

RETAIL BUSINESS MEN AND THEIR ANNUAL CONVENTIONS

Important Associations That Meet in Omaha From Year to Year and the Effect and Benefit to Trade in General That Comes From Their Deliberations

ONE THOUSAND Nebraska business men visit Omaha each month to attend conventions, association meetings, grand lodges and trade expositions. These are the most progressive men in their line; those who take their work seriously and mean to do a little or much work to help the other fellow.

Some of them come in response to calls which look and sound like the blast of the Shriners' horn or the muezzin's cry of "Allah, Allah;" some of them are Shriners, Elks, Masons or members of some secret or fraternal order, but the one interest they show a disposition to regard as above all others is the welfare, growth and effectiveness of their trade organization. These organizations compose the international congress of talkers—a great grand jury always sitting, where public wrongs are first declared, public errors first corrected and public opinion shaped day by day a little nearer the right.

The history of the Nebraska trade organizations is one long conversation, checkered by disputes. No new law goes on the statute books of the state affecting commerce or governing trade but what it is first prepared by the conventions, a large number of which meet in Omaha. Thus it is said that while Lincoln is the capital and the legislature meets there, the laws are made at conventions and association meetings; the pure food laws by the representative manufacturers and sellers of foods; railroad laws by associations composed of big shippers of coal, lumber and merchandise, and others by the associations representing the line affected. The ideas are turned over, this and that struck out or inserted, then, without sound of trumpet, the organizations move on Lincoln, aligning their guns on certain legislative ramparts and coming away with new notches on their gunstocks. Many a good law has resulted from the report of a resolutions committee in some convention held at one of the big hotels or in one of the numerous halls of Omaha; many an evil law lies under the turf where the daisies grew, because some committee of bright and earnest business men reported to a convention unfavorably and some one slipped down to Lincoln with the chloroform jug.

Co-operation among dealers is no mere idle talk among the retailers of Nebraska who have organized these associations. It is a feature of the business world as it is represented within the boundaries of the state. When one of these organizations, such as the lumbermen, hardware dealers, butter makers, jewelers, druggists or hotel keepers decides on a policy it means definite plans for the future conduct of the particular line of business and some of the associations go so far as to lay down a code of trade ethics which must be followed by the members or they will be asked kindly, but firmly, for a resignation.

General prosperity in the state, competition of outside concerns usually doing business by mail, unscrupulous dealers and to better deal with transportation companies, are a few of the reasons for the existence of a state organization in almost every line of trade. Perhaps the first is the foremost. The dealers are usually prosperous and feel they want to come together with other men in the same line, where they can have a big clearing house of ideas and all take home a share of the big heap of knowledge which will be generously passed to all those who listen. Some of the organizers contend, however, that necessity drove them to organization, that they had organized brains against the individual retail merchant and they had to organize to combat competitors and the men higher up who make and job the merchandise the retailer sells.

The Nebraska Retail Hardware Dealers' association met in Omaha for four days of last week. It is a very serious organization. One of the most earnest which meets in the city, and one of the only ones which has executive sessions where the public is not admitted to learn the troubles and secrets of trade. The association is composed of 500 of the busiest and most successful retail dealers in hardware in the country, and officered by men who have made a success of their own business and been chosen to head an organization which is making definite plans—almost rules—for those to follow who are not so successful. The hardware dealers, like the lumber dealers of the state and other trade organizations, have an insurance company which is mutual, and this year they wear buttons which say 33 1/2. This means the insurance company is in such good shape that it will be to refund this year 33 1/2 per cent of the amount paid in premiums.

Perhaps no line of business in the country has a more genuine grievance against the mail order houses than the hardware dealers. This trouble was the nightmare of dealers until the state organization was perfected and the dealers got together and reasoned among themselves, that if commerce had made a condition which threatened to put them out of business, certainly somewhere commerce had a way of letting them escape. Hundreds of dealers have met catalogue house competition successfully and others are getting wise. Clear back of the troubles of the hardware dealers are those of the manufacturers. For years the retailers have seen carloads of catalogues from mail order houses placed in the hands of their customers, giving the price on everything they had in stock. And the price quoted is usually about what the retailer must pay a wholesaler for the article. This is a hard thing for a customer to understand. But it is all in the buying power of the mail order house. Some of the big "cat" houses are able to buy almost the entire output of a small factory. Suppose it is some patent can-opener. The factory is making 10,000 per month and selling them to the jobbers for 6 cents each in small

Officers of the Nebraska Retail Hardware Dealers' Association

			
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quantities. The jobber sells them for 7 cents to the retailer and the retailer gets 10 cents. The mail order house agrees to buy the output of the factory for one year, 120,000 can-openers, at 5 cents each or even at 4 1/2 cents each and pay the freight. The can-opener is listed in the big catalogue at 6 cents and the country merchant who wants 10 cents because he paid 7 cents and the freight on the article, is thought to be a gentlemanly robber.

Not to the small things like can-openers is this tremendous buying power of the catalogue houses confined, but to paint, washing machines, sewing machines, bicycles, phonographs, sanitary couches, iron beds and ranges. Some manufacturers have discontinued selling to the houses altogether; others cannot get their goods handled by first class jobbers at any price as long as they continue to sell to the catalogue houses not called the pirates of trade, while still other jobbing houses have come to the rescue of the retailer and studied the lines offered by the catalogue houses, duplicating them in almost every instance and enabling the retailer to sell the identical article advertised in the catalogue at less than the mail order house offers it and also saving the freight.

This is the experience of an enterprising dealer from Allen, who has assisted in working out the problem. It reads like a romance to the other dealers in the state because it is such a come back at the "cat" houses:

For months the dealer noticed sewing machines coming to Allen to farmers and others. He made a little examination and found several machines had been shipped in for \$14.75 each and the freight was \$1.90 to \$2.40, making an average of about \$17 for the machine when the customer loaded it in his wagon. The firm opened correspondence with his jobber and the wholesaler was wide-awake and waiting for the order. After a little waiting the wholesaler found where he could buy the machines at a price which enabled him to sell them to the retailers at Allen for \$12.50, the retailer paying the freight. Big bills were printed, showing a cut of the machine, identically the same sewing machine as listed in the catalogues for \$14.75, and the retailer offered the machines in lots of one or a dozen for \$14.25, a clear saving of from \$2.40 to \$3 on the machine. In a short time the dealer had sold enough of the machines to make all the wedding clothes and then all the baby clothes around Allen, Neb., for the next ten or fifteen years.

This idea looked good and the Allen firm was not stingy with it. The wholesalers also used it and during the year dealers have tried it with paint, phonographs, shears, baby carriages, and one hardware dealer who has a general store tried it with shirts and gave each man and boy in his community an opportunity to buy the same black sateen shirt at his store for 98 cents which the catalogue house wanted \$1.18 for.

Thus the organization has evolved a scheme for getting the goods which the mail order house advertises and selling them for a little less, or at least for the same and saving the freight to the customer. Large printing houses have been secured by some wholesalers, to prepare to get out big bills with pictures "just like the catalogues have," and these are generously distributed by the merchants to their customers on rural routes whenever there is a feeling that too much money is leaving the community.

No trade organization that meets in Omaha gives such an elaborate exposition simply that members may see all the latest articles in the hardware line. The Auditorium was occupied this year and the exhibits consisted of everything from a "fish hook to a motor boat,"

or better, "from lightning rods to furnaces." The exposition serves a good many purposes, according to the hardware dealers. The arrangement of exhibits gives an idea of window trimming and store decoration, while the experienced demonstrators who travel with the exhibits are able to point out the difference between real hardware and some of the "cheap stuff" made to sell at racket stores and by mail order houses.

"Coming to Omaha and looking over the hardware exposition is equal to a trip through twenty factories," said a hardware dealer after visiting the Auditorium. "To see what we found exhibited there would require a trip from Buffalo to St. Louis, back to Chicago and Minneapolis, with a stopover in Des Moines and Omaha; then a trip out to Denver. As it is all the manufacturers start out each year with a big exhibit and go to all the state dealers' associations. They put on exhibits which equal those in the salesrooms of their factories or warehouses."

This week the jewelers are coming to town and there will be on exhibit "gold, gold, bright and yellow, hard and cold."

The Nebraska Retail Jewelers' association is a "3-year-old yearling," but a strong and healthy organization, having more than 100 members and ambition to have 500 by the end of the present year.

As the national association meets in Omaha during August, and all Nebraska will assist Omaha entertain the jewelers from all parts of the United States, the incentive for becoming a member of the association never was stronger than this year. Those who were responsible for the organization feel the time has come when the association must grow. "We'll decide the goodness and cussedness of it this time," says the announcement of the Omaha meeting. "The association has no money to spend sending you extra notices, so keep this one close to your heart of 'purse and plans' and come on the earliest train."

While the association undoubtedly trains its members to guide one, three of a kind or a pair of diamonds to their ultimate destination, the real object of the organization is more serious. Its object is to support the work of the National Retail Jewelers' association in the bettering of trade conditions, regulation and maintenance of prices and per cent of retail profit and the settlement of grievances. The jewelers claim the organization has already demonstrated that there is no trade abuse which cannot be righted if half the retail jewelers are enrolled in the association work. Already a better feeling exists among the retailers and they don't even treat each other like competitors, but co-operate to put down the seller of gold-looking watches and trash which is handled by illegitimate dealers and mail order houses. The national association, with the assistance of such organizations as that of Nebraska, has stopped the selling of solid gold anything not ten karat or better. Until the jewelers' associations took the matter up some dealers sold for solid gold rings and watch cases about six karat, if the gold in them could be expressed in karats at all. Under pressure from the associations, manufacturers have been forced to establish a minimum selling price and eliminate restrictive prices. Wholesalers who formerly sold at retail have been forced in one way or another to stop the practice and give the retailers the field.

Almost all jewelers have been led to handle only price protected goods and jobbers sell only to those who keep faith in these matters. In years gone by some jewelers and mail order houses bought rings, as an instance, for \$5 and engraved them, put them in a box and

wrapped them for \$5.50, making them a "leader" for advertising purposes. This made life a burden for the retailer and took away legitimate profits simply to give some more or less enterprising merchant an opportunity to advertise his business to the detriment of every other jeweler in the trade. Long descriptions of inferior goods which make people believe they are securing a Yukon gold mine for \$1.98 no longer sell jewelry. The associations have caught many houses which advertised standard goods and substituted inferior ones. They paid the penalty when the organizations got after them and as a result the jewelry trade is said to be more free from deception than ever before.

Malicious competition among country dealers is disappearing and the secretary of the association frequently prevents a costly price war which formerly made enemies of all jewelers in a town.

What the busy business men of Nebraska do when they visit Omaha is a secret, but because of this more and more wives are coming to the conventions with their husbands. Few conventions meet in Omaha that do not have from fifty to one hundred women visitors.

Men and women are both entertained by local members of the different crafts or by the wholesalers of Omaha, while almost everyone can find something to do for self-entertainment. Automobile rides are taken whenever the weather will permit, which is about 325 days in the year. The sun does not shine all the time in Omaha, but that is unnecessary with more than 100 miles of paving over which the automobiles may take visitors most any day. Visits to the parks in the summer time, the theaters in winter, open house at the clubs of the city and dinner parties and banquets at the hotels are the usual form of entertainment.

The wholesale district of Omaha is an endless attraction to the visitors, who may go through the big warehouses not only of the firms of which they buy goods, but see the houses handling other lines. Many of the largest houses of Omaha are in new buildings which afford the very latest conveniences in business house furnishings, and to see the armies of men and women at work furnishes many suggestions for betterment of system and store management at home.

Few trade organizations meet in Omaha, but what the country merchants are frank to admit that perhaps some of the fault is with them when they fail to meet competition. They admit their windows are not trimmed and their clerks are behind the time when it comes to salesmanship; that they extend credit for long terms and frequently get overstocked with certain lines which they do not know how to dispose of to advantage.

A school of salesmanship, window trimming and business system is going on all around the visitors to Omaha. They walk through one of the big retail establishments and see how goods are displayed, pass many hundred feet of plate glass where windows are trimmed by men drawing salaries equal to the income of a country merchant; they see the "bargain counters" where the metropolitan merchants can dispose of anything from a paper of pins to a Wilton rug, and very few merchants visit Omaha or any other modern city but go back to their own stores and make some changes.

In the opinion of the men who head the organizations, the best tonic which it is possible for country merchants to take to make them think more of their business and desire to expand it, is to meet with their trade organization in Omaha.

Jewelers Who Are Leaders in the Association Movement in Their Trade

			
MARK A. HURLBURT, Ex-President American National Retail Jewelers' Association, Fort Dodge, Ia.	GEORGE ARKWRIGHT, President Nebraska Association, Beatrice.	S. CALLISON, National Secretary, Dexter, Ia.	TINLEY L. COMBS, Omaha.

Takes Train Over Torrent

ONE hundred lives hung in the balance for the fraction of a second while Engineer W. A. Baldwin of the Santa Fe's San Bernardino local hesitated as to whether he should follow his fireman's example and jump, or stick by his engine and pilot it over the fast settling bridge at Avenue Thirty-five and the Arroyo Seco, in southern California.

The heavy rains swelled the stream in the arroyo from a rivulet until it was a raging torrent, higher than since the flood of 1889. The water cut under the concrete piling of the Santa Fe's new steel bridge and it began to sag in the middle. Then came the train of five cars from San Bernardino slipping down grade from Pasadena.

Several hundred people living in the vicinity were out watching the stream eat away its bank and when they saw the approaching train they made every attempt to warn it in time. Umbrellas and handkerchiefs were waved, hats thrown in the air, while men and women screamed in desperation, hoping that the engineer would hear or see in time to stop.

W. A. Baldwin was at the throttle and he both saw and heard, but to stop was beyond human power, for the rails were wet and slippery. He did his best, but failed, and when his fireman, Fred Walker, saw that the train was going onto the sagging bridge he jumped.

Baldwin had been in tight places before, and as he hesitated—hands off the reversing lever and airbrake—he decided what to do.

It was the deed of a master hand, for had the train hit the bridge at high speed or jarred as it went across, down the cars and their passengers would have gone into the roaring waters.

As soon as the train stopped hundreds of people, who had made so great an effort to warn Baldwin, crowded around to congratulate him on his nerve and remarkable escape. And in spite of the rain it was such a reception as falls to the lot of few men.—Los Angeles Times.