Made in Massachusetts

Goods for Sale is a tribute to the industries that once brought renown to the Bay State BY JAMES V. HORRIGAN

NOWADAYS WE EXPECT to see actors, athletes, and other celebrities used to sell products. Things were much different a century ago, when goods got their props from doe-eyed, rosy-cheeked boys and girls.

Images of cherubic-looking youngsters were used to advertise things any kid would want, of course, like bicycles, chocolates, and lace-up shoes. They were also employed in marketing items that could benefit whole families, such as pianos, lawn mowers, and sewing machines. But those same innocents were also used to sell products like "liver pills," "nerve tonic" and "vegetable compound"—so-called medicines for adults, whose most active ingredient was alcohol, or worse.

These images, among others, can be found in Chaim Rosenberg's *Goods for Sale: Products and Advertising in the Massachusetts Industrial Age* (published by the University of Massachusetts Press). Rosenberg calls his book a "nostalgic tribute" to a particular marketing technique: Victorian trade cards, colorful three-by-five-inch lithographs handed out as souvenirs at fairs and expositions. These cards helped build national markets for products made in Massachusetts and were collected by both children and adults, who often pasted them into scrapbooks. Today they're rare and valuable, and Rosenberg reproduces more than 100 of his favorites here. (Rosenberg, not a full-time historian but a professor of psychiatry at Boston University, does not include footnotes or endnotes to flesh out the skeletal bibliography. And so we have to take his word for it when he declares, for instance, that Chase & Sanborn, founded in Boston in 1862, made "the first ground coffee in America to be distributed coast to coast.")

Goods for Sale also chronicles the rise and fall of Massachusetts industries, primarily between 1860 and 1920. During that period, many Bay State communities had national—sometimes international—reputations. Gardner was renowned for its chairs, Easton its shovels, Westfield its buggy whips, and Attleboro its jewelry. Holyoke became famous for the production of paper, Springfield for firearms, Taunton for silver, and Waltham for watches.

As these Massachusetts-made products became more widely available throughout the country, they were boosted by new forms of marketing. More than 100 lithographic companies were active in Boston during the 19th century, many producing the multicolored trade cards featured in *Goods for Sale*. With soon-to-be famous artists like Winslow Homer and Childe Hassam among the illustrators, it's no surprise that some, in Rosenberg's estimation, became "elaborate minor works of art."

Millions of sewing machines came from the town of Orange.

They also became idealized views of industry and its place in society. The mills and factories depicted on trade cards aren't smoke-belching sweatshops. One of the cards reproduced in the book shows an enormous, immaculate mill on the banks of the Merrimack River. "This is where I hope to work sometime," an optimistic person with the initials G.B.L. apparently scribbled across the front of it.

Rosenberg also shows us an 1897 calendar issued by the Malden–based Boston Rubber Shoe Co. that uses charming lithographs of the Massachusetts State House and Trinity Church to help convince people of the quality and durability of their footwear. Although familiar to Bostonians, it seems doubtful such icons would mean anything to national audiences today.

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RALPH WALDO EMERSON supposedly said that if a man could make a better mousetrap, the world would beat a path to his door. When Elias Howe Jr. was 24, the Spencer native heard similar words. "Invent a sewing machine," someone at the Boston machine shop where he worked told him, "and it will ensure you an independent fortune."

With a wife and three kids to support on a $9 weekly salary, "poverty and concern for the future of his family encouraged him" to invent just such a machine, writes Rosenberg. "After a number of false starts, Howe hit upon the idea of using a threaded needle with an eye near the point, interacting with a shuttle carrying a second thread, moving back and forth."

In 1845 he assembled a few prototypes, found a model that worked, and applied for a patent, which he received the following year. Today people associate Isaac Singer with the sewing machine, but Elias Howe's invention gave birth to the industry. According to Rosenberg, between 1850 and 1900 there were 250 sewing machine companies in the United States; 45 got their start in Massachusetts.

In no community was a local sewing machine company as prominent or dominant as in the Franklin County town of Orange. In 1862, Thomas White, 26, moved his sewing machine factory there (from its smaller quarters in nearby East Templeton) to be closer to a railroad line. Steam power had eclipsed water power, and factory owners, no longer dependent upon swift moving rivers to run machinery, considered proximity to rail a major advantage.

By 1866, White "decided that the country was moving to the booming West," writes Rosenberg, so he moved his company to Cleveland, which had even better rail service. In less than a decade, a tiny Massachusetts town became both the beneficiary and victim of the fast-expanding railroad system.

Rather than pack up their families and move west with him, White's employees formed the New Home Sewing Machine Co., and it became the most successful Bay State firm in the industry, with 750 employees and an assembly line turning out 500 machines daily. According to Rosenberg, between 1877 and 1930, more than 7 million sewing machines were assembled in Orange.

Two of the most interesting trade cards reproduced in *Goods for Sale* were issued by the company. One shows a young man, with two dogs nipping at his feet, chasing after a horse-drawn wagon filled with sewing machines, in a manner reminiscent of a kid chasing after an ice cream truck. But instead of seeking a cool, refreshing treat, he's shouting, "Hello! Stop I want a New Home Machine."

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Oil stoves from Florence, Mass., supposedly brought joy to children and adults alike.

The other card, which Rosenberg describes as "delightful," was given out by the company at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. It depicts a precocious young girl with a sewing basket at her feet, wearing granny glasses as she peruses a book titled *The Song of the Shirt*. It also lists cities where the New Home machine could be purchased, including Boston, New York, Chicago, Atlanta, Dallas, and San Francisco. That list is topped not by a metropolis, but by the justifiably proud "Orange, Mass."

For a half-century, New Home loomed large in every aspect of small-town life, providing schools, housing for workers, a company store, a post office, and a community center. When New Home was sold to an Illinois company in 1930, production moved with it and brought an end to what had been one of the Bay State's most vibrant industries, but echoes of the past still reverberate in Orange. Thomas White has a road named after him, as does New Home founder A.J. Clark. The town library is named after Clark's partner, John W. Wheeler. A dam on the Millers River at the site of his factory is still known as the New Home dam, and across town is a package store called New Home Liquors.

PATENT MEDICINE IS another quondam Massachusetts industry, but it wasn't done in by factories chasing their customers out west.

Rosenberg describes the industry's beginnings in England, where medicinal chemists "sought to protect their products by means of a royal patent." By the time the term gained currency in 19th-century America, "patent medicine" covered "an infinite number of concoctions claiming a wide array of benefits." There were no laws to prevent apothecaries from making claims without evidence, and many patent medicines got their strength from alcohol, opiates, or even cocaine—ingredients which, Rosenberg writes, accounted "for much of their appeal."

By mid-century, 1,500 different patent medicines were for sale in America, with some of the largest companies here in Massachusetts. One of the most successful was in Lynn, where Lydia Pinkham, a mother of four in her mid 50s impoverished by an invalid husband, decided to sell a home medicine she had long been handing out free to family and friends. Because vegetables were known to promote health, she called the mixture "vegetable compound," though it was not filled with tomatoes or carrots but rather more obscure ingredients such as unicorn root and fenugreek seed. "Despite her lifelong temperance views," Rosenberg writes, alcohol was another significant component of Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound.

Merchants were given bottles on consignment, and the product began to sell in small quantities, but it wasn't until a *Boston Herald* ad in 1876 brought an unexpectedly strong response that Pinkham hired an advertising company. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound was then claimed to cure a wide array of ailments, including faintness, flatulency, and "weakness of the stomach." According to the back of one trade card, the concoction could also "dissolve and expel" uterine tumors, while curing "Bloating, Headaches, Nervous Prostration, General Debility, Sleeplessness, Depression and Indigestion."

Ads became 'elaborate minor works of art.'

Sales were helped when Pinkham put her curly-haired, kewpie-doll-mouthed granddaughter on a trade card, but they really took off when the "reassuring portrait" of Lydia herself was used to market the product. "Over the years," Rosenberg writes, "Lydia's company spent $35 million on advertising and shipping." Pinkham became "the country's first great female entrepreneur" and "one of the best-known

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women in the United States."

People felt they knew Lydia Pinkham and wrote her for advice. Her death in 1883 was not widely publicized (she was a national icon before there was national media), and the company simply responded to new queries with "form letters advocating continued use of the Vegetable Compound." The upshot, writes Rosenberg, was that for a number of years after her death the company continued to gross more than $1 million annually.

In 1905, however, "the clouds of decline" moved over the company when the *Ladies' Home Journal* published an exposé on the patent medicine industry. Among other things, the magazine revealed that Pinkham had been dead for 22 years and the company had "duped" its most faithful customers into believing otherwise. Then came the Food and Drug Act of 1906, which required makers of patent medicine to list alcohol content on the label. Not surprisingly, Pinkham's customers were shocked to learn that her vegetable compound "contained a heavy dose of it."

When the American Medical Association joined the fight against patent medicines, the death knell was struck. "None of the nineteenth-century Massachusetts patent medicine companies made the transition from folk remedies into the science-based pharmaceutical industry of modern times," Rosenberg notes.

Lydia Pinkham's patent medicine was born in Lynn.

THE PATENT MEDICINE bust was but a precursor to the end of nearly all the Massachusetts industries commemorated in *Goods for Sale*. When the Great Depression hit, owners of the red brick mills and factories that dominated the landscape and economy of so many Massachusetts communities either closed shop or fled south to escape, as Rosenberg writes, "labor strife, changing fashions [and] technological advances."

They included the makers of footwear, automobiles, pianos, and many other industries that advertised their goods for sale on trade cards. The gilded age of Massachusetts industry was over, and the state would have to wait for a completely new set of products to rejuvenate its economy. CW

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