

A Lancaster City Boy of the Gay Nineties

Part 2*

by Abner McMichael Eyde
with Miriam Eyde Bixler

A boy really worked for his spending money in my day, none of this allowance business. You got a few pennies for Sunday School and church and mostly that was it, unless your older brothers and sisters slipped you a little something. If you wanted a nickel you ran errands or hung around the markets and carried baskets home for the women. In a pinch you could always go to the pretzel factory and get a basket of soft pretzels to peddle. I told you how I helped the Eshleman Feed Company drivers load and unload for no money, just a treat, and how I sold pretzels for circus money.

Well, the first real job I had was when I went to Hannah Finger's grammar school on W. Chestnut Street. There was a widow, name of Carrie Smollen, who carried on her husband John's tailor and dying shop at 146 N. Duke Street where Wissler's Flower Shop is now. (Note: This was demolished to make way for a parking garage in 1969). I had to get to the shop early in the morning before school to stir up the fire in the pot-bellied stove and sweep the pavement. Then I'd fly like a bat "out of you know what" down Chestnut Street to get to school on time. Hannah Finger stood for no nonsense like being late just because you had a job. At noon I ran back to keep store while Mrs. Smollen ate her dinner. After school I ran errands and made deliveries.

Right next to Mrs. Smollen's shop there was a shoemaker, David Young. Sometimes he would give me a nickel to sweep his pavement.

Then Dad got me a job as after-school errand boy at the Boston Store on N. Queen Street (Leinbach's). I remember delivering beautiful clothes on approval to an exclusive brothel that accepted only the best of clientele, situated on N. Prince Street near Walnut. Tips for delivering there were never less than a dime.

*Part I may be found in Vol. 69 No. 3 of the 1965 Journal, pages 163 through 167.

I was a freshman in High School when our doctor told my parents I'd better stop school and spend a great deal of my time hanging around horse stables for a while. I needed to strengthen my lungs by breathing the beneficial fumes. Your grandfather talked to Ike Miller, who owned a delivery stable on Marion Street between Chestnut and Charlotte, and he said it was all right if I hung around there just as long as I kept out of mischief.

I learned plenty there—mother would have had a fit if she had known. At the end of their working day the drivers of the "tea and coffee" wagons came in from their regular routes. I picked up quite a bit of change doing the thing I liked best—currying and bedding down their horses. One day Fred F. Groff, the undertaker from W. Orange Street, who used the stable, asked if I'd drive out in the country and hold his skittish horse while he made a call. I sure jumped at the chance to earn the money. From then on Freddy could count on me and you know what happened—later I ended up working for him regularly.

The fellows at the stables put up with me good-naturedly. I was a long-legged, redhaired kid who they could tease and sometimes use to their advantage. Each night before the drivers left for home they'd play a little poker. I never was a card player to this day, but sometimes I'd work out a set of signals and hire myself to a driver. I'd sit behind a stiff opponent and, even though the others watched me like a hawk, I'd usually get away with using those signals. This earned big money for me, a quarter at least.

It was about this time that I was called to testify in court. In those days if you walked down the alley alongside of what was Doc Alleman's house on W. Chestnut Street you came to the place on Marion Street where two girls ran a house of ill repute. They were good-natured and jolly and full of fun. One was small and dark and the other was big-boned and blonde. They would call to me over at the stable when they wanted me to run an errand. Often they invited the men from the livery stables over to the house to help drink up the beer left from the party the night before. I trailed along too, though they never gave me anything to drink. Your Uncle John, who was four years older than me, cornered me one day and said, "Abner, you stay away from that — house." Now, I wonder how our John knew about it!

The ward police captain was ordered to clean up his ward one day. So as a cop he brought those girls from that same house into court. Now I was only fourteen years old, but didn't they call me for a character witness! The man next door to the girls testified that he never saw anything out of the way. Well, he admitted, the beer delivery man went in but then beer was delivered to his own house too. The stable owner's son testified he didn't know of anything wrong either and I, of course, said I didn't. How did it come out? Well, the county paid the costs. Couldn't get anything on them cause nobody would say anything against them. Fine girls!

Now get this straight! You know I never was a card player or a drinker. And do you know who kept me from drinking? Billy Wenninger who owned a saloon on N. Queen Street, that's who. I could hardly wait until I was sixteen so I could join the Junior Mechanics (Junior Order of United American Mechanics). The lodge met over Reilly Bros. and Raub's hardware store. And after the meetings a bunch of the boys would go a few doors away to Billy's for something to eat. He sold the best cheese sandwiches that I ever ate in my born days. On white bread. We didn't know about this other bread stuff.

Now I knew Billy Wenninger pretty well for when I was a kid I'd lived on W. Lemon Street next door to his nephew George Weitzel. I think Billy liked me but he didn't treat me any different than the rest of the fellows. He'd be gentle and kind but very firm about refusing us a beer when we would try him out. He'd say, "You don't have a birth certificate with you and you don't look twenty-one to me so I guess I can't give it to you". So I never yet had that first drink.

(Note: In a 1933 newspaper interview George Wenninger, who tended bar for his father, stated Billy's policy. He stressed that most of the saloon owners ran establishments as respectable as most soda fountains. His father, in business for twenty-seven years, never once had a "remonstrance circulated against him". Moreover, their saloon was one of the few places where treating was discouraged for "many adjourned meetings of local fraternal organizations were held there" and Billy felt that "not only did treating mean men would drink more beer than they really wanted but it kept other customers away because they could not afford it".)

After a while my folks decided I was strong enough to get a regular job and I did—at Baily's Carriage Works in the four hundred block of N. Queen Street. They made all kinds of carriages and later had factories in York and connections in Philadelphia. The N. Queen Street place burned down years afterwards and the State bought the ground and built an armory.

Painting carriages all day long, outdoors, on the factory back lot, wasn't for me. The job and the bosses got under my skin. There wasn't a fellow working with me that didn't feel the same so we worked out a dodge. There was a stream running through the lot. We'd start out the day with a full paint can, use about half the can, dump the rest in the stream and loaf a while. Did the same when they brought us more paint. That was a monotonous job!

Your Uncle Will, who was two years older than me got the railroad job he was waiting for, and I left Bailey's and took over his lamplighter's route. Freddy Groff began using me more and more, too, on his undertaking jobs and it worked in pretty good. I'd put my application in for a railroad job, too, of course. Dad and my three brothers worked for the Pennsy and it was taken for granted I would.

I was around twenty, I guess, when the Foltz's at the corner of Charlotte and W. Walnut asked me to take care of their furnace. Not many had central heating then. Well, I did up to the time I was married, and their dog, Sparkle, almost became my dog. Followed me everywhere. He practically lived with us at 543 W. Walnut and came along when I got married. Was he ever jealous of you!

About Will's and my lamplighting route! A Mr. Trimble had a contract with Lancaster City and he hired the fellows and gave them routes just like newspaper boys have now. We got fifty cents a piece per month and one boy could handle up to about one hundred lamps. I remember that a family on the north side of W. Orange Street between Charlotte and Mary Streets complained that the light was too bright for sitting on their porch in the summer. I thought about it and came up with a kind of tin shade that I could attach in front of the light on their side. I decided to try asking fifty cents for it, and by gum, that's what I got. Not only that, the word got around and I got quite a few more orders.

(Note: Mrs. John W. Eckenrode, Jr., the former Kathryn Griffiths, lived at 525 W. Chestnut Street. She well remembers Abner Eyde and his lamplighting chores. Sometimes his friend, Ed Downs, who lived on E. James Street between Duke and Lime Streets would tag along. I suppose that at times young teen-age girls could be quite interested in watching that the lamps were lighted properly).

When I was nineteen the call came from the railroad and Fred Groff, who was using me regular part-time, made me a proposition. He thought that if he upped my pay and I kept the lamplighting that I could make out O.K. And I'd have a good future with him. I talked it over with my parents and my girl, (I was sparking your mother by that time), and decided to forget the Pennsy and stick with Freddy. You know, an undertaker was well thought of in the town at that time. I'd started wearing a high hat and frock coat and meeting people and I liked it. Besides, I was pretty good at working in the carpenter shop which was Freddy's bread and butter business in those first years,

About the time you were born there were days that my regular job with Groff's wouldn't let me light lamps. We were getting a good little business there and sometimes it kept us jumping. Your mother's brother, Jim Kautz, helped me out with the lamps. Each time he'd start at one end of the route and if he didn't meet me along the way coming from the other end, he'd finish for he knew I was out on a call.

In a year or so, about 1907, I guess, Jim decided to be an apprentice mechanic. Freddy Groff upped my wages again and I gave up the lamp route. From then on we built that business up together and I worked for him and later on for Bob (Robert F. Groff, Sr.) until I was past seventy-four years old, never missing one week's pay check.

That's all I remember about the different jobs I had, but someday I'll tell you some stories that are dillies about the undertaking business, if you want.

Notes on Lamplighting, Et Cetera

by Miriam E. Bixler

Interviews

Mother's brother, James Kautz, remembers that there were a few remaining oil lamps in Lancaster's back alleys when he stopped lighting gas lamps about 1907. These, of course, were beyond the reach of gas lines. Uncle James can still picture an old fellow called "Stumpy" carrying his ladder under his stump arm. He'd use the good left hand to light the oil lamp with a torch that burned constantly as he went along his route. Always faithful, he never missed a day.

Uncle James confirms, "I lit lamps every night, moonlight or not. How well I know! Around 1910 an automatic, electric method of lighting gas lamps was introduced. However, I know that there were still some gas routes in 1917."

The local United Gas Improvement Company office states that after lamplighters were not employed clock timers were attached to each post. These were wound exactly like a clock once each week. The switch had a halfway pull and by means of an arbor bar and chain, was rocked back and forth. Certain merchants controlled the lights of lamps on sidewalks in front of their stores. A switch would turn the flame very low during daylight and an opposite turn would light the lamp fully. An example of this sort of lamp in fine condition is in front of the home of Joseph McMichael, 25 N. Main St., Manheim. There is an old gas lamp, electrified of course, standing in the churchyard of the First Reformed Church (United Church of Christ) on N. Christian Street, Lancaster city.

Uncle James Kautz said, "Each gas lamp had a mantle which had to be replaced when worn. When I first lit lamps for your father (Abner Eyde) we used a sawed off broom stick with a notch on one end to hold a kitchen match. We'd tap open a small plate on the bottom of the cast iron lamppost, strike the match with an upward