Households of the 1890's

The household economy of my boyhood was more self-contained than its counterpart is today. Thrift and frugality were generally observed; there was little incentive to compete in new decorations and furniture, and even families that kept horses and carriages lived within their means. The attitude of my people toward debt was typical of their generation. Unless credit was needed to run a business, buy a house or a farm, money was not borrowed. They would not have tolerated buying furniture or other household goods on time. You paid for what you could afford and did not pledge your future earnings. If you did not have the money in hand, you waited until the amount needed had been saved. Because this trait was general, Davenport banks were particularly strong in the savings departments.

Arrivals from Europe, addicted to bargaining, were confronted by the sales policies of Davenport stores, which warned: "All goods plainly marked," and, "One price to all." However, merchants often gave discounts for purchases in quantity for cash. My mother, who was a tireless knitter, always bought her Clark's O.N.T. thread by boxes of one-dozen spools and thereby made

a saving that at the end of a year accounted for several extra boxes. My father's advice was: "Discount all bills and do not endorse notes." The number of endorsers who had been called on to make good their pledges was large, for the claims of friendship, and especially of lodge brotherhood, often overcame caution. Reckless spenders wasted their earnings in saloons. There must have been many, for I often heard commiseration for harassed housewives whose husbands "drank."

The advantage of "having money in the bank" led many Davenport citizens of German birth to make at least one journey to the Fatherland to see the old folks. Although they relived incidents of this voyage the rest of their lives, they often returned critical of what they had experienced and "glad to be back."

We made the customary voyage to Europe when I was 6, and I was able to brag to my playmates that in Copenhagen I had caught a glimpse of the Danish king and the German kaiser as they were driven past at great speed in a carriage drawn by black horses. My mother, Christine Jochims, was a native of Holstein. Her father, who had studied jurisprudence at Göttingen and had known the brothers Grimm, Bismarck, and the elder Keyserling, had held provincial offices under the Danish crown and then supported the Schleswig-Holstein liberation movement, which

collapsed. My mother had come in a big shift of her relatives and neighbors to Davenport and Scott County after the Franco-Prussian War. Today my office windows overlook New York's lower bay, and I often think of the apprehension and hope with which she and her associates arrived at Castle Garden, on the lower end of Manhattan Island.

My father's house had been furnished in mid-Victorian days, and there was no incentive to change the walnut tables, beds and chairs, and the tall, narrow mirror that rested on a marble console between the front windows of the parlor. There was a black, horse-hair settee, but the round table in front of it practically deterred anyone from sitting there. Steel engravings framed in black lacquer with a gold inner edge lingered with us for decades. With youthful enthusiasm for change I managed in time to introduce several pieces of golden oak, and to my later distress the horse-hair settee, which was as good as new, was disposed of before its future distinction was suspected. One prized article of furniture was the cherry wardrobe, in which suits and dresses were carefully preserved, since closets were not built into the older houses.

Domestic help came from farm girls who remained several years and then went back home to be married. Room and meals were important parts of their fees, for the wages were small.

Many a married woman carried a heavy load of housework, yet found time to go calling an afternoon or two a week. She was often the cook, and since canned goods were unavailable, she prepared all dishes from fresh products. Although the ice man daily exchanged a chunk of ice for a ticket, the icebox held far fewer objects than it does today. There was at hand in the shops a tremendous supply of fresh meats and garden truck at little cost.

Juicy steaks were plentiful, and every dinner, served at noon, had a substantial meat course. White and graham bread was baked in the kitchen oven, and pie was such a daily dish that I long thought dessert meant pie. I never have been able to recapture the flavor of lemon pies my mother baked, simply because she made the extract from the lemon rind, another household occupation long since displaced.

Before coffee was sold in packages my mother bought coffee beans green and roasted them in the oven, and I ground them in our handmill. She would not patronize the Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company, the first chain store to reach Davenport. This had a blazing red front and huge bins of tea and coffee in red with gold trimmings, but my mother distrusted its products because it gave away dishes. Any merchant who gave premiums, she argued, must make up the cost by cheapening the product. A friend served coffee that had for

me the attraction of the unfamiliar; my mother deprecated it as made with chicory which, she said, was a substitute used to make the coffee last longer.

Our economy was replete with specialists. The butter man came every two weeks with a huge chunk of butter, and collected 20 cents a pound in summer and 25 cents a pound in winter. The market price was often lower, but the quality justified the outlay. The milkman dashed in daily with his big milk can, measured a quart into our pitcher, and then slapped in a small dividend, which every housewife expected. Once a week a baker came with a large basket of sweet-smelling fresh rolls, from which we made a careful selection. The most specialized of all these vanished individuals was the mustard man. For a dime he filled a tumbler with dark, German mustard. He came only at long intervals, for he covered a large part of Davenport in his daily walks. Today I look back on this frugal, homely period as a most wholesome one. As a boy I rarely had pennies to spend, yet lacked nothing.

The lumber room of the attic was always an interesting spot for me. Some of the objects that stirred my curiosity were commonplace to my elders; they included a carpetbag, a folding carpet chair, and skates made of wood with iron runners that curved forward to an acorn-tip. My people considered them outmoded trappings and eventu-

ally disposed of them; today such objects appear in antique shops. There in the attic also reposed a long oblong box, locked, in which rested my father's rifle. Carefully oiled and placed in shavings, it was a relic of the days when my father, as a young marksman, used it on Sundays at target shooting.

He had helped establish the Davenport *Schuetzen Verein* and plan Schuetzen Park. For a number of decades after the Civil War this place was the resort of marksmen. Once he had become king in an annual tournament. By the time I was born his interest had subsided, but he treasured the rifle and preserved it. It came into my hands at his death. A beautiful piece, it operated with percussion cap, powder and ball, and was heavy to lift. I also have the powder horns and bullet mold that the marksmen used, and the little brown handbag in which they carried these objects. All these trappings were once as fashionable as the golf outfits men have today.

My father told me that on Sunday mornings the society would collect its members by marching a brass band down the principal streets west of Main Street, and then take streetcars at Turner Hall. The members wore grey coats trimmed with green lapels, typical of foresters abroad. Father's coat hung for years in his wardrobe. One day an actor named Bartels, who appeared with the German stock company in Turner Grand Opera

House, expressed a wish to use the coat as a costume. After that we often saw him stalk the stage in father's coat and felt a special relation to the theater.

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