

SUBSCRIPTION BOOK SELLING

Among the most vivid memories of my childhood are the visits of peddlers, tinkers, and traveling salesmen who criss-crossed rural South Carolina with car-loads of everything from home remedies to books.

There were the regulars like the iceman, the insurance man, and the laundry man. One my favorites was the Watkins man whose car overflowed with many different kinds of boxes of remedies and bottles filled with liquids mostly of a brown color. My grandmother bought his vanilla flavoring, my grandfather his liniment, and I always got the almanac.

There were also traveling book sellers, most of them selling books and tracts, usually representing some religious organization that I had never heard of.

I remember one visit in particular. But I confess it was several decades had passed before I understood fully its significance.

On a hot August afternoon, my grandmother and I sought relief from the heat on the front porch to wait for it to cool off enough so we could go fishing. While we rested, I read the Bible for her.

We were in the middle of the story of Job, when a man in a black suit, a white shirt and tie, and wearing dusty black shoes came up to the front porch. He carried something like a small suitcase.

After pleasantries and a glass of cool water, he opened his case and pulled out several books and discussed them with my grandmother. I heard her say she would buy one of those for me, and pointed to the slender black book in his hand. He handed it to me and said "This is for you."

It had a black cover with a title printed in gold letters "Bible Readings for the Home." Even then I thought it was rather odd: it had another cover bound in at the back just like the one on the front, except that it was green; it also had a curious little fold-out strip about two inches wide, printed with the title on both sides, each in different colored cloth. It looked like the spine of a fatter edition.

For years I kept it with my other childhood treasures. But its significance struck me only after years of working as a rare books librarian. It was a publisher's dummy. Instead of having to lug around the real thing in its many and various forms, salesmen carried a copy with a selection of the pages and with examples of the different bindings. The bookseller gave me his sample, while my grandmother ordered a copy bound in green cloth.

Traveling booksellers were working as early as the 1470s. Publishers made great use of them to hawk almanacs, religious pictures and tracts, and even ABC books and diaries. Throughout printing history, the traveling book seller in every century has been a major source of books and pamphlets for provincial readers.

In the nineteenth century, especially in the South after the Civil War, he made available most of the reading material for those living in the rural areas.

At Duke we assembled a sizable collection of publisher's dummies, mostly from the nineteenth-century. I thought that my "Bible Readings for the Home" must be among the last of them. I certainly did not expect to see them in the decade of the eighties. But one day a man in a business suit came to my office and asked if we wanted his armload of wide thin books. They were publisher's dummies of books from several of the world's best known publishers of art books. Here I was face to face with a twentieth-century traveling publisher's representative. We graciously accepted his gift.

Publishers' dummies are important because they preserve a first-rate, first-hand record of popular reading tastes from any time. But in the story of how books got to the people, they are a tribute to enterprising publishers and especially to the indefatigable salesmen who wanted a book in every room.

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