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THE HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF ADVERTISING

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CHAPTER I

FROM THE SYMBOLS IN BABYLON TO PAINTED WALLS IN ROME

How old is advertising? It depends upon the definition of advertising and whether the writer on the subject wishes to make the art an ancient one.

1

There are those who will question that anything as modern as we consider advertising to be has a history; yet the facts show that it not only has a history but that it is an interesting chronicle. Advertising as we know it is new in its aspects, but its ideas and its objects are as old as the human race.

2

Advertising really has two histories. The history of advertising as we know it today dates from yesterday. The history of advertising in all its forms harks back through the ages and into the haze that hides the beginning of humanity.

3

So far as we know the cave man did no trading. He had nothing to sell and nothing to advertise. He purchased nothing: When mother needed a new dress father took his club in hand and went out and killed a bear.

4

Even in the early tribal stage, when humans began to gather in communities for better protection, there was little or nothing to trade with. Each family made its own necessities.

5

But when the tribes grew in size and number bartering was begun. An animal fur, which is still an article of great importance in human wearing apparel, probably was the first item ever bartered. A weapon for hunting,

perhaps a stone club, is believed to have been the next sale made. Thus our fur dealers and sporting goods men may lay claim to the greatest antiquity in trade.

6

Tribal men particularly skilled in weapon making found their weapons in demand by others and gave more and more time to that in which they excelled, getting what they needed for their families by trading weapons for food and clothing. The more expert hunters had a surplus of meat and skins and traded it for something of which another had more than he needed for his own use.

7

As men discovered that they could get food and clothing by trading their own specialties for these necessities, the arts began to develop. Skill in making things grew, and each craftsman's output increased. When a man found rivals in his line it became necessary to do some "Selling," to persuade, and he evolved a selling talk. This, incidentally, gave a decided impetus to language.

8

Early selling, however, was oral, face-to-face, and cannot properly be called advertising. The excuse for tracing advertising back to the tribal state of man is, of course, that oral salesmanship was the progenitor of advertising.

9

One of the earliest arts was the making of objects out of clay bricks and pottery — and on bricks that were made by the Babylonians some three thousand years before Christ are found stenciled inscriptions which have been called the first advertisements. The bricks carry the name of the temple in which they were used and the name of the king who built it, just as a modern public building contains a corner stone or tablet with the names of officials in office when the structure was erected. The method was to cut a stencil in a hard stone and with it stamp each brick while the clay was still soft. The kings who did this advertised themselves to such of their subjects as could read hieroglyphics. The modern advertising man would say they ran an institutional campaign for themselves and their dynasties.

10

We owe our knowledge of the Egyptian hieroglyphics to an advertisement. Until 1799 the scholars of the world had racked their brains for a key to the inscriptions on Egyptian temples, tombs, and manuscripts, but without success. In that year the French engineers with Napoleon found the famous Rosetta stone in the Nile mud. This tablet bore an inscription in three languages — Greek, hieroglyphics, and Coptic, which was the language of the common people of Egypt. The stone dated from the year 136 B. C., when the ruler of Egypt, Ptolemy Epiphanies, remitted some taxes to the priesthood, by whom many of these basalt tablets were erected throughout the land, bearing a eulogy of the king in three languages. Only the Rosetta specimen survived the ages, but by its aid the hieroglyphic system was recovered and thirty centuries of Egypt's history and knowledge were thrown open. This ancient "poster" advertised Ptolemy as the true Son of the Sun, the Father of the Moon, and the Keeper of the Happiness of Men.



THE ROSETTA STONE

11

In this connection it will be recalled that one especially of the ancient Egyptian kings has been accused of putting his name on every good thing in sight, whether he built it or not, even removing the name of a

predecessor if necessary. The billposter of later centuries may have inherited from very ancient forefathers his proclivity for sticking his poster over the other man's advertisement.

12

The Babylonian merchant, who is noted in history for his enterprise, was as far advanced in advertising as the tradesman of centuries later. He employed barkers who advertised him orally by shouting his wares to passers by, and he hung over his door the symbol of his trade, which indicated the nature of his business as the striped barber's pole of more recent times identifies the barber shop and advertises it in 'a sense. The merchant of Babylon went as far as was sensible when he used simply the symbol and barker, for although he could read and write himself this accomplishment was confined to the learned and the merchant classes. If he had attempted written advertising he would have had an audience of only his fellow merchants and the small percentage that constituted the highly accomplished class. Inscriptions have been uncovered by archeologists in Babylonia which have been interpreted as advertisements of an ointment dealer, a scribe and a shoemaker. Also this puzzling fragment: "Window cases . . . made in Palace of Darius." Their identification as commercial advertisement, however, appears to be uncertain.

13

The first written advertisements appeared about this time, but they were not offers of something for sale. They were announcements on papyri of reward for the return of runaway slaves, with a description of the runaways. They probably were posted in the temples.

14

After the invention of printing and the publication of newspapers, centuries later, offers of rewards for runaway slaves and bond servants likewise were among the first uses for disseminated advertising. Lost articles came next.

15

Of commercial advertising the only form known to the people of early Egypt was the crier, and his announcements were confined to arrival of ships and the offering of items from their cargoes. The owner of a shipload of wine, spices, or metals, or an assortment of goods, would, like the twentieth-century department store that announces "a fresh arrival of oriental rugs from our special representative in the East," send out his announcer, who would picture the desirability of the articles just received. The Egyptian crier sang his story and gave further interest to his announcements by describing in florid language the regions from which the articles came and the difficulties under which they were obtained.

16

The public crier mode of advertising is found also in mythology. Venus is the advertiser, and again it is a runaway. Psyche has left the home of the gods without permission, and Venus asks Mercury to go down to earth and spread the news everywhere. He is told to "clearly describe the marks by which Psyche may be recognized that no one may excuse himself on the plea of ignorance if he incurs the crime of unlawfully concealing her." To give his proclamation a positive appeal Mercury adds: "If anyone can seize her in her flight, or discover where she has concealed herself, let such person repair to Mercury, behind the boundaries of Murtia, and receive by way of reward for the discovery seven sweet kisses from Venus herself." When Eros disappears Venus is again found advertising: "If anyone has seen my son Eros in the cross roads, he is a runaway. The informer shall have a reward. The kiss of Venus shall be your pay."

17

It was a custom of early Greeks to affix advertisements to the statues of their infernal deities and demons calling down the vengeance of the gods on those who had found lost articles and had not returned them. These notices were inscribed on sheets of lead, and a large collection of them found years ago in the Temple of Demeter is one of the interesting exhibits in the British Museum.

18

When we come down to the later Greeks we find a common "media" in the public crier. The crier was selected for his pleasing voice and elocutionary ability, and sometimes was accompanied by a musician. He was used mainly to advertise auction sales of slaves and animals. He would also act as auctioneer, doing the selling as well as the advertising. The Greeks, with their desire for beauty and perfection, demanded art in their public criers also, and these men were required to have in their voices what the modern advertising man puts into his printed announcement with typography and illustration—a pleasing note. A voice that was not altogether agreeable, and Greek that was not good, wouldn't do.

19

It is said that the sandwich man was invented in Carthage, that the galley owner sent into the tradesmen's street a man wearing a shirt lettered with news of the arrival of the galley and the nature of its cargo. There is, however, no definite proof of this early use of the sandwich man.

20

Signboards outside shop doors are known to have been a form of advertising in ancient Athens, but evidence of it there is not so clear as it is later in Rome, where that method of getting the attention of the passer by was quite common. One of these signs, which has been made famous in proverb, was the sign of the bush, which was used to mark the wine shop. "Good wine needs no bush" has, like some other proverbs and wise sayings, been disproved, for modern manufacturers and dealers have found that even the best products need a bush.

21

Among Roman signboards in the time of the Caesars there was the figure of a cherub flying with a shoe in each hand; the painted cow of the dairyman; the phallus, or symbol of life, which indicated the bakery; the mule turning a mill, another sign of the bakery; the handle of a pitcher, which was a guide to where potables could be obtained. Besides the bush and pitcher handle there were other wine-shop signs which came in when the bush began to be too common—a picture of slaves carrying a jar on a pole, or a depiction of Bacchus pressing the juice from a bunch of grapes.

22

It was a custom of the Romans to smooth off and whiten a place on the wall of the house for written announcements or sculptured inscriptions. The Latin name for these places was "album." The physician's album in the wall alongside his door showed a cupper's glass. Artisans pictured on their house albums the tools of their trade. A school advertised its location with a tablet picturing a boy under going punishment with a switch—an assurance to parents that the child would not be spoiled or Solomon's injunction disregarded.



THE BUSH—THE SIGN OF THE WINE SHOP FROM ANCIENT TIMES TO THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY
(From crude drawings in old manuscripts preserved in the British Museum.)

23

Roman house tablets of terra cotta or stone were an outlet for the sculptors of the time when making statues of Venus did not provide an adequate income. The lettering and illustrations in their work were in relief: Sometimes the tablet would be suspended from a bracket over the door, but usually it was set into the wall.

24

Our word "libel" is the echo of an old form of advertising, for it was the name given by the Romans to a written announcement of absconded debtors. Publicly to characterize a man as a deadbeat was to libel him.

It is in records of Rome, Herculaneum and Pompeii that we first find advertising which comes within the modern meaning of the term. This advertising consisted of persuasive announcements painted on walls in black or red. Examples of it uncovered by excavators in the ruins of Pompeii indicate that the commercial world was beginning to develop advertising sense two thousand years ago, and that written advertising came soon after the spread of literacy in ancient Rome, only to disappear with the decline in ability to read that followed and lasted through centuries of the Dark Ages. In Pompeii there were walls which may have been controlled by an advertising contractor, for they carried a variety of painted announcements. These notices were mostly of theatrical performances, sports and baths, but especially of gladiatorial exhibitions. A translation of one of them reads:

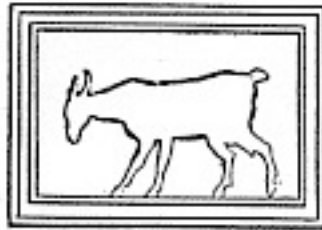
THE TROOP OF GLADIATORS OF THE AEDIL
WILL FIGHT ON THE 31ST OF MAY
THERE WILL BE FIGHTS WITH WILD ANIMALS
AND AN AWNING TO KEEP OFF THE SUN

25

The walls selected were at places where crowds gathered, or at central points where people passed in great numbers, evidence that the billboard man knew his business. On a wall of the public baths at Pompeii, where people stood in line awaiting admission, there were many painted notices of coming exhibitions and sales, which doubtless received the same interested attention in that day which a similar crowd two thousand years later gives to the flashing electric-bulb letters on the under side of an advertiser's airplane roaring overhead.

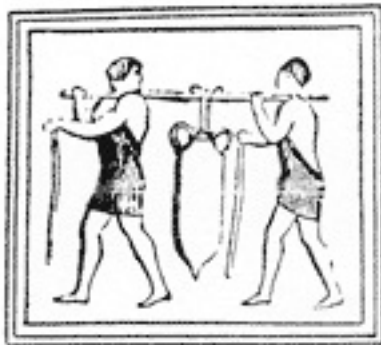
26

There is evidence that the Romans knew something of advertising psychology. A bathing establishment in a provincial town would not fail to mention that its "warm, sea and fresh-water baths" were patterned after the baths in the City of Rome. The showman also would make the most of a desire to follow the metropolitan taste in entertainment. His company was announced as "fresh from Rome."



SIGNBOARDS FOUND IN RUINS OF POMPEII

The grain mill for the bakery and goat for the dairy



A Wine Merchant at Pompeii



A Shoemaker at Herculaneum

TRADESMEN'S SIGNS IN ROMAN TIMES

Some of these walls were advertising stations for those who had houses to let. Whitewash would cover the announcement when the advertiser's time ran out and another wanted the space. The property owner advertised thus

IN THE ARRIAN
POLLIAN BLOCK OF HOUSES
THE PROPERTY OF CN ALIFUS NIGIDIUS SENIOR
ARE TO BE LET FROM THE FIRST IDES OF JULY
SHOPS WITH THEIR BOWERS
AND GENTLEMEN'S APARTMENTS
THE HIRER MUST APPLY TO THE SLAVE
OF CN ALIFUS NIGIDIUS SENIOR

Notice that a house was for rent would also be painted on the door of the house itself, or on the album alongside the door, which also was used to advertise the profession of the occupant, who might be a dramatist, a poet, a teacher, a musician or a gladiator. One such album sign, found by archeologists, reads

YOU SHALL HEAR A POEM
OF NUMERIUS

The poets read their works in the streets or in a hired auditorium, and some of them are said to have advertised by means of written handbills.

That the Pompeians knew the value of advertising to tourists is evidenced by the following advertisement on a wall:

TRAVELER
GOING FROM HERE TO THE TWELFTH TOWER
THERE SARINUS KEEPS A TAVERN
THIS IS TAO REQUEST YOU TO ENTER.
FAREWELL

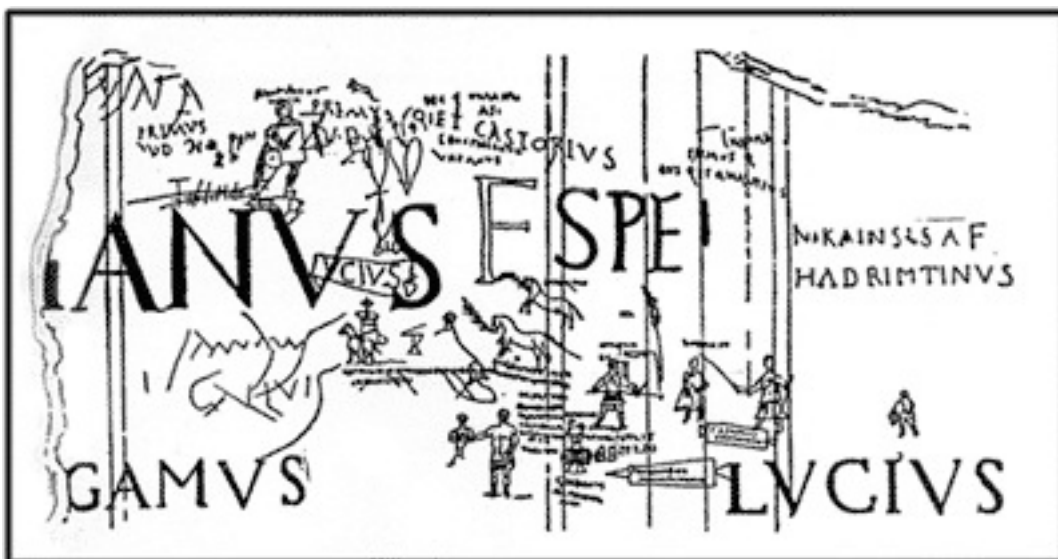
27

Such Pompeian tablets, buried by the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 A.D., were preserved under the lava. Records of advertising in the Roman capital are not so clear, but it is reasonable to believe that just before a big exhibition in the arena Rome was well covered with exclamatory advertisements.

28

For nearly a thousand years following the decline of Rome advertising made no progress. Instead, it went backward, following the retreating steps of civilization.

With a return to illiteracy where there had been common ability to read; with western Europe still in a more or less barbaric state, its habitants slaves of the feudal lords; with trade choked by the centuries-long supremacy of piracy on the seas; with the route to the East closed by the Saracens, and with commerce made extremely hazardous by the widespread banditry that marked the Dark Ages, there was no incentive to think about advertising.



CONTRIBUTED ADVERTISEMENTS FOR GLADIATORS AND POETS ON THE EXCAVATED WALLS OF POMPEII

In Venice for a long time the merchant's shop was a fort, ever ready to repel pillagers. Far from advertising what he had, he kept the nature and extent of his stock a secret from the general run of people; informing only such as he could trust with the information. Cargoes there and elsewhere in Europe were few, and fewer still were announcements of their arrival and what they contained, which had furnished advertising with its first commercial job in ancient times.

30

The painted announcement on a wall stopped where the fall of Rome and the loss of common ability to read left it. Street-sign advertising likewise decayed. Few beyond the learned clergy could read. Even the noble knight could not read, and did not wish to. To know how to read and write was considered too effeminate an accomplishment for the red-blooded gentlemen of those days.

31

Only the barker was used, and he only where it was safe. He was the medium of the first advertising by merchants in Britain, as he had been in southern Europe. It is recorded that barkers were used in England in the third century by exhibitors at the Stourbridge fair. Town-wide crying was restricted to official uses. The merchant class, held in contempt by the lords that ruled, were subjected to handicaps instead of being given encouragement. Presently, however, public auction sales got into the crier's announcements. After a time a source of revenue for henchmen was seen, and the crying of wine shops began.

32

Then, gradually, as law and order came back in a measure on land, and civilization began to take a new grip after centuries of retrogression, there came commercial ambition and a searching about for ways to increase business. The merchant, whose barker at the door reached only those who passed that way, heard the town crier announcing a new war, or peace, or an execution, and thought how fine it would be if this official crier could be engaged to tell people over all the town about the good thing he had to sell—or, if that was not possible, if he might employ a crier of his own to go about everywhere.

33

These commercial town criers of a thousand years ago were equipped with loud horns. They had charters from the government and their number was restricted. In the province of Berry, France, in the year 1141, twelve criers organized a company and obtained a charter from Louis VII giving them the exclusive privilege of town crying in the province. Five were assigned to crying wines in behalf of the taverns. They went about extolling the wines, each man crying for a particular tavern and giving samples of the wine to be had there. For each blowing of the horn and sampling to the group that gathered this advertising man received a small fee from the tavern. In Paris the wine criers were numerous, parading the streets and passing out samples from wooden buckets. The psychology of this advertising probably was that one drink would lead to more. It appears that we are indebted to the French tavern keeper of the Middle Ages for the street sampling idea.



AN EARLY ADVERTISING MEDIUM:
"THE BELMAN OF LONDON"

Through the town crier early "lost and found" and other advertisement were broadcast. (Illustration is from Thomas Dekker's "Lanthorne and Candle Light; or, The Bellman's Second Night's Walke," 1608.)

34

Retainers had to be supported, and in the thirteenth century tavern keepers in Paris were compelled by law to use public criers. The criers had formed themselves into a corporation, or union, which was given exclusive privileges by Philip Augustus, who in 1258 decreed that

Whosoever is a crier in Paris may go to any tavern he likes and cry its wine, provided they sell wine from the wood, and that there is no other crier employed for that tavern; and the tavern keeper cannot prohibit him.

If a crier finds people drinking in a tavern, he may ask what they pay for the wine they drink; and he may go out and cry the wine at the prices they pay, whether the tavern keeper wishes it or not, provided always that there be no other crier employed for that tavern.

If a tavern keeper sells wine in Paris and employs no crier, and closes his door against the criers, the crier may proclaim that tavern keeper's wine at the same price as the king's wine (the current price) that is to say, if it be a good wine year, at seven dinarii, and if it be a bad wine year, at twelve dinarii.

Each crier to receive daily from the tavern for which he cries at least four dinarii and he is bound on his oath not to claim more.

That edict, while it covers only taverns and may have helped their business rather than hurt it, furnishes an example of the tyrannical attitude of the rulers of the Middle Ages toward tradesmen, who were oppressed and mulcted at every opportunity, with the result that growth of trade was greatly hindered even where there was defensive protection from out-and-out bandits.

35

When it came to pulling Europe out of the Dark Ages it was business men, the class of men who today are the advertisers, who did it. Formation by them of the Hanseatic League in the thirteenth century gave us the beginning of modern civilization. This league of men and cities interested in commerce and trade, starting with a membership of two cities on the Baltic, spread south to the Danube, and in a hundred years had seventy cities in its membership.

36

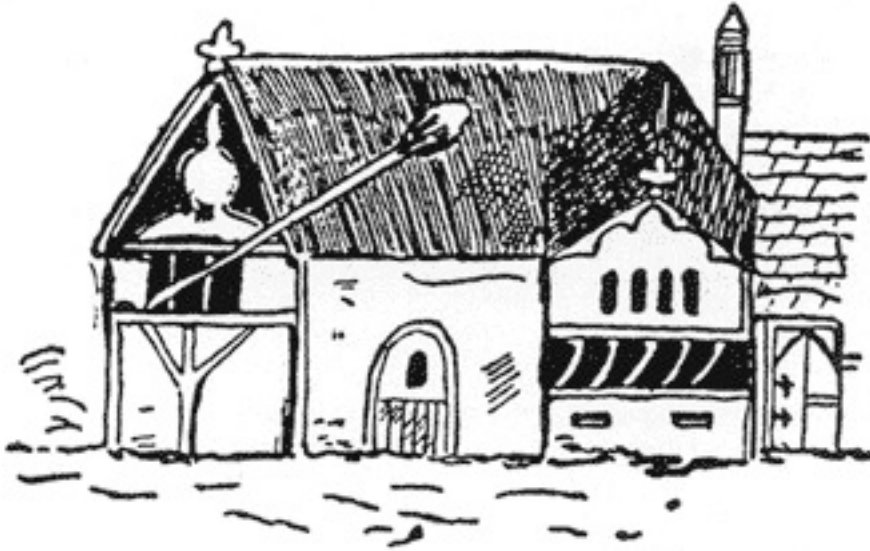
It was trade and commerce under arms to protect itself against banditry and the feudal lords. Sailors and soldiers of the league put an end to the rule of piracy on sea and banditry on land, which had kept commerce and the interchange of ideas at a standstill for centuries. The league established factories, and schools to train workers. It opened mines and encouraged the tilling of idle land. It inaugurated and maintained a postal service and enforced the right of freedom for the individual. It broke the power of the feudal lords and brought a large measure of popular government where there had been serfdom.

37

The crusaders of the previous two centuries had returned from the East with many products known to Europe of the Dark Ages only as legends. Under the protection of the Hanseatic League ships now went to distant ports and traded the products of the Hanseatic cities for commodities that were new to western Europe.

38

When the Cape of Good Hope route to India was discovered by the Portuguese at the close of the fifteenth century it was the Hansa regions of Europe that had the ships and the goods and were able to take advantage of the opportunity. With this new acceleration to commerce Europe took a great bound ahead, commercially and socially. Fresh desires and new ambition came to the people. Living standards improved. Education spread. Art and science developed. The underlying cause was trade. With the development of trade came advertising, crude though it was.



MEDIEVAL ENGLAND—AN INN SIGN IN
THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY

(from an illustration in an old manuscript
in the British Museum.)

Beginning in 1419 bush poles on English inns were limited in length to seven feet after some extraordinarily heavy poles had with their weight pulled down the fronts of the building from which they projected.

[Frank Presbrey's](#) *The History and Development of Advertising*, first published in 1929, is a classic history of advertising. Although not analytic in nature, it provides a comprehensive chronology of advertising in England and America and is a standard reference work for all those interested in advertising history. The book is richly illustrated with examples of advertising from different time periods.

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