

9-1-99

Then and Now

During a weekend of visiting with our grandchildren in Salem, several times I could not help comparing some of the products we use daily today with those of my childhood. Times have surely changed, especially in material things as well as in ways of doing things. Personally, I enjoy the changes in new or redesigned products. Most of the changes in how we do things I like, too.

Take everyday products, for instance. I recognized a number of products that are no longer on the market, the difference in the ways of advertising, and, of course a great number of new products. For example, remember Ipana Toothpaste, with its radio, newspaper and magazine warnings about "pink toothbrush"? The advice was somewhat similar to what we hear today - "see your dentist twice a year" - with the promise that you could avoid the threat of "pink toothbrush," while now we hear about avoiding plaque. Ipana has been supplanted by Crest and a bewildering number of new products as well as additional advice about flossing.

The first deodorant I remember is "Odorono," a sticky and sometimes stinging liquid that seemed to take forever to dry, with the threat of ruining clothes if one didn't let it dry. I don't recall that the product was also an antiperspirant, a conspicuous improvement today as well as the promise of the dryness of the product. Today there are countless improvements over the original deodorant, and a proliferating number of new products, all considerably improved over the original Odorono.

As I watched the children in Salem press a drinking glass into a square cubbyhole in the front of their new refrigerator and thereby fill the glass with ice and water for a refreshing drink, I remembered my childhood's block of ice in the wooden ice box on the back porch, with the attendant care required to empty the drip pan under the box. Chipping ice from the block of ice for a cold drink of water was a considerable job and not often attempted by a child.

The plastic gallon jug of milk, with different indications of fat content (from zero to whole), bought at the super-market contrasts with the glass quarts of whole milk that were delivered to the front porch or, sometimes, to the back porch ice box. The homogenized milk content of today keeps us from having to shake the bottle, but a quart size was much easier for children to manage. The old quart bottle also provided Mother the occasional opportunity to swipe a small amount of top cream for a bonus taste treat for a fruit cobbler. We've also lost the convenience of home-delivered milk.

The pound of butter delivered by the milkman with the milk is an almost fading memory of that convenience. I can't help remembering that the home delivered butter was replaced by an unattractive block of white oleomargarine from the grocery store. The yellow bead of coloring which had to be messily and laboriously hand-mixed with the white mass so that it might fool our taste buds into thinking we were tasting butter was the result of lobbying by the dairy industry legislate that margarine could not be sold yellow on the

argument that people would be cheated by thinking it was real butter. They did this to discourage the success of the budding margarine industry. It was replaced many years later by ready-colored margarine in convenient tubs or sticks resembling butter. And then we heard that real butter was bad for cholesterol. Isn't it interesting that, now, some nutritionists have removed some of the stigma against butter?

Today there are electronics products for opening and closing garage doors. Back then, when we visited our uncle in the country, someone had to get out of the car to open the gate so that the car could pass through and then stay behind to close the gate to keep the livestock in. At home, someone had to open the garage doors to house the car for the night and then re-open those doors in the morning, lingering to close them again before getting in the car. A child usually furnished the "man" power. Today a motor triggered by an electronic radio device opens the garage doors as the car approaches the closed garage. The same device, or one like it, shuts the doors when the car enters the garage, and the children stay in their seats. We don't have such a gadget, but then we don't have a garage, either. I still get a kick from watching the silent operation of the garage doors without help from a child getting out of the car. I wonder if there are such gadgets for country gates. Surely, there must be.

And how about central air conditioning to cool our summer-heated houses? There's no doubt that the subtle cooling of today is greatly superior to the limited cooling of electric fans at home or the ubiquitous funeral home hand fans of yesteryear. There were beautifully decorated accordion pleated hand fans, but the effort to cool my face with them took as much heat-producing effort as the flat fans or the church bulletin. I wouldn't expect anyone today to want to return to the self-generated cooling we formerly used.

On the whole I like the many modern gadgets and ways of living now, but would argue that some aspects of life then were better than those of today.