle grease were other things vended in the flour and feed store which I recall.