

Introduction

The Peddlers

“There is no character in all Maine history, so original, so indigenous to Maine soil as the old tin-peddler for he was as much a part of the Maine scene as the wares he bartered. At first he peddled his wares in a basket, but when a particular type of wagon was perfected, the tin-peddler with his well-known qualities of wit, imagination, and trading ability really came into his own. He rode in a box-like vehicle of flaming red and, like the white knights of old, was surrounded by gleaming metalware. At the rear of his van stood erect, like sentinels, a row of new brooms and below was a rack of bulging gunny sacks. The mysterious interior of his vehicle was reached by little doors through which he would thrust a groping arm in search of hidden treasures not exposed to view. He never wore a coat, and his waistcoat was ornamented by a heavy watch chain. From one upper pocket appeared a strange assortment of articles—among others a pencil or two, a comb, a toothbrush, and a row of cigars.

“His arrival at a lonely farmhouse was a thrilling moment. All work was suspended, and the entire family gathered about him. He knew everyone within a circuit of miles, and he brought the latest information of births, marriages, deaths, fires, freshets, and lesser items of local interest. During this social discourse his wares were examined, and he leisurely stepped down from his throne. Then came the exciting hour of barter. Desired articles

were unhooked from the van and laid upon the grass. Barter began with the swapping of rags, paper, bottles, and scrap iron until the deal was completed and everybody apparently happy and satisfied.”

This description of peddling was originally broadcast by WGAN in Portland, Maine, and published in *Maine Memories* by Herbert G. Jones in 1940.

Don Mitchell told his son “Peddlers and Jews, often one and the same, were always good for a laugh. The local Jew was Sam Gopan, and the natives found hilarious Sam’s accent and his attempts to keep his children on a kosher diet when they were surrounded by excellent cooks who fried innumerable doughnuts in home-rendered pork fat. And cause for mirth was Sam’s concern with his personal finances.”

Don Mitchell’s remembrance in the biography *I’m a Man That Works* was typical of the Maine woodsmen of Aroostook County in the 1890s and early 1900s. No ill will or anti-Semitism was included in the hilarity. The French Canadians who came to work in the camps were subjected to hilarity too, but they could fight back because they could laugh at the locals in French; the peddler was alone and did not understand the hazing anyway.

Peddler’s licenses in 1891 and 1896 were issued to Jews from Waterville, Frank Wolman and Julius and Philip Levine; and from Gardiner, Max Slosberg, the Epsteins (Simon, Harris, Max, U., Morris, and Hyman), as well as to Canadians and Middle Easterners, including Abdallah Akel, Ignazio Albarnaise, and others. In fact, two who peddled in the 1890s were Edwin S. Daggett and Everett S. Damon, whose names are on two prosperous stores today. Some descendants of Jewish peddlers are still in business too: Ludy and Pacy Levine (the Colby College boosters), Louis and Cyrus Schiro, and Mayer Wolman in Waterville. (Note: The Levine store closed in 1995.)

The peddlers obtained their merchandise from companies in Boston such as J. S. Round Co., Publishers, who stocked the immigrants with religious, historical, and practical works as well as rugs, wringers, clocks, albums, lace curtains, etc. Indeed this company wrote a letter for H. Rosenberg who lost his peddler’s certificate because he could not write in English.

Before the Jews and Lebanese came, soldiers and sailors who came for fifty cents an acre (their service pay) were also peddlers. Some of the Lebanese became potato farmers and

some of their descendants still operate potato warehouses in Aroostook County. Actually the Jews replaced Yankee peddlers who fled to the Midwest and West when Chicago and the gold rush in California seemed to offer more options.

"In the 1880s Maine was a generation behind the other states—almost entirely concerned with the lumber industry and farming. It was a quiet, unhurried life, undisturbed by the noise of factory motors, booms and depressions, isolated from America by an economy and harsh winter climate that made the retention of old Yankee customs and habits practical which other places were even then beginning to discard," according to Harry Segal, whose father came to Bangor as a tailor.

The poor, mostly uneducated, unskilled Jews from Kovna, Grodna, and Vilna in Lithuania who came to Bangor then found German Jews who could not speak or understand Yiddish, the language of the Polish and Russian ghettos. These newcomers formed a closely knit community, preserving the Jewish customs and values they had known in Lithuania and in small villages in Eastern Europe. "Bringing little or worldly goods but much courage and hope, they worked hard and brought their families to Maine. They were lonely, uprooted, displaced persons fleeing the pogroms," said Segal.

In twenty years most of the German Jews left or were assimilated into the gentile community. They formed the first synagogue in 1848, but by 1856 the minutes show the congregation dwindled to less than ten families, leaving little for the new arrivals except their cemetery. The Lithuanians formed their own societies for mutual aid, and landsmen (people from the same town) developed loan groups and other ways to share peddling experiences. **Ezriel Lemke Allen** came to Bangor in 1882 when his landsman, **Ike Wolpert**, persuaded him to leave Boston. Allen prospered and helped to found Beth Israel Synagogue in Bangor.

Jews came at a time of economic expansion. New England merchants were sending goods to the new cities: Chicago, Cleveland, St. Louis, and even cities in the south. Jews did not remain in mills or as laborers for long; they developed trade routes or stores. No bosses for them—they worked long hours on their own time.

At first the peddler simply carried a basket with "Kuddle-Muddle"—thread, needles, pins, yard goods, etc. When he

learned a little English, he carried a 150-pound pack, planning to become a businessman. From this he peddled with a horse and wagon like a baron. When he carried watches and other jewelry, he was envied as a rich man by his friends. The pinnacle of success was the opening of a store, usually a clothing store. Then he became a "prince."

Peddlers were usually housed in the barn for twenty-five cents a night. They carried fruit, bread, and even kosher salami. The only things of which they partook were tea and potatoes so that the kosher diet could be observed. Farmers helped them by trading, increasing their English-speaking ability, and assisting in obtaining naturalization and legal peddler's licenses.

Although many immigrants feared government in the form of police or judicial courts, the Jews often appealed to these authorities. When a young boy threw a rock through the window of a Jewish baker, **Issac Dvorin**, he brought the case to municipal court. Jews did not hesitate to state their grievances as American citizens because the public schools taught "equality before the law."

Mary Spratt, a teacher in the public school in the Jewish section of Bangor, taught children who arrived with no knowledge of English. Appalled that adults had to pay to learn English, she started night classes for them in 1907. She and other teachers volunteered their time; community organizations also helped.

Jews used the newspapers to explain the High Holidays, rituals, ceremonies, and social events. Every year editors devoted space to the fasting and praying on Yom Kippur, the closing of Hebrew stores, and the number of Jews who observed the holidays. The visit of **Jacob Schiff** from Bar Harbor or other prominent Jews also merited attention in the press. The disagreements over ritual and persons never hit the press, but rabbis came and went, schochets (ritual slaughterers) were fired or quit, and in some years finances were short for religious institutions.

Although they lost their fear of government and the army, they still had to contend with the severe winters. They also had to be willing to compromise on religious observance. The beard and skull cap (yarmulke) evoked derision; these distinctive features of Orthodox Jews were soon abandoned. They had to accept the strange learning of their children in school as well as their attitude toward authority in the home.

Jews were treated with curiosity, interest, and respect by the Christian Americans because there was a religious connection, but they were still foreigners. Until they spoke, dressed, and lived like the local Protestants, could they avoid being objects of curiosity? Justice Edward T. Gignoux, a district court justice, said of Jews: "As a class they were treated considerately in public because of their votes, disparaged in private because of general dislike, and sought by all for the work they do and the money they spend."

Not everyone succeeded. Some never earned a living; their wives took in laundry, their daughters worked as domestics, they cooked for others, and many took in boarders. In addition there were beggars (schnorrers) who traveled the length and breadth of Maine from one Jewish group to another, bringing news and gossip as well as propaganda for Palestine. They were called "luftmenschen," literally "air people," because they had only the gift of gab. They believed a poor man was a child of God who had been unfairly disinherited from his patrimony. Therefore he was not an object of pity but was a man denied his due—an adequate living. In Biblical times a portion of the harvest was always set aside for the poor. Throughout Maine, Jews living in towns were taxed to provide for the needy—not by the government but by established Jews who even provided a temporary shelter for beggars.