THE JARVIS RECORD

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GEO. I. MILLER
Editor and Proprietor

CHAINS NOT LAST WORD

Will be Eliminated if Some Better System of Merchandising Comes Along, Not By Old System.

By Robert Crampton

"In my opinion, such organizations as chain stores are not economically sound. They are making no real contribution to the distribution system of the country."

Thus speaks Hon. H. H. Stevens in that famous pamphlet which Mr. Bennett suppressed, but which everyone has read who is interested in politics and in the price spreads and mass buying investigation.

A little later, P. Ashley Cooper, governor of the Hudson's Bay Company, spoke at the Canadian National Exhibition, declaring that, if the retailer fails to meet the demands of the consumer, no power on earth can keep him in existence. The demands of the consumer, Mr. Cooper explained, are for the "highest quality of article at the lowest possible price." And the final objective of all business, he said, is "the greatest number of goods for the greatest number of people at the lowest possible price."

Proponents of the chain store system quote the Dominion Bureau of Statistics to show that in 1930 the chain-store system of Canada, including department store chains, sold $550,000,000 of goods, about one-fifth of all goods sold in retail establishments in Canada. They cite these figures as evidence that the system is efficient in that it lowered the cost of distribution—loss of the consumer's dollar went to the extent of distribution than under other systems. In the grocery field particularly, this business has grown from negligible proportions in perhaps a dozen years.

There may be those who will argue that a system of merchandising which in the course of a year distributes half a billion dollars of goods is too important to be replaced by some other form of merchandising. But neither Mr. Cooper nor the more thoughtful of chain-store men feel any such confidence in the future. They are apt to notice that the railways, which a few years ago had a monopoly of land transportation, have suffered from loss of traffic to buses and private motor cars and airplanes. Likewise, some other idea, some better plan, of merchandising may be developed which will make the present types of chain store obselete.

Possibly it is significant that in the last three years there has been a noticeable growth in group-buying chains, while the corporate chains have remained stationary in size. (A group-buying chain is either a number of independent merchants banded together for quantity purchases and advertising, or a group of independent merchants who have been organized for the same purpose by a wholesale house.) These group-buyers have some considerable advantage over the company chain. The manager of the individual store is the owner, the man primarily interested in making it profitable. Headquarters' supervisory expense is thereby unnecessary. The company store is operated by employees, and employees must be supervised and accounting is more complicated. Any successful independent merchant—and their still are many—could tell you a number of other advantages he has over his chain rival.

Group buying and keen management may be the independent merchant's answer to his problems born of big-chain competition. But this does not mean that the consumer, docile as she is in some respects, will permit some fond hopes o be realized. I refer to the fond hopes of some old-time merchants and wholesalers who believe that, by raising enough fuss, they can bring back the dear dead days of comfort and ease for the merchant who was not alive. Those days are gone beyond recall. If the chain-store system is replaced it will be replaced by something better, not by something outmoded. Whether the "something better" is the independent store, the group-buying store, or something not hitherto seen, remains for a prophet to forecast.

Chain stores are merely one of the latest words in merchandising—not the last word. And conceiving the fact that the chairman of the price-spreads committee heard many things to the detriment of the chain store system in the several months of inquiry, there will be a multitude of students of merchandising who will take issue with him on his statement that chains are making no real contribution to the distribution system of the country.

The chain-store idea is predicated on several things. First of all, by reason of centralized and expert management of a chain of stores, rather than one, a good profit can be made normally on the capital invested even when the profit per dollar of sales is extremely small. Secondly, the volume of purchases by a chain-store company eliminated some of the expenses of wholesaling under the old methods of food merchandising. Thirdly, volume has been attained in most instances by passing to consumers savings in operating costs. There are a thousand ways of telling the story, but in the final analysis, the chain-store system will istand or fall on whether it can bring producers' goods to consumers' hands at less expense than by another system of merchandising.

The price spreads committee heard many allegations of unethical practices by chain-stores and the resumption of the inquiry shortly may establish whether or not there are bases for the charges. There have been some prosecutions for short weight and inaccurate scales, and Mr. Stevens has intimated to a Toronto audience recently that there will be further court actio of this character.

The allegations, and the convictions, indicate that the chains have their troubles, too. One might discuss the cry of the proponents of independent merchants and the attractive life of the small town as a wail like that of the stage-coach driver when the iron horse put him out of business. And one may suggest that short weights in groceries were known long before there were chain stores. But these extenuating remarks do not alter the fact that, in the abstract, chains are unpopular in some places and that the law says that there must always be sixteen ounces to the pound.

Why are there inaccurate weights from chain stores or any other store? One reason is that a scale gets out of adjustment easily. Another reason is that the man weighing the goods may be hurried and careless (in which event an overweight is as probable as a short weight). A third reason may be that the man behind the counter may be chiseling from the customer as well as the store owner. And a fourth reason is that if through carelessness or some other reason not allowable by his superiors, the store manager's inventory is short, he may endeavor to make up the loss by cheating the customer.

It may be taken for granted that the chain-store companies—having had the spotlight placed on them in recent months—have been doing a bit of soul searching and other kinds of searching to eliminate any legitimate causes of criticism which may have arisen. In these matters of weights, for instance, I have been told that hardly a week goes by without checking and double-checking by all the higher executives to try to see that the customer gets what she pays for. It is a difficult problem for, when a company is working on a small margin of profit, a run of slight over weights would eliminate profit altogether. On the other hand, short weights cause trouble. And exact weights require more care than some grocery clerks give to that portion of their jobs on a busy day. And when goods are weighed in advance there must be calculation as to shrinkage between the time of weighing and the time of sale, even though as in the case of prunes, the moisture will go in again as soon as the prunes hit the pot.

And all the time there is the human element. There are many ways of being dishonest, and while the average of honesty in chain-store employees doubtless is as high as the average among other classes of people, some of the men and women behind the counters who are dishonest are yet to be caught and dismissed. The Stevens' inquiry is to the good in so far as it has caused business to look inward and try to correct evils that management, if and when it will, is more competent to find than is a parliamentary committee.

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TRUCKS FOR THE TROOPS

Delivery of 250 trucks to United States army posts in the Pacific Coast and Rocky Mountain states has been started by the Oakland plant of the Chevrolet Motor Company. Sixty-two convoy trucks and twelve dump trucks were delivered last week. The new army trucks are of 131-inch wheelbase, with dual wheel equipment. The convoy trucks with tarpaulin tops are fitted for the transport of troops or materials.

Not Speed Crazy

The young people of this country can hardly be called "speed crazy" to judge from the information obtained by General Motors Customer Research Activity. "We form this opinion," says an official "from our analysis of owner e-ections, gathered during the past year through the mailing of questionnaires to car owners in all sections of the country. A breakdown of the data on an age basis makes it possible to compare the tastes and desires of youth with those of adults. Our analysis show that the younger generation wants a top cruising speed only three and seven tenths miles per hour greater than that voted for by adults. It is interesting too to note that the general subject of safety was stressed more frequently by youth than by the grown-ups although the point was frequently made by both groups that an extra margin of speed and pick-up is essential to safety in coping with modern traffic conditions."

THE JARVIS RECORD, THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 22nd., 1934

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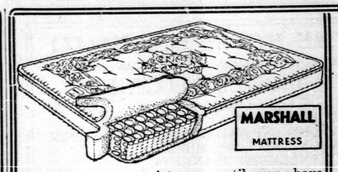

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