An Ada Tradition: Home Delivery  

By Mike Zurgable

Home delivery was nearly as common in Ada a hundred years ago as it is today. Products and services delivered to residents were diverse, from basic food staples like bread, milk, ice cream for summer parties, ice to preserve food in the ice box (before refrigerators were common), fuel for cooking and home heating, morning, and afternoon newspapers, even pick-up and drop-off dry cleaning.

Bread and Baked Goods

The Ada History Center oral history collection has many recollections of home delivery. Two life-long residents of Ada and longtime Ada History Center volunteers Marian Wride Bolhuis and Frank Hoover recall growing up in Ada, a quiet town out in the country in the 1940s and 1950s. Both recall the Colonial Bread man delivering bread, baked goods and donuts. Marian recalls “I was just a little girl but I remember mom getting bread from the Colonial Bakery. I know they used to come to our house. I don’t know how often they came, once a week or something. I was more interested in donuts. We got those once in a while.”

Milk, Ice Cream for Summer Parties

Marian remembers “Jerry Stevens was our milkman. He worked for Knapp Avenue Creamery. Jerry delivered milk to our house three days a week, Monday-Wednesday-Friday one week then Tuesday-Thursday-Saturday the next. My mom would put out empty quart bottles in a wire rack, and Jerry would swap them out for full bottles. He sold cottage cheese and ice cream too.” Before refrigerators were commonplace, village residents used ice boxes to keep food fresh. Ice cut from the backwaters of the Thornapple River in winter were delivered to homes two or three times a week in the warm months. Ice delivery stopped after World War II when refrigerators became commonplace.

Fuel for Cooking and Home Heating

Frank recalls “We had an octopus furnace in the basement that used coal. My dad ordered coal by the pound, enough to last 2-3 weeks at a time. The delivery truck would back into the driveway and the coal went down the truck’s chute through an opening in the foundation and into a room in the basement. Dad would stoke the furnace twice a day and my job was shovel the cinders (or coal ashes) out into the ash bucket and dump them into the driveway or in the backyard every morning and afternoon. Some time in the 1950s Dad had the coal furnace converted to fuel oil. I remember the three delivery men from Standard Oil Company: Irv Alexander, Walt Hayes and Ed Bennett. In the 1950s, fuel oil was sixteen cents a gallon.” Marian remembers “The wood stove heated up the kitchen in the summer, so Mom cooked on a kerosene stove. Dad had wood delivered in the summer and fall, storing it in the shed to keep it dry until Mom needed it.”

Mail and Newspapers

Mail was delivered to individual homes in the village starting in the 1960s. Marian recalls “Village residents picked up their mail at the post office. If you lived in town you were assigned a PO Box, we had box 9.” In an oral history, Charles Crampton recalled mail delivery to the rural parts of Ada. “At the turn of the century we began to get rural mail delivery. We had to put our mailbox up at the corner at first, sometimes a half mile from home. Later the territory was totally covered door-to-door. The early carriers of Ada all drove horses at first. In their little canvas covered wagons, they carried the
Home Delivery (Continued)

mail. Later there was Mr. Mondell, Charlie Nellist with his 1910 Cadillac, Rex Anthony with his two cylinder chain drive 1908 Buick, Dave Winters with his horse, later son Ed with his Wasp or Willys, and Irvin Wride and William Penninga with their Model T Fords.” Through the end of the 1950s village residents could get home delivery from two newspapers. The morning paper was the Grand Rapids Herald and the afternoon paper was the Grand Rapids Press.

Laundry and Dry Cleaning

Marian recalls “We had pick-up and drop-off dry cleaning service that came right to the house. My mom and I had wool skirts that needed to be dry cleaned. Mom would put a card up in the window facing Rix Street. That prompted them to stop at our house. If they picked up on Monday it was back Wednesday or Thursday. The Ada Laundermat opened in the early 1960s. It was in the building where Nonna’s Pantry occupies today.”

Village residents one hundred years ago had state-of-the-art home delivery. Our modern-day delivery options from DoorDash, Amazon, FedEx and UPS are extensions of a service industry that started about one hundred years ago. Early home delivery options were a convenience and helped homeowners with small refrigerators keep their pantries stocked with basic provisions like milk and fresh baked bread along with fuel for cooking and home heating. Home delivery of newspapers and mail brought news of the world to village and rural Ada Township residents.

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Upcoming Events (Cont’d)

Wednesdays all summer  Workdays in the Garden
9-11am on the History Center grounds. Join our fearless Master Gardeners digging in the dirt and caring for our beautiful gardens and grounds.

Thursday, July 6  Lecture Presentation on the Declaration of Independence
7pm at the Ada History Center. “What You Didn’t Know About the Declaration of Independence” will include a brief history of the Declaration and little-known facts that will blow your mind! Presenter Craig Avery, a former teacher, has studied and explored events leading up to the Declaration and fascinating facts pertaining to the 1,337 word document.

Fridays, July 19 & Aug 18  Beers at the Bridge
6-9pm at Legacy Park. Due to improvements being made at Leonard Field, this year’s concerts will be held at Legacy Park. Come find the AHS booth!

Thursday, July 13  Parks History Hike
6:30pm beginning at Ada Park. Participate in a guided hike from Ada Park to Leonard Park, concluding at Legacy Park, led by the Ada Historical Society and the Parks and Recreation Department. The hike will feature aspects of historic Ada, information about current projects, and will showcase areas highlighted in the new temporary exhibit Grass Roots: Growing Parks in Ada.

Tuesday, Aug 1  Pioneer Days summer camp
9am-12pm at the Ada History Center. We step back in time to work and play like Ada residents a century ago. Offered in partnership with Ada Parks and Recreation. Pre-registration is required at https://rec.adamichigan.org/ViewCourseActivityDetails.aspx?id=C68

Friday & Saturday, Sept 16 & 17  Fur Trade Encampment
Time TBD at the Ada History Center. It’s back and better than ever! Explore the history of the fur trade that took place in Ada 200 years ago. History comes alive as you experience the camp and the traders there. Interact with descendants of Rix Robinson who took over Ada’s trading post in 1821 and the Grand River Valley trading network that extended north to Mackinac Island.

Thursdays, July 13, Aug 10, Sept 14  Ada Historical Society Board Meetings
3:00pm at the Ada History Center. Meetings are open to the public. May is our annual membership meeting and election of officers. Join us to find out how we’re making history!
Volunteer Opportunities – Topping our Wish List

As the Ada History Center is a primarily volunteer run organization, we are looking to add to our team in a few significant ways.

- Communications Coordinator
- Volunteer Coordinator
- Grant Writer

If you would like more information, please call or email AdaHistoricalSociety@gmail.com. We'd greatly appreciate the opportunity to work with you!

* New Temporary Exhibit for 2023 *

Grass Roots: Growing Parks in Ada is in full swing. Come explore the development of over 1,000 acres of parkland and discover the people who made it a walk in the park. Open hours are Fridays & Saturdays 1-4pm, or by appointment.

On May 13th the Ada Grangers met the Cascade Sentinels in a vintage baseball game on the grassy meadow corner of Ada Park. The event featured 1880s style uniforms, Foxy Irwin gloves, lemon peel baseballs, traditional bats, cracker jacks, and root beer. Umpire Dave Goodell called a fair game and even surveyed the crowd for a few calls, as was the custom in turn-of-the-century baseball. Gregg Wildes led in singing “Take Me Out to the Ballgame” during the 7th inning stretch with over 500 spectators on their feet singing the timeless tune together.

In the end, the Ada Grangers came from behind to win in the final inning 14-12 after early game heroics from the Cascade Sentinels. A special thank you goes to our partners Wesley Deason of Ada Parks and Recreation and local history teacher Brad Anderson for making the event a reality. FHC Woodshop teacher Rob Miedema and student Taylor Greeman made the wooden bats for the game and the FHC Mat Club led by Clay Hatinger and Cartwright Stephens set up and sold the concessions.

Girls on the Run at Cross Creek Charter Academy raised money for the History Center gardens! Thirty girls participated in a community service project that focused on taking care of our Earth. Sadie, a representative of the group, and her mom Carrie presented the gift and some gardening goodies to our Master Gardener Aleisha. Be on the lookout for a new natives garden growing from the girls’ thoughtful donation.

The Tri-River Historical Museum Network will have their catered luncheon and program on Tuesday, August 15th. It will be held at the Outreach Christian Church, 7831 Jordan Lake Rd., Lake Odessa. The lunch will be catered by Swede’s in Mulliken. Our speaker will be Dr. Gary L. Hauck. The title of his presentation is “Let’s Eat! – Celebrating our History of Food.” The tickets are $20 each. Several members of the Tri River societies have tickets for sale. If you would like a ticket, please call Marian Bolhuis at 616-676-2426.

In August we will start selling ads for our 2024 Directory.

Lately Received

This cutie waddled in recently and is joining the flock. When Ada’s beloved covered bridge burned down in 1979, the community efforts to rebuild. In rubber ducks were raced to raise grateful for donation tell Ada’s
2023-2024 MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

Name _________________________________________________________ Date _________________
Address ____________________________________________________________________________
City _________________________________________________ State ________ Zip __________
Phone _______________________________ Email ___________________________________

Membership Level
____Senior (60+) - $15
____2 Seniors - $25
____Individual - $20
____Family - $30
____Friend - $50
____Settler - $100
____Business - $100

Benefactors
____Lucius Lyon - $250
____Edward Bradfield - $500
____Rix Robinson - $1000

Additional tax-deductible gift ________________

____ I have items to donate to the museum.

Mail completed form and check to: Ada Historical Society, PO Box 741, Ada, MI 49301

The Ada Historical Society preserves, shares, and celebrates the unique history of the Ada community.

www.AdaHistoryCenter.org   616.676.9346   AdaHistoricalSociety@gmail.com

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