

ESSAYS FROM THE EAST SIDE: The Milkman

By Corrie Clark

When I was growing up in small town Ontario, there were few things that delighted us local kids more than the sight of the ice cream truck and the sound of that sickeningly sweet, yet slightly psychotic, circus tune approaching your street. Like the Pied Piper, kids would come out of all sorts of places to greet a man in a van for a delicious treat. Back then the act of the ice cream man luring children to his business was a relatively normal one, as many entrepreneurs and businesses approached your street every day. Our mothers got milk from the milkman, and bread from the bread man. The bread man of my childhood even sold penny candy to all the kids, because he really liked kids. And he did it in a way that would give heart attacks to parents today. We went into the bread truck and picked it out from little bins. In the poorer neighborhoods he just gave kids the candy. It was the 1970s and everything was the set up for a Movie of the Week. But these deliverymen usually had a route for years, kept a community together and provided an essential service to those who weren't mobile enough to be able to go and get supplies. They knew what people needed. The milkman and the bread man are long gone these days, even though some of the jokes we make about them still linger. There's something to be said for the mobile business or delivery person. There were also the local salespeople?ones who sold encyclopedias, or Amway or Avon. My mother sold Avon briefly when I was a kid and I remember going door to door with her and her big blue bag. They were the same doors we hit up every spring trying to sell Girl Guide cookies. Often these were people you already knew. The ones doing the selling to you were family or friends who needed some extra cash. A community is made up of large and small businesses, even the travelling or mobile cart variety. Ever notice the lack of ?no solicitors or peddlers? signs now? That's because there aren't that many peddlers anymore. We live in a world of packaged goods sold on keyboards. But sometimes you can still hear the music of the ice cream truck navigating along the streets of your neighborhood on a warm summer's day. Once in a while you'll hear the clanging of a bell? ?Ding, ding? ding, ding? of the knife sharpener. This mobile business always looks nostalgic as if he's been driving around the community without stopping for 50 years. In fact, he probably has. A lot of these peddler cars and carts have long histories and began in large cities. Around 1900, there were thousands of mobile businesses in New York City. Today, less than a dozen mobile grinders or sharpeners exist. Sure, you can get anything from Amazon dropped at your door, even your groceries? but it's not the same as the solitary entrepreneur with time to talk and an expertise in his product or service. This is a person who is happy to see you and feels like they are part of your day and community. The first official hot dog cart started in 1893 in New York on Coney Island. And for over a decade or so in Aurora, you can get a good dog and drink served up with conversation and connection right outside the Home Hardware on Wellington Street. Every day in the summer months you'll see a small gaggle of hungry lunchers gathered around this contractor's connection spot. That's what these services and little businesses are? connectors. And it's a great memory of a time where the people who sold to us or gave good service were as important as what we bought.