

Carroll Yesteryears
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It Was Buyer Beware When it Came to Newspaper Advertising in 1887
By Mary Ann Ashcraft

Old newspaper ads like this one for Charles Wantz's "segar" store on Main Street in Westminster provide us with a few chuckles or sometimes raise an eyebrow. I glanced at 1887 newspapers to see what was being sold 130 years ago.

"Nattan's Crystal Discovery for the Hair" was promoted as "a perfectly clear preparation in one bottle as easily applied as water, for restoring to gray hair its natural color and youthful appearance." Did it work? Was it safe? There was no Food and Drug Administration to ensure proper labeling and to test products on the market. Judging by the number of liniments and "cures" being promoted, it was probably "buyer beware."

Francis Grolock's store carried Royal St. John sewing machines which sewed backward as well as forward, something we take for granted today but which must have been an innovation back then. Although Singer sewing machines had been around more than 30 years by the 1880s, a brief history of that company didn't reveal if it also offered machines that reversed direction.

By 1887 American factories were turning out thousands of products that previously had been handmade in local shops with only a few employees. Oliver Hiteshew of Uniontown still ran such a shop. He made bureaus with no nails "at prices competitive with factory-made goods." In addition, he produced his own woven wire mattresses using "20 pounds of wire." Provided he supplied soft padding over the wire, these may have been more comfortable and longer-lasting than homemade mattresses stuffed with straw.

During the winter months, James W. Beacham provided ice cream for parties "furnished in Fancy Moulds and various colors and flavors." When summer rolled around, he was proud to advertise he still had sufficient ice available to make the best quality ice cream and "water ice" for "Pic Nics, Sunday Schools, Excursions, Hotels, Boarding Houses and Private Residences." Even with today's air-conditioned cars and insulated coolers, do you know many people who dare to take ice cream on a "Pic Nic?"

Finally, two advertisements strongly suggested that some local merchants resorted to deception when it came to putting prices on their goods. The dry goods store of Charles Weiller & Son was closing out its winter stock to make way for spring and summer items. "Everything has got the plain figures marked on them, as before, and the reduction is made after you have selected what you want. No Humbug, But Solid Truth."

U. L. Reaver sold boots, shoes, hats, etc. on Westminster's Main Street. His ad also implied that he was more honest with its customers than others. "Because I mark my goods in plain figures that speak more eloquently than words. Price tags which have a tongue. You need no salesman to interpret for you. Your eyes do it all. There is no bait but honest value when you see a plain price tag on everything."

Do we feel equally confident when venturing to buy large or small-ticket items in 2017? Ads on the internet or in newspapers probably enable today's consumers to be more savvy than in the past.

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Photo credit: Submitted photo

Photo caption: Charles Valentine Wantz used this clever advertisement to sell tobacco and segars from his shop on Westminster's East Main Street.