Shortage of Rubber Halts Bayou’s Rolling Store

One of Shops on Wheels Is War Casualty

By Alex Melancon
Larose, La., March 7—No successor to M’sieu Tin Pan has yet made an appearance hereabouts, but such an event is not impossible. And housewives who, in recent weeks, have been passing a Larose store noted a large, blocked-up truck near it, would feel just a bit more comfortable if they could be assured of the return of the old-time marchand de charrette.

The huge truck was one of the first of the “rolling stores” to be taken off the bayou road as a result of the rubber situation. The Lafourche housewives, threatened with deprivation of one of their favorite institutions, have had the fact of total war brought one step closer to home.

To oldtimers it seems only yesterday that M’sieu Tin Pan last drove his covered wagon up the road from his down-bayou store, clucking after the horse that leisurely covered the miles of his route. Forward of his wagon dangled the clusters of bright tinware that led the bayou people to give him his fond nickname.

His was the last of the horse-drawn stores-on-wheels so familiar to the Bayou Lafourche, and unlike many of those that had preceded him, he depended on no clanging bell to attract his feminine customers. Each morning when he was due to make his rounds, housewives listened for the accordion music that was his approaching signal and went through the front gate to meet him.

Sold Groceries, Pans
A cheerful, lighthearted seller of groceries, he sat on his high seat and squeezed the instrument on his knees as he went from house to house. Between rollicking tunes, he sold the staple foods that went into dozens of pots for the making of noonday dinners, and extolled the merits of his tin cups and pans.

That was five or six years ago, and already the highways on both sides of the bayou were crowded with large trucks that started out each day from the Lafourche stores. The small wagons such as the one driven by M’sieu Tin Pan had been able to carry little more goods than what the housewives ordered from the parents.

store. But as the years passed, the machines increased in size until the advent of the present-day rolling stores that are often huge converted buses.

No need for a housewife to order on Tuesday the goods that she must have delivered to her for use on Thursday. Compact shelves are crowded with every article of food she is likely to want, as well as many things she uses in her home. The newest of the rolling stores have their glass sides revealing an array of goods rivalling a city shop window display.

Early each morning, when the groceries along the bayou are opened for business, the trucks stand in front as the driver loads his supply. The evening before he spent hours packing into convenient size bags the beans, rice, sugar, coffee that his customers will purchase next day. Everything from a spool of thread to a tank of kerosene is ready when the truck drives off, sometimes from a store hardly larger than the machine itself. The explanation of why stores can be operated in more remote sections of the parish is that a business that visits its customers daily can have headquarters practically anywhere.

Carried News
M’sieu Tin Pan, so affectionately remembered by his onetime customers, could always be depended upon to carry a bit of news or gossip to some friend some miles away. If Tante Mathilde had just finished her boucherie, he would willingly carry a roast of the fresh pork to her niece in the next village. And if Sarina needed her new gown that the couturiere was sewing for her to wear at Louis’s wedding, he’d take pleasure in bringing the carefully wrapped parcel on Saturday morning.

And the drivers of the present-day rolling stores carry on the same tradition of obligingly running errands for all their customers. If Mrs. Cheramie must be told that her daughter is planning on a Sunday visit, no need to seek further for a messenger. Lou or Gus or Frank will be happy to honk the horn a bit more imperatively before the Cheramie house.

On the more remote farms, even though a weekly visit to the stores in the nearest town takes care of most of the family needs, there are always a few trifles that are overlooked. Was the salt forgotten? No need for the housewife to worry at the prospect of having to serve an unpalatable meal. Half a dozen of the stores-on-wheels will be along and stop long enough to remedy the lack. The purchase can be made with the surplus eggs.