

# A Good Old Custom

The penny Christmas Seals this year depict a jolly and colorful town crier. Garbed in warm caped cloak of brown and three-cornered hat, he brings to mind a once-popular character in many lands—the man who went from house to house in small towns and villages to spread the news, warn of danger, and protect householders.

The earliest settlers in all parts of our country brought from their various homelands this custom of having a bell ringer, a town crier, or a night watchman go about at night to guard their homes and warn against Indians or marauding bandits. The Dutch folk who settled New Amsterdam about the middle of the seventeenth century observed the custom of their home country with the ringing of curfew from the church belfry at eight o'clock. This was the signal for all hausfraus to cover their fires with ashes; then all the family retired. Cozy and warm in their huge feather beds they had every feeling of safety, for each night through the lanes of the town (now New York City) boldly marched the sturdy "Kloppermann," or rattle watch. This he was called because of the large Klopper or rattle he carried and whirled loudly at each dor. The shrill cracking sound re-echoing in the stillness of the night made known he was there to protect them. In his other hand he carried a strong staff, a lighted lantern and a brass bound hour-glass by which he told the time. He called out the hours throughout the night and at the break of day he would cry, "A fair morning and all's well."

In the Boston town records for 1638 is a notice of the custom of crying lost animals "a stray sow that had been taken in the corne, and often Cryed" but without success in finding its owner. In New England the town crier was paid to make announcements and only those licensed by the selectmen could cry without paying fines. Twopence was paid the "cryer" for each announcement made in the meeting house and sixpence for those "up and down the street."

Noted in Boston was James Wilson for his jovial temperament and his facetious comments. Over the entrance of the Exchange Coffee House building is a hand-bell with the date 1795 on it, an ancient tavery symbol of "Old Wilson." "One can hear now the clang of Wilson's ponderous bell," writes Robert Means Lawrence in "New England Colonial Life," "and the hoarse, thick tones of his voice, as clad in a purple cloak and wearing a cocked hat, he perambulated the streets, crying Sales at Auction and 'Child Lost, 25 cents reward.' He always drew a crowd of people ready and willing to chaff with him; but they often got more than they bargained for. As when announcing a Fourth of July dinner in Charlestown, certain denizens of that ancient place pestered him with inquiries as to the bill of fare; and elicited the reply that the dinner would be ample with a pig at every plate." Rev. Edward G. Porter in "Rambles in Old Boston" wrote, "Nature had endowed him with a ready wit, a good flow of language, and an imposing presence."

"Child Lost! Four years old. She wore a blue and white calico dress" and other announcements were made by these town criers in New England. They did not combine their duties with those of the night watchmen. In 1635 Boston appointed a night watch "from sunset, an hour after the beating of the drumbe." When any lights were observed after ten o'clock, the constables, or night watchmen, were "to inquire discreetly if there was any excuse warranting the noise." They must especially

check dancing, drinking or singing, and admonish the revellers for disturbing the public peace. During this period there were also two bellmen who went about to call out the hours of the night and other interesting information.

The bellmen came to New England from England and we have mention of him in the "Diary of Samuel Johnson" by Boswell. He writes, "I staid up till the bellman came by with his bell, just under my window, as I was writing this very line and cried, 'Past one of the clock and a cold, frosty, windy morning'."

Some criers waxed poetic and shouted their messages in verse. One of these from "Old Street Cries of London," by Oscar E. Norman was:

List good people all! Past ten o'clock the hour I call.  
Now say your prayers and take your rest  
With conscience clear and sins confessed.  
I bid you all good night! Good night!

The criers went about proclaiming ordinances, summoning the citizens to meetings, and to remind people of such duties as "to have all cattle and hogs out of the fields" or, "Have water at your doors for fear of fires."

Only last spring we found a notice in a New York newspaper (Sun., March 16) Haddenbaum, telling how the town crier in ancient Haddenbaum, Eng., ran through the streets summoning "all able bodied men to report on the river banks to aid in combating flood waters which threatened to overwhelm one hundred square miles of the richest farm land in Great Britain." The account went on to say how Town

Crier George Chapman broke all precedent by donning ordinary clothes instead of his regular crier's uniform to run through the streets calling "Volunteers are urgently needed at the river banks."

In this country the town of Provincetown on Cape Cod, Massachusetts, still has its town crier, one Amos Kubik. He made his first appearance at the time of the tercentary in 1933 when in a new uniform with spangles, wide belt, large buckles, and black hat he walked down the street ringing his big brass bell and booming out the news of the day. Children and grownups trailed him down the street to hear this sort of announcement: "Hear ye! Hear ye! The first whale seen in Provincetown for twenty years is on exhibition today behind Matheson's store. Come and see the monster of the deep! Bring the children for a lesson in zoology. Ten cents admission."

This town crier came to New York in 1935 and the Times in a write up May 2 said of him . . . "Amos is the only town crier extant and he takes his role seriously. He will cry up anything but wants it written out in advance. His present method is to begin all announcements with three loud 'Hark ye's', each preceded by two clangs on his dinner bell" . . . He has learned to refer to himself as a better medium than newspapers, because of something he calls "instant effect." Amos is a far cry from the dignified bellman of former days.

The curfew, or covering bell because it meant all fires should be covered, was of Norman origin and has been rung in various states in the Union. In 1880 Omaha, Nebraska, passed the "Curfew Law" for children under fifteen years of age, and over 3,000 other cities and towns had this law during the latter part of the nineteenth century.

BE THANKFUL FOR YOUR MANY BLESSINGS THIS DAY



**RINGING IN HEALTH...**  
and protection against tuberculosis  
**THE 1937 CHRISTMAS SEALS**

**BUY and USE them**



The National, State, and Local Tuberculosis Associations in the United States

*The Cars that  
have Everything!*

IF IT'S something new and modern—if it adds to safety, comfort or convenience—if it makes action more thrilling, more enjoyable or more economical, you'll find it in the 1938 Oldsmobiles. Again Oldsmobile's dashing new Six and dynamic new Eight are tops in styling, in fine-car features and in value. Comparison will convince you that *nowhere else can money buy so much!*



**STEP AHEAD AND  
BE MONEY AHEAD  
DRIVE AN -**

**OLDSMOBILE**