

THE PEDDLER

By Elias F. Messner, Jackson, Michigan

I enjoyed Sally Ohman's articles, as she is quite an author. The one she wrote in the February issue about the peddler reminded me of my childhood in Redridge. We had a peddler that came into Redridge on the Copper Range Railroad train early in the morning. He was one of the Kirkish Brothers from that store in Houghton at the bottom of the hill coming in from Atlantic. He had a huge pack of clothing, etc. on his back. It was so huge that "two of me's" or more could fit in it. Some straps fastened to the pack went over his shoulders and they were fastened to a suit case sort of thing that he carried in front. In that he carried all sorts of notions, buttons of all kinds, thread, pins, and everything one could imagine.

That suit case always intrigued me when he came to our house and emptied everything out on the floor. I would be right there digging through everything. He went house to house in Redridge staying all day and returned to Houghton on the train in the evening.

There was a road between Brinkman's house and the Mehrings that led to the houses on the back streets, and usually around noon time he would be in that location and sit on the embankment along side of my Grandparent's house "The Mehrings" and under a willow tree to rest.

If I were at my Grandparents, I would join him and he would tell me stories about his life when he was a little boy. Sometimes my Grandma, known as Mammie to all of her Grandchildren as she never wanted to be called Grandma, would bring us a jam sandwich made from home made bread. Most everyone had home made bread as the store never sold bread in those days that I remembered. Also my Grandmother was a very poor bread slicer and one end would be real thick and the other end real thin and the jam would run out on our chins. The peddler would then pull out a big red bandana hankerchief and wipe both of our faces. Before he put his pack back on to continue his door to door selling, he would always visit the Brinkman's outhouse.

I was real fond of that peddler, so fond infact, that I wanted to be a peddler myself when I grew up, so my Uncle Charles Mehring decided he would make me a pack. He made me one out of an old sugar sack and stuffed it with old rags and clothing and in front an old satchel stuffed with kitchen utensils and hooked them together with a pair of Grandpa's old suspenders. When I tried to put that contraption on my back, I fell over and banged my head on the kitchen range. It hurt real bad, but I didn't cry, instead I let out a slew of swear words that were unbelievable and no one knew where I had learned those words. My Father never swore, my Grandfather never swore, and I don't believe Mr. Kirkish the peddler ever swore; so its a puzzle to this day. I was lucky my mouth wasn't washed out with soap and that was the end of my wanting to be a peddler.

CHIMNEY FIRES

by Elias F. Messner, Jackson, Michigan

Back in the old days, long ago in Redridge and before we had electric stoves and forced air gas and oil furnaces, we burned wood from trees that we cut down in the forest, and then cut to smaller pieces to fit into our stoves at home.

Some of the wood was hard wood and still a little green at the time of burning and some was hemlock, and these woods caused a build-up of creosote ash in the chimney.

A normal slow fire was alright and just caused a little more creosote ash to build up in the chimney; but sometimes Mom or Dad would put some extra dry wood in the stove and with the dampers wide open would cause a roaring fire to start in the stove and one would see sparks flying outside in the air and falling past the window. This would worry the residents of Redridge as the roofs of our houses were of dry cedar shingles and if a spark of any good size lodged in a crevice, it was possible that your whole house could burn down.

Often times while we were eating supper by the kitchen window we would look out and see sparks coming from Morin's chimney which was right next door to us. It would be dark so it looked like a fire-works show on the Fourth of July. Frank Morin told me a few years ago that he used to borrow our wheelbarrow and go and gather hemlock bark so that his Mom could build a roaring fire to cook their supper.

Our kitchen stove was several feet out from the chimney, allowing space behind the stove where Mom put a rack to dry clothes in the winter when she brought them in from outside, frozen so stiff they could stand up by themselves. It was the same with the stove in the dining room. I used to store my root beer in that space whenever I made a batch, as it had to be cured in a warm place for several days.

We had several feet of stove pipe from the stove to the chimney entrance and they had dampers in them; so when we saw the sparks coming down past the window and flying around through the air, those dampers were quickly turned off and so were the bottom dampers that allowed air to reach the chamber where the fire was located. That caused the stove to belch smoke into the room, but it slowed the raging fire down, and we felt safe again. I guess that cleared out the chimney of creosote ash for a while.

Although there were many chimney fires in Redridge during my tenure there, I only know of one house that caught fire and burned down to the ground, and that was the Simonsons.

Now most of us have electricity and natural gas or oil to heat our houses and for our cooking. Our chimneys are as clean as a whistle and we don't worry about chimney fires anymore; but I wouldn't be surprised if there are some houses in the little towns and villages along the Lake Superior Shore where people go into the forest to gather wood to burn in their stoves and still have to contend with chimney fires.