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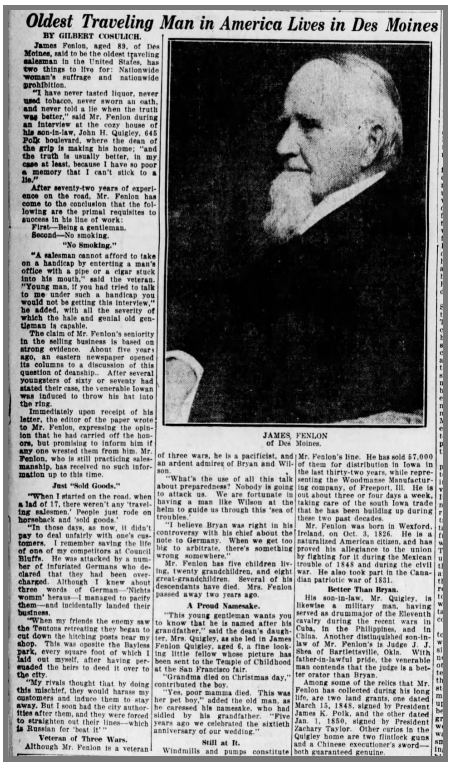

Oldest Traveling Man in America Lives in Des Moines

BY GILBERT COSULICH.

James Fenlon, aged 89, of Des Moines, said to be the oldest traveling salesman in the United States, has two things to live for: Nationwide woman's suffrage and nationwide prohibition.

"I have never tasted liquor, never used tobacco, never sworn an oath, and never told a lie when the truth was better," said Mr. Fenlon during an interview at the cozy house of his son-in-law, John H. Quigley, 645 Polk boulevard, where the dean of the grip is making his home; "and the truth is usually better, in my case at least, because I have so poor a memory that I can't stick to a lie."

After seventy-two years of experience on the road, Mr. Fenlon has come to the conclusion that the following are the primal requisites to success in his line of work:

First—Being a gentleman.
Second—No smoking.

"No Smoking."

"A salesman cannot afford to take on a handicap by entering a man's office with a pipe or a cigar stuck into his mouth," said the veteran. "Young man, if you had tried to talk to me under such a handicap you would not be getting this interview," he added, with all the severity of which the hale and genial old gentleman is capable.

The claim of Mr. Fenlon's seniority in the selling business is based on strong evidence. About five years ago, an eastern newspaper opened its columns to a discussion of this question of deanship. After several youngsters of sixty or seventy had stated their case, the venerable Iowan was induced to throw his hat into the ring.

Immediately upon receipt of his letter, the editor of the paper wrote to Mr. Fenlon, expressing the opinion that he had carried off the honors, but promising to inform him if any one wrested them from him. Mr. Fenlon, who is still practicing salesmanship, has received no such information up to this time.

Just "Sold Goods."

"When I started on the road, when a lad of 17, there weren't any 'traveling salesmen.' People just rode on horseback and 'sold goods.'

"In those days, as now, it didn't pay to deal unfairly with one's customers. I remember saving the life of one of my competitors at Council Bluffs. He was attacked by a number of infuriated Germans who declared that they had been overcharged. Although I knew about three words of German—'Nichts womm' heraus—I managed to pacify them—and incidentally landed their business.

"When my friends the enemy saw the Teutons retreating they began to cut down the hitching posts near my shop. This was opposite the Bayless park, every square foot of which I laid out myself, after having persuaded the heirs to deed it over to the city.

"My rivals thought that by doing this mischief, they would harass my customers and induce them to stay away. But I soon had the city authorities after them, and they were forced to straighten out their lines—which is Russian for 'beat it.'"

Veteran of Three Wars.

Although Mr. Fenlon is a veteran of three wars, he is a pacificist, and an ardent admirer of Bryan and Wilson.

"What's the use of all this talk about preparedness? Nobody is going to attack us. We are fortunate in having a man like Wilson at the helm to guide us through this 'sea of troubles.'

"I believe Bryan was right in his controversy with his chief about the note to Germany. When we get too big to arbitrate, there's something wrong somewhere."

Mr. Fenlon has five children living, twenty grandchildren, and eight great-grandchildren. Several of his descendants have died. Mrs. Fenlon passed away two years ago.

A Proud Namesake.

"This young gentleman wants you to know that he is named after his grandfather," said the dean's daughter, Mrs. Quigley, as she led in James Fenlon Quigley, aged 6, a fine looking little fellow whose picture has been sent to the Temple of Childhood at the San Francisco fair.

"Grandma died on Christmas day," contributed the boy.

"Yes, poor mamma died. This was her pet boy," added the old man, as he caressed his namesake, who had sided by his grandfather. "Five years ago we celebrated the sixtieth anniversary of our wedding."

Still at It.

Windmills and pumps constitute Mr. Fenlon's line. He has sold 57,000 of them for distribution in Iowa in the last thirty-two years, while representing the Woodmanse Manufacturing company, of Freeport, Ill. He is out about three or four days a week, taking care of the south Iowa trade that he has been building up during those two past decades.

Mr. Fenlon was born in Wexford, Ireland, on Oct. 3, 1826. He is a naturalized American citizen, and has proved his allegiance to the union by fighting for it during the Mexican trouble of 1848 and during the civil war. He also took part in the Canadian patriotic war of 1831.

Better Than Bryan.

His son-in-law, Mr. Quigley, is likewise a military man, having served as drummajor of the Eleventh cavalry during the recent wars in Cuba, in the Philippines, and in China. Another distinguished son-in-law of Mr. Fenlon's is Judge J. J. Shea of Bartlettsville, Okla. With father-in-lawful pride, the venerable man contends that the judge is a better orator than Bryan.

Among some of the relics that Mr. Fenlon has collected during his long life, are two land grants, one dated March 15, 1845, signed by President James K. Polk, and the other dated Jan. 1, 1850, signed by President Zachary Taylor. Other curios in the Quigley home are two flintlock guns and a Chinese executioner's sword—both guaranteed genuine.

JAMES FENLON
of Des Moines.

James FENLON-b 1826-Wexrord IRE- DeMoines Register, IA, 29 Aug 1915-p 46

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