

Tricks of Short Weights and Dishonest Measures Exposed



NO. 1 - REAL BUSHEL OF POTATOES

NO. 2 - TEN POUNDS SHORT

INSPECTOR
PEGG
EXAMINING
MEASURES

COLLECTION OF CONFISCATED MEASURES

WHILE Omaha, like other metropolitan cities, is concerning itself with the regulation of weights and measures, the United States government is also taking a hand in this very important game. At this time there is pending before a committee of the congress a bill to regulate the size of a berry basket.

"And it is in the small matters, perhaps, more than in the big ones that strict inspection can help very materially to cut the cost of living," says John Grant Pegg, the inspector of weights and measures, who looks after the enforcing of the Omaha law.

With the same thought in mind, Francis E. Leupp, formerly commissioner of Indian affairs, writes in a recent number of Scribner's:

"On poor Richard's theory that the penny saved is the penny earned, the conservation of human energy by minimizing its wanton expenditure is as important in a way as the protection of a mineral bed or a spring-fed lake; and when we learn that every strawberry sent from Florida to Massachusetts must be repacked before it is offered for sale we can understand why congress takes cognizance of so apparently petty a business."

In this connection Mr. Leupp explains that, while Florida berry raisers use any size measure they like to ship their fruit in, the law of the Bay state prescribes the size of box or basket in which the fruit may be sold. What is true of Massachusetts is also true of Nebraska and other states.

National Supervising Bureau.

The national bureau of standards comprises, among other departments, the office of weights and measures, which in a large way has in its charge the preservation of the recognized standards of length, cubic contents and weight, most of which, by the way, were brought bodily from England. Up to a comparatively few years ago each state, and each city of a state almost, had its own system and few agreed. At the present time the pound, yard, gallon and bushel are, Mr. Leupp says, uniform for the most part. Still, he contends, and most officials engaged in inspection agree with him, that the exceptions are quite serious. Nebraska, for instance, is among the states in which the gallon is defined in pounds. In this state twelve pounds of honey constitute a legal gallon. In Kansas six and a half pounds of kerosene make a gallon; in Ohio, seven and a half pounds of linseed oil; in Indiana, eleven pounds of sorghum molasses. The gallon as fixed by congress is 231 cubic inches. The ancient ale gallon of 282 cubic inches prevails still in some states, and in a few others the old ale or milk gallon is the legal dry gallon, although it is 5 per cent larger than the corresponding unit derived from the Winchester bushel.

A bushel of coal ranges in the various states from 2,419 1/4 cubic inches to 2,748, a difference of more than one-eighth. Similar variations are found in bushel measures of lime and coke.

The liquid barrel measure today fluctuates between twenty-nine gallons in New York and forty-two gallons in Texas.

These facts and others of similar import have brought about a movement, originating in Massachusetts, to standardize the weights and measures throughout the country. Many cities have joined in an organization to bring this about. While Omaha is not as yet formally affiliated, much good work has been done to protect buyers in their daily dealings with sellers.

Housewife Vitrally Concerned.

"Housewives are mainly concerned," insists Inspector Pegg, "because they are the ones who do what may be called the hand-to-mouth buying for the great majority of families. Not only do they do most of the purchasing in stores, but they buy from peddlers of all sorts of commodities. And in this field the inspection departments are put to it the hardest to keep things measurably straight. That's not a pun, but a statement of fact."

Dwelling on his hobby, "the cost of living," Inspector Pegg insists that all families could reduce it quite appreciably if they would call on his department for official verification when they suspect they are getting the worst of it from any merchant or peddler. "Everything is so high now," says Mr. Pegg, "that

the men or women who pay the bills are entitled to every ounce they are charged for. Some people do not even know there is a law to compel dealers in all commodities to give full weight and honest measure. The Omaha law is conceded to be among the very best in the land; but there is urgent need of a uniform system of laws, so that shipped-in products shall be measured alike in all states. In the matter of berry boxes there is a wide variation, and this varies again with the seasons. Early in the season we get very few berries in a box; later on we get fuller measures. So the government is considering a law that shall be nation-wide in its provisions.

"In making my rounds I frequently find grocers using a wine measure to sell dry stuff from. The excuse is made, usually, that they don't know the difference; but the buyer ought to know it and insist on the proper measure. I have noticed the grocers never make a mistake the other way and use a dry measure to sell liquids from. Whenever a buyer sees a bright tin measure used to sell cranberries, for instance, he can make up his mind he is getting short measure.

Bread and Butter Honest.

"Formerly this office used to have a good many complaints as to butter in pound packages, which really only contained fifteen ounces. The Omaha creameries and butter dealers now have a scale girl, who makes sure that each pound contains sixteen ounces before the wrapping paper is put on it. But, while package butter is right now, purchasers can be cheated on bulk butter if the dealer is inclined to be dishonest, unless they make sure of the weight. Large loaves of bread should also weigh sixteen ounces, and the weight of bread I find to be honest. The bakers change their stock every twenty-four hours, so there is little chance for shrinkage."

Touching basket goods, Omaha has an ordinance which makes it unlawful for any person, firm or corporation to even "offer for sale" any basket or measure purporting, appearing or representing to be a quart, a two-quart, four-quart, peck, one-half bushel or bushel measure which is not up to the standard of such measures, and fines may be levied from \$5 up to \$50 for violation.

In spite of this the inspector of weights and measures finds some grocers and coal dealers and many peddlers using bogus baskets. "The practice is not as frequent, by any means, as it used to be," says Mr. Pegg, "and in the case of small coal dealers sizes are now made by the basket, not by the bushel, in which case I am powerless. The same is true of beer, for when we got after the bottles that did not contain quarts and pints of liquid the terms used were changed to 'large' and 'small,' and people must buy with that understanding."

Bushel Baskets Should Be Heaped.

"As will be noted from the illustrations, there are ways to cheat, though, that require continual watchfulness. Take the basket of potatoes, for instance.

Stroke measure, making the contents of a basket or box even with the top, is all right for grain, but it is all wrong for bulky vegetables, which should be heaped up. If the dealer or peddler is allowed to measure potatoes, apples, turnips, carrots or things of that kind even with the top of the basket or measure, on a ten-bushel order the buyer loses a bushel and a half or more. In the illustration the short basket lacks about ten pounds of the proper quantity. It might just as easily be eleven or twelve pounds. On the amount of potatoes and similar heavy vegetables sold in Omaha, in one day let us say, the cheating against the housewives or other purchasers would be something worth having."

An illustration is also given of the honest and dishonest basket—a bottom view. The full measure basket has a wide—almost flat—bottom, while the cheat basket tapers suddenly from base to shoulder and, of course, will not hold nearly the right quantity when full, or even when heaped.

"At every turn, almost, you win or you lose, just as you are watchful and informed, or careless and wilfully ignorant," says Inspector Pegg. "Take the case of the metal half-bushel measures shown. The one stands squarely, flat on the ground, bottom even with the lower rim. The other has a bottom raised considerably above the rim at the bottom, perhaps two inches in some instances, and this method of cheating will mean a big margin of profit to the man using the measure, unless we catch him at it; but if he sells enough of his goods in a day the dishonest man can still pocket a neat profit, after paying a fine. Look out for strangers and peddlers who give you the run act on sales; protect yourself, as you can when you know the tricks."

Trick in Loose Bottoms.

"Another shady plan of some professional peddlers is to have a basket or a metal measure with a loose bottom. Then, by pressing it up with the weight of the contents resting on the hand the measure looks full, but it isn't. Beware, too, of badly dented measures, for a moment's thought will convince you that such a utensil will not hold as many apples, potatoes or other truck as an honest measure ought to. Eternal vigilance, it will be noted, is a requisite of getting the amount of goods you pay for. Much of the weight is wasted, we know, in peeling; but keep your eye peeled, first of all."

The legal peck is fifteen pounds, and who can afford to lose half a peck, perhaps, on each bushel? If the dishonest dealer or peddler can flick a pound or two, or five pounds, on every peck sold, he can find an object to do so. Inspector Pegg does not assert that a majority of dealers or peddlers are dishonest, but he does insist that a large enough percentage of the whole number is warped in conscience to make it worth while for buyers in small quantities to be vigilant.

Eighty pounds is the legal bushel, but through the inference conveyed by an apparently full measure many a bushel is sold having only about sixty

pounds of contents. And the Omaha inspector has on exhibition in the collection of good and bad measures in his office some scales, or steelyards, that have two indicators. One particularly bad example was used to sell ice. The front indicator was bent to indicate twenty pounds more than a chunk of ice really weighed, while the indicator on the back showed the real weight. Looking at the weight from the front, the ice buyer felt sure he was getting 100 pounds, but the ice seller knew he was really only putting seventy-five to eighty pounds in the box.

Pretty Measures Deceitful.

In the collection there are also several samples of long, slim tin measures. They show superficially the proper cubic content, but in the case of bulky goods the actual amount would fall considerably short. "An honest measure is like the perfect female form, as the old artists depict it," said Mr. Pegg, solemnly. "It is broad and generous in dimensions, even if not so pretty to look at, and stands squarely on the ground, like a Holland frau."

Elucidating further, the Omaha inspector says: "Many of these slender, pretty measures used to be sold here in Omaha, but they are not now. As soon as I notified the houses having them for sale the measures were unlawful they discontinued the handling of them. In using these measures it was the custom to stick them down into a sack, fill them and then jerk them out. Every purchaser was being cheated on every such purchase. The wooden basket with a lining half way down on the inside is much on the same order, because, while the basket is full size on the outside, the lining takes off quite materially from its holding capacity."

In the office collection of Inspector Pegg are two charts taken from a scale that was very popular in Omaha and other cities until the inspectors got after them. They were sold on the guarantee that every odd advantage of fractions would inevitably accrue to the dealer. A court injunction stopped interference with these scales, but popular prejudice was aroused to such a degree they have now been almost entirely eliminated.

The inspector talks with interest and satire about a good many tricks that were being worked all along the line before the users were made to realize that their continued use was not profitable; and he also talks with a tinge of bitterness about the difficulty of getting cheated people to prosecute. "Some women who have caught dealers and peddlers cheating have absolutely refused to go to court," said the inspector. "They seem to forget they are doing wrong to their husbands or other providers whose good money is being wasted. It is, as a rule, the folks who buy in small quantities—and with whom every penny counts—that suffer most in the matter of short weights and dishonest measures, but successful prosecutions in such cases are few. By watching and warning we get results; in fact, almost entirely by that method."

Afraid of Newspaper Notoriety.

Newspaper notoriety also repels many from prosecuting, according to Inspector Pegg. "Not only the dealers, but the sufferers from dishonest sales fear the publicity of going to court. And in this particular I find that the daily newspapers are the very best help I can get. To have himself published as dishonest is almost business death to an established dealer, and even the peddlers have a wholesome respect for newspaper criticism or the threat of it; and, even though we do not often get into the papers with these cases, there is always the possibility of it, and the influence

thus silently exercised by the daily press is realized by nobody more keenly than by myself."

Manufacturers of many kinds of goods ship in short weight packages, according to Mr. Pegg, who remarks dryly: "They never err the wrong way to cheat themselves, and when their attention is forcibly called to the bogus packages they blame the fault on the carelessness of their employees. It has seemed to me that if the statement were true the same employees would once in a while put in too much instead of always putting in too little."

While the poor suffer most, the inspector also finds reason to opine, "Where the rich are cheated they lose larger chunks." He can reel off numerous instances that have come under his observation, and tells with glee of meeting a rich friend who was superintending the storing in his bins of the winter's coal. "Asking to see the slip brought by the driver, I found it called for 3,800 pounds of coal on that load. A city scale was close by and I took the load over and had it weighed. It went only 2,800 pounds net. In his anger the purchaser boiled over, but when it came to prosecuting his kind heart failed and the coal company got off scot free."

Small Containers Craftily Built.

It is not only in large measures and heavy weights that people suffer, according to the experience of the inspector. In bottles of milk the consuming public used to be bilked to the extent of a gill or more through a neck that sloped too much, and in liquor and medicine bottles and other small containers there is too often a trick of making that shortens their holding capacity. "It will be only a small matter on any one package," says Pegg, "but when we consider that thousands are put on the market continually, the cheating of the public is glaringly apparent. Hence, I contend that every person who has to buy anything in the market has a personal interest in encouraging the movement for uniformity of weights and measures in every state of the union. United States senators and representatives should take a lively interest in this question, and it would be mighty good work for our state legislators if they would give some powerful consideration to establishing a stringent and strong state law along the same lines."

Incidentally, Inspector Pegg has it in mind to ask the city council of Omaha to make it necessary for applicants for city license to peddle to secure a certificate showing their scales and measures have been tested and sealed with the city stamp before a license is issued. "Such a measure seems entirely feasible to me," he said, "and it would help very much if women and men who buy would see to it that the weights and measures used have the official city stamp on them. This might involve some trouble, but the results would be worth it."

Something Did Happen

A witness in a railroad case at Fort Worth, Kan., was asked to tell in his own way how the accident happened. He said:

"Well, Ole and I was walking down the track, and I heard a whistle, an' I got off the track and the train went by, an' I got back on the track. I didn't see Ole, but I walked along an' pretty soon I seen Ole's hat, an' I walked on an, seen one of Ole's legs, an' then I seen one of Ole's arms, an' then another leg, an' then over on one side, Ole's head, an' I says, 'Great stupor!' Something must have happened to Ole!" — Railroad Man's Magazine.