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The Fuller Brush Man *Bay Rat Cleaning Tools*

By David Frew
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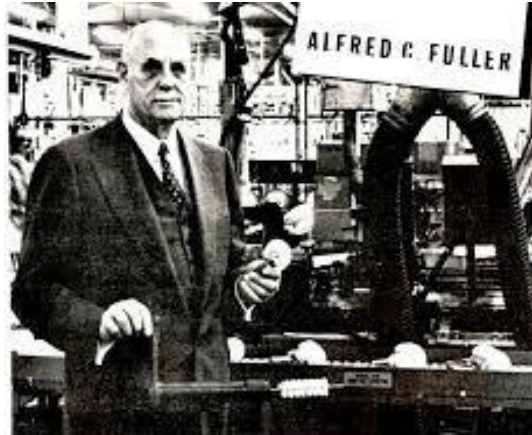
Editor's note: Following is an On the Waterfront "Classic" by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence David Frew. The Jefferson published it originally in April 2021.



Fuller Brush headquarters in Hartford Connecticut, a vintage postcard

Continuing the 1950s shopping from home theme, there was another critical neighborhood sales agent. Like most of the others who called on individual houses, he was a classic door-to-door salesman. But unlike the cold callers who are often associated with such selling, the Fuller Brush Man had a steady route

with repeat customers who looked forward to his regular visits. Unlike the Jewel Tea Man and most of the other neighborhood regulars, however, the Fuller Brush Man did not sell perishables. This allowed him to have a much larger, geographic route.



Alfred Fuller, the 11th of 12 children, was born in Nova Scotia and emigrated to Boston.

Alfred Fuller began his company in 1904, selling various maintenance products, including brushes, from his Massachusetts basement. The business was such a success that two years later, in 1906, he rented a large space in Hartford, Connecticut and officially launched the Fuller Brush Account. The company began by selling brushes and expanded to adjunct cleaning products, such as detergents, aerosols, and chemicals. The brush product line featured cleaning brushes, brooms, hairbrushes, and dozens of other specialty brushes.

Fuller brushes were guaranteed for life, a distinction used to separate Fuller's company from other less trustworthy door-to-door sellers of the era. Fuller assured customers that they could return any of his brushes anytime for either a full refund or a replacement. No questions asked. In company literature he noted that his brushes were superior to others because they were made from boar hair, a natural product that would last indefinitely.



Fuller brushes were made of boar hair, which was touted as being coarse, flexible, and long-lasting. Fuller harvested the hair by purchasing boar skins from specialty European meat producers that sold boar meat.

One interesting outcome of the Fuller Brush Man's relatively less frequent neighborhood arrivals was the resulting customer anticipation when he eventually came. Compared to other neighborhood sellers, most of whom came more often, the arrival of the Fuller Brush Man was welcomed by pent-up demand when he finally showed up. Moving from house-to-house like the Jewel Tea Man and other sellers, the Fuller Brush Man was often deluged with orders driven by word-of-mouth advertising that had permeated the neighborhood. Especially in the spring, when everyone was planning the annual yearly cleaning blitz, neighbors were eager to try out the latest in innovative cleaning tools: brushes, brooms, and mops that they had learned about from friends and neighbors.

The Fuller Brush man offered an amazing variety of specialized brushes that made everything from cleaning toilets to beating carpets and freshening mattresses a simple chore. Fuller's advertising slogan was "45 Brushes for 69 Uses: Head to Foot and Cellar to Attic." Wordy by modern standards, but it worked. And the brushes were in stock in the salesman's car unlike most Jewel Tea products. Fuller meant instant gratification.



Neat, clean, and trustworthy: The Fuller Brush image

The Fuller Brush Man used an aggressive, in-house demonstration technique for first-time customers. He would talk his way into a home and walk uninvited into the living room, where he opened and emptied a display case. Before any objections, he had spread an astonishing array of brushes onto the floor and the living room furniture and presented the new customer with a free “handy brush,” one of Fuller’s best-known products. One of Fuller’s most important sales principles was “to increase time with customers,” especially new customers. Alfred Fuller preached about the importance of elapsed time.

More time resulted in increased sales, a sales principle that eventually found its way into supermarket chains as they designed stores. Fuller sales techniques and closing strategies, which were intensely trained and had to be followed meticulously, became the source of jokes about salesmen. The jokes reached a crescendo when a popular movie, “The Fuller Brush Man,” starring Red Skelton, was released in 1948. The film poked fun at Fuller’s high-pressure sales techniques and people wondered why the company would have allowed it to be produced. As it turned out, Alfred Fuller had given permission for the film in 1943, thinking that the free advertising would outweigh any negative takeaways regarding the high-pressure sales techniques featured in the movie. His son, Howard, who was in charge of the company when the film was released, was against the film but he could not stop it since his father had shifted from company president to chairman of the board and outvoted his objections.



A popular film, which poked fun at Fuller's sales techniques, was released in 1948.



Fuller salesmen used their own cars for stocking and delivering products.

The Fuller Brush Company grew exponentially until 1931 when “Green River Ordinances” began to spread across the country from Wyoming. Unlike the Jewel Tea Company, which variously tried to comply with the new laws while fighting to earn exceptions in individual communities (where laws prohibiting door-to-door selling were being passed), Alfred Fuller was infuriated and determined to fight. He saw the new ordinances as an existential threat to his company and decided to fight them legally.

After recruiting a team of high-end Connecticut attorneys, the Fuller Brush Company launched a six-year legal battle that was successful in lower

courts. Aggressive anti-Fuller lawyers challenged the lower court rulings, however, and pushed the case all the way to the United States Supreme Court. In a stunning defeat for Fuller Brush, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of local communities and their right to prohibit door-to-door selling.



Fuller did not regularly use company trucks for neighborhood sales calls, but they maintained a few painted in company colors for promotions and parades.

The legal defeat slowed Fuller's growth but did not stop it. While the company had to withdraw from a few of its best geographic markets, it continued to grow, but at a slower rate. Somehow, publicity surrounding Fuller Brush Company's arguments in favor of allowing customers to make their own choices slowed the onslaught of new Green River Ordinances as the conflict began to take on a political tone. Overall sales outcomes were not as difficult as had been previously anticipated.

In the run up to World War II, Fuller Brush Company was awarded a massive new contract with the United States government. Company product developers innovated a small brush that was to be used to clean service weapons and millions were produced and sold between the early 1940s and 1950. They were sold to the government, exported to other countries, and added to the tool chests of hundreds of thousands of private gun owners. The infusion of cash from the military allowed Fuller to continue to finance its regular urban neighborhood delivery fleet but a new wartime problem emerged.

So many of Fuller's salesmen were drafted into the service during the 1940s that the company became desperate for employees. That was when Fuller inadvertently stepped into the women's job movement. Years earlier, in 1929, company Vice President Stanley Beveridge had left Fuller Brush to begin his own company: Stanley Home Products. Beveridge had been an advocate of hiring part-time women to work in the door-to-door business, since he had

concluded that female salespeople would have a decided advantage in selling to housewives. After Fuller had vehemently disagreed with Beveridge over this issue, the resultant conflict motivated Beveridge to leave Fuller Brush and start his own company.

Reluctantly, as the war years began, Fuller was forced to admit that Beveridge had been right. Stanley Home Products sales were growing. Eventually, Stanley sales grew to be equal to and then eclipsed the sales of Fuller Brush, largely because of the addition of women. Alfred Fuller made an attempt to recruit women to take over Fuller Brush routes that had been vacated by drafted men. Calling them his “Fullerettes,” he hurriedly designed a training program intended to propel a cadre of female sales representatives into established neighborhood delivery markets, but the effort failed. A large number of new female trainees decided that the sales and marketing classes they were attending were unsatisfactory and quit before completing the training. And then the actual field placements of the Fullerettes who had managed to stay through the training program had poor results. Trade magazines made fun of Fuller’s attempts, calling the new female trainees “Fuller’s Fillies.”

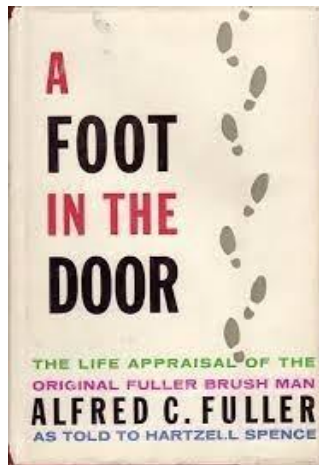
Thinking that the world of sales and door-to-door selling had passed him by, Alfred Stanley turned the management of the company over to Howard. The junior Fuller had been in agreement with his father regarding the use of women as door-to-door sales agents, but he was intrigued by the success that Beveridge was having. He could see that his father’s earlier approach toward integration and training was ham-handed and doomed to failure, however, and vowed to reconsider the use of female and part-time sales agents at a later date. His father had insisted that all Fuller route persons be full-time workers and that they adopt the aggressive sales tactics that he had advocated. Neither Alfred nor Howard could imagine women as high pressure, door-to-door salespeople and the failure of the wartime Fullerette training program seemed to reinforce that thinking.



A new cosmetic line, Juvene, revolutionized the company, adding 17,500 part-time working women to the sales force.

Howard Fuller's personality was dramatically different from his father's. Senior Fuller was financially conservative both in his business and personal life, and he continued to live the frugal life of a typical Nova Scotia farmer, even after he became wealthy. His son was an aggressive, wheeler-dealer type who drove fast cars, gambled, and took risks. In 1959, Howard Fuller was driving his sports car at over 100 miles per hour when he failed to negotiate a curve and was killed in a fiery crash. The business passed to Howard's younger brother, Avard, who began to gather a more powerful board of directors and took their business advice. Noting the success that Stanley Home Products was having with part-time working women, Avard Fuller added a new line of cosmetics, vitamins and other related products, which eventually became a major success. To sell the cosmetic line, he hired 17,500 part-timers and added a new training program, designed especially for the new female salespeople. The new program was less aggressive, more relationship oriented, and dedicated to encouraging female salespeople to sell to housewives. The new cosmetic line and added employees required a larger headquarters so Avard Fuller designed a new building, also in Hartford, Connecticut, where he moved in 1966.

The new, part-time female sales force was encouraged to sell the complete line of brushes, brooms, and detergents to the housewives who were buying cosmetics and vitamins. Other than his use of part-time women workers to sell, Avard was much more like his father than his brother. He was conservative, hardworking, and preferred a low personal profile. Avard Fuller encouraged his father to remain on the board and also encouraged him to write a book about the founding of the business. Alfred Fuller's classic sales book, "A Foot in the Door," was published in 1960 and further propelled sales. Alfred Fuller passed away in 1973.



Fuller's book was one of the first in the pure sales genre.

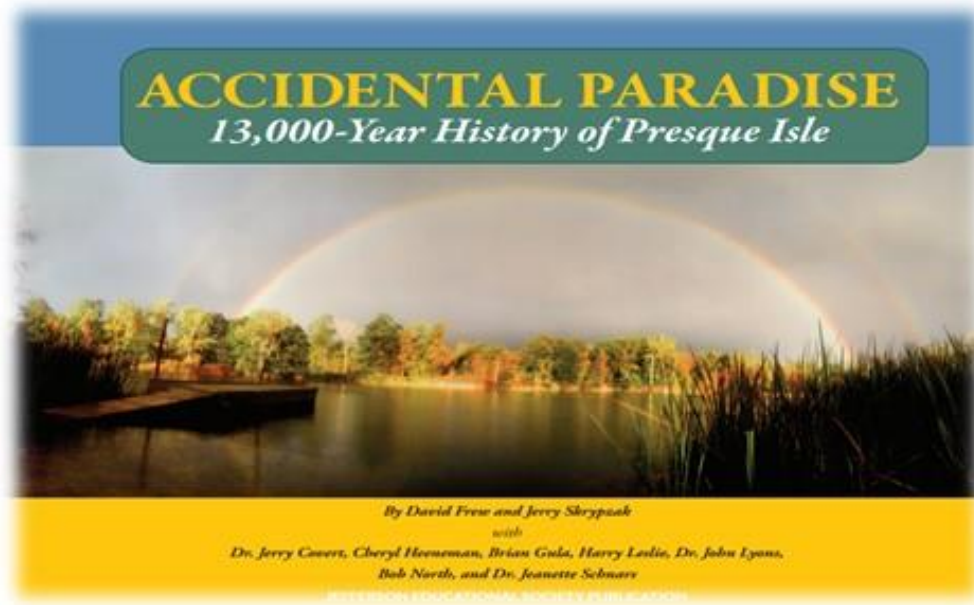
Sara Lee acquired Fuller Brush in 1968 and moved it to Illinois. Door-to-door sales continued as the company mainstay through the 1980s. In the mid-1980s, however, Sara Lee added a Fuller Brush catalogue as well as outlet stores that sold flawed and discontinued products. By 1990, catalogue and outlet store revenues had accounted for 40 percent of sales, making the company look modern and ripe for a takeover. In 1991, the first of several hostile acquisitions pushed the Fuller family out and began to change the identity of the company. The first post-takeover shift used the sales force to sell from the catalogues, as Jewel Tea had done. Sadly, most of the takeover changes did not work. America had moved beyond the era of door-to-door sales and toward shopping malls.

Fuller Brush has made a modern reappearance. In 2018, Galaxy Brush, a New Jersey Company, purchased the name Fuller Brush along with all trademarks and patents. A relatively new and internet and television-based company, Galaxy, was struggling to establish a market niche and wanted to use the established Fuller name and reputation for quality. Galaxy has been operating since that time, mostly using television commercials in which it emphasizes "the reliable Fuller Brush Man" in its advertising and customer satisfaction.

The 1950s in Erie and elsewhere were simpler times. The Fuller Brush Man and other door-to-door sellers came regularly, helping families who did not have automobiles to acquire the necessities of daily life. They came to neighborhoods where everyone knew each other. No social media. No cable television. No internet ... were those better days?

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Accidental Paradise
by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



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Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.



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