

More Stories!

Forum

Number 8

August 2007

The Persistent Shopper

By Robert J. O'Connell

In the early days of my first marriage our family lived with my in-laws while I was finishing college and graduate school. Luckily, I was rarely home and my wife Pat was hard at work running an open heart machine at the Medical School.

My mother-in-law, Mary went shopping everyday. The goal of these expeditions was finding, or creating, that most elusive target, *the bargain*. Although she had a car and was a good driver she preferred to go shopping on the bus to downtown. Looking back on it, this was probably because she liked to shop small stores in downtown Syracuse where parking was scarce over larger stores in the neighboring malls. On many days she returned home on the afternoon bus with an empty shopping bag, but on others with a bewildering array of stuff.

Each of these forays was discussed at the evening meal and I soon learned her secrets for finding *the bargain*. One of her favorite haunts was a store called the Busy Bee. As far as I can tell it was a modern version of a general store. She was on a first name basis with the young manager of this store and would often council him on various aspects of retail sales. Where an item was displayed on the shelves and its price. Another of her favorites was the nearby Northern Auto store which often had on offer a similar array of merchandise Her tact was then to tell the manager that a particular item could be obtained cheaper at the competitors. I suspect she did the same thing in the Northern Auto store. She was very patient, advising each of them to cut the price of a certain item. Her target price was near a dollar. She would buy anything for a dollar. It was always a mystery to me why she targeted particular items because as far as I could see they were rarely any thing that she needed. In fact many of these items were first stored in her bedroom and when it was near bursting, selected items were taken to the attic. Where many of them remained until I cleaned them out after her death some 30 years latter.

On one memorable occasion I asked her if the Busy Bee had insulated juice jugs as we were planning a picnic as part of my college graduation festivities. She acknowledge that they did have such an item but that it was still too expensive. She said she would work on it. About a week latter she returned home with six



large two gallon jugs, proudly announcing that they were only a dollar plus tax each. I gratefully paid her for an orange jug and then asked why she had bought five additional. At this moment another of her shopping criteria was revealed. She proudly pointed to the hallmark embossed on the bottom of my jug. After the name of the company it stated that this item was made of Virgin Vinyl. "See she said, that means that it is the best". As it turns out many of the items she bought had similar hallmarks. I never understood why an item not made from recycled vinyl was better than one that was. Further questioning revealed that she had no idea why it was the best, but Virgin Vinyl remained to her the grail.

Mary had a large number of lady friends who would visit on a regular basis whereupon they would have tea and discuss the latest hunt for *bargains*. Occasionally a visitor would ask if a particular item was still available. Mary had inevitably bought the remaining stock, but would be willing to sell one of them to her visitor. She would retrieve the item from either the bedroom or the attic and sell it for the price she said she had paid for it, plus tax. I was never able to tell if she actually remembered the price of everything she bought or was just making it up. It mattered little, I

guess since the price always hovered around a dollar. Two of these jugs were still in the attic when I cleaned it out.

This occasion was memorable to me as I never got to use the jug for its original purpose. Mary scheduled a family party for the same time and date of the school picnic. As this was being planned, over my protestations, she pointed out that we could not have the party unless all of the rooms downstairs received a needed coat of paint. This turned out to be my job as I was free from school obligations. So I spent graduation week painting her house. I am sure that she viewed it as another great *bargain*.

copyright Robert J. O'Connell, 2007

Robert J. O'Connell grew up in Syracuse, NY where he graduated from LeMoyne College and gained his PhD from the Upstate Medical University Center at Syracuse. He has been a career neurobiologist on the research faculty of Florida State University, Rockefeller University, Worcester Foundation for Experimental Biology and the (University of Massachusetts) UMass Medical School. Now semi-retired, Bob and his second wife are engaged in real estate and other endeavors.

The Windswept Press,
Saugerties, NY

davidgriffin@hvc.rr.com