

AN EIGHT-BARRELLED MOTH-BALL SALE.*

BY WILLIAM J. LOWRY, JR.

The business was old, the boss was older, and the building was older still; the store was cold, the boss was colder, and the weather was colder still.

The business had been founded about fifty-five years back and considerable conservativeness had accumulated in the interim, so on this cold morning in March, when the signs of spring betokened the approaching need of thinner clothes and the consequent shedding of the thicker ones, their necessary protection from the attacks of moths suggested taking stock of the preservatives used for that purpose.

Naphthalene in the form of moulded balls resembling the old cough remedy Sal Prunelle in appearance, but with the difference that "Every little moth ball has an odor all its own," had been coming into use as a cheap substitute for camphor and in a good many places was selling quite well.

The stock consisted of a few pounds left over from the last season, and the question as to how much to buy was being discussed.

The senior member of the firm objected to handling them at all, mainly on account of the odor, and the season's selling usually consisted of one dozen one-pound wrapped and double-labelled boxes bought from the jobber at seventy-five cents a dozen and sold at ten cents a box.

The other druggists were selling them at five cents for a twelve-ounce carton, and the small department stores were selling them in one-pound manila bags at five cents a pound; bargain day beginning only four and seven-eighths, or, at the lowest, four and three-quarter cents.

Towards the end of the previous season the public positively refused to pay ten cents a pound for a box when they could go down the street and get them for five cents in pound bags. All moth balls looked alike to patrons, and even old customers began to reason that if moth balls cost double, other things might also cost in the same proportion; so a splurge was made and a hundred-pound bulk lot was purchased in order to be able to sell them at five cents a pound.

Well do I remember the box in which they came, for I had to open it, and the villain (he couldn't have been a gentleman) who nailed it up had used about a thousand (count not guaranteed) spikes in sealing it against inspection and almost against opening, and they were used impartially, without fear or favor, on top, bottom, sides, and ends of that coffin-like box.

How I wished it was his casket, for I skinned my knuckles, ruffled my temper, tore my finger-nails, broke the hatchet and hammer handles, smashed at least one of the commandments, chipped the chisel, and littered the floor with nails, splinters, and cuticle, and dampened it with perspiration and gore!

We wrote to the jobber and told him of those nails, told him of their net weight, measure and numerical count and probable cost, told him of their assorted sizes, told him of the approximate cost of the time consumed in driving them in, told him of my afflictions, told him of my peeved disposition, and told him of a good many other things which I have since forgotten, and finally told him that if we were not to sever diplomatic relations he'd have to "fire" the scoundrel who nailed up that box.

It was late in the season, yet we sold practically all of those balls at five cents a pound.

* Read before Section on Commercial Interests, A. Ph. A., San Francisco meeting

On this particular morning we were discussing the advisability of anticipating the "Buy a bale of cotton" movement by buying a barrel of moth balls.

We decided to buy a barrel, and we bought it and we sold it; we bought another and we sold it; we bought another and we sold it, and the senior member forgot about his dislike of the odor of naphthalene.

The next season he gave his consent to buying not one or two or three, but five barrels, and we sold them.

In reviewing the sale of the three barrels, he said it wasn't the balls, it wasn't the bags, it wasn't the display so much that sold them, but it was William's signs.

Looking backwards, I'm sure he was very nearly right, for although the balls, the bags, and the display were absolutely necessary, yet I feel that the signs turned the trick.

We had a monopoly of the moth-ball business of that section of the city. The people must have had a large supply of habiliments which needed preserving, or they must have used the balls for other purposes.

There were rumors that the kids used them for marbles after cutting off the ends, and that the girls used them for necklaces after threading them with the pink string with which the packages were wrapped, and there is one instance, for which I can vouch, where an old colored woman used three of them at one time for cream almonds, but quickly spat them out and said, "Never again will I taste something unless I am invited."

The boss was the treasurer of the church and one of the deacons, and what he lacked in stature, *embonpoint*, and avoirdupois he made up in fairness and squareness and goodness, and he decided that we would not pay the printer a half cent for his twelve-ounce capacity cartons, but would buy paper parchment bags and give the customer a full pound for his nickel.

So we made a nice display of the white packages and loose balls, and, as the window had glass doors which could be closed tightly, there was very little odor in the store.

We then put in my sign, which read:

16 Ounces Make One Pound.
Moth Balls,
5 Cents a Pound.

In a short time we sold our barrel. The fact that we gave a full pound, which cost us no more than the twelve-ounce cartons cost others, made us customers, yet it somewhat riled the brother druggists, because they had loaded up on cartons and did not want to sacrifice them and use bags. Their sentiment was voiced by the man Friday who came from one for two ounces of "Peafowl's Fluorides" to make up a shortage on a prescription and said, "You all ain't playing fair about that there sign with 16 ounces to the pound on it."

In changing the display to another window, around the corner, a sign was used which read:

Moth Balls Are Selling Fast,
Get a Pound While They Last.
Moth Balls—5 Cents a Pound.

On different occasions other signs were used. One especially caused a good many smiles and helped the sales. In fact, we always tried to wrap up a smile with each sale of goods, and, while no burlesque or buffoonery was countenanced, yet a good clean laugh or a pleasant smile helped and paid.

This one read :

Did You Ever Hear a Moth Bawl?
Moth Balls Here at 5 Cents a Pound.

Another read :

We've Lots of Calls
For These Moth Balls,
5 Cents a Pound.

Another read :

Moth Balls Fresh and Moth Balls White,
You Get a Full Pound Here All Right.
16 Ounces for 5 Cents.

The signs were written at the store in large, legible capital letters, and only one or at most two were used at a time, and the display was changed every week, the window stock sold when taken out, and new lots put in the windows on the other street.

The sales were increased from twelve pounds to a ton of two thousand pounds a season, and the cost of two five-cent bags was the same as that of one ten-cent box, the profits being in the same proportion.

More people were brought into the store and the general business helped; especially did our sales of kindred lines increase. We sold more camphor than ever before, because the moth balls suggested that to those who did not use them. We also sold quantities of cedar chips, tar paper, fly paper, fly killers, insect powder, insect powder guns, and even dog soap.

The same tactics were followed along other lines of merchandise and results always followed, so our old, looking-backward song :

Moth balls were selling slow,
In fact, the stock was never low,

was changed to our looking-forward song :

Moth balls are selling fast,
We hardly think our stock will last.

The sign that caused us to buy insect powder guns in 5-gross lots instead of by dozens read :

GREAT GUNS
10 Cents.

THE POWER OF PUBLICITY.

One of the speakers at the recent Rochester convention of the National Public Health Association paid the following remarkable tribute to "printers' ink," as a factor in the prevention and cure of disease :

"Printers' ink should be included in the pharmacopœia. Wisely used, it prevents tuberculosis and builds hospitals to cure it. Thousands of babies are saved every year by its educational force. It is the only universal agency for the treatment of diseases in the community at large. You may cure the individual in the sickroom; you must treat the community through the newspapers. As soon as you begin to use print for any public or educational purpose, your opponents will dub you an 'agitator.' But it's a good thing to be. Every advertiser is an agitator, whether he agitates the public mind in favor of pickles or public health. Don't let the term bother you. It's really a compliment. Use printers' ink in large quantities, and don't be afraid to pay for it."