

Meet Our Museum Podcast: The Shopping Cart

Date: 8/2010

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Codes:

MR = Matt Ringelstetter

AO = Allison Oswald

“ “ = interrupting, pause

[] = not speaker's words

MR = Welcome to the History Explorer Meet Our Museum Podcast. In this month's episode we're going to speak with archivist, Allison Oswald, who explains the history of the shopping cart; an every-day object you might not consider all that historical. As with any invention, however, the story behind it is much more interesting than it may appear. Listen in as Allison discusses the history behind the invention of the shopping cart.

AO = Hi, my name is Allison Oswald and I'm an archivist.

MR = So, Allison, why don't you tell us a little bit about the history of the shopping cart.

AO = Sure, um, well the invention of the shopping cart is like so many stories made up of individuals, really interesting individuals, as well as, big manufacturing and industry. It really starts with two people who are contemporaries of each other and working really in the middle of the country, in the United States; Sylban Goldman and Orlo Watson and Sylban Goldman is credited with inventing the first shopping cart in April of 1939.

We're fortunate here at the museum to have Goldman's shopping cart actually on display right now as well as Orlo Watson's telescoping shopping cart.

So Goldman and Watson are contemporaries of each other but yet at the same time they're very different. Goldman is working in the grocery industry. He's a grocer himself in Oklahoma and Watson is a machinist; a trained machinist who's working in Kansas City, Missouri, and they're both working on these carts and that kind of thing and other sorts of, what I would call today, hand trucks and other kinds of things.

About, oh, the late 1940s, Watson comes up with this idea to create a telescoping shopping cart; something that is hinged really and it sort of moves inward and allows the baskets to telescope in a way that they take up less space on a store floor and that kind of thing. He does that and decides that he's going to patent this which he ultimately does in August of '49. At the same time, Goldman is also concurrently working on something very similar and sort of contests it and that's where Goldman's and Watson's lives intersect because there's patent litigation that is going to ensure so they go into court to sort of battle this out. Ultimately Watson's prior patent, his prior art, is upheld in court because he had very substantial documentation to prove his invention and those are the materials we were able to collect here in the Archive Center. When you look at those materials you really get a sense of how well-documented Watson was doing with his work. He was making sure that things were being witnessed, that they were being signed, and he has substantial correspondence and other things that really helped him prove his case in court. Goldman ultimately settles with Watson and allows this to sort of fade away and then he gets sort of the royalty payment per cart that he made.

MR = Sure. So, Goldman was the grocer.

AO = He was a grocer, correct.

MR = So, do you think that has a lot to do with the fact that he just kind of invented this to solve a problem that was in his grocery store versus someone that was...

AO = I do. I think that Goldman definitely was analyzing what was going on in the grocery store in Oklahoma and he was seeing that people were having difficulty maneuvering or handling what was a hand-held basket and essentially what Goldman did was that he took a hand-held basket, the small ones that we use today, and he placed it on top of a folding chair and then had castor wheels put on the bottom to move it around. So, it's essentially two small baskets stacked on top of each another but his cart did not collapse or telescope. It had to have the baskets taken off, it had to be folded up so it wasn't terribly efficient whereas Watson's actually did fit into each other but Goldman was doing some analysis, he's seeing what's going on, and this invention is something that is sort of happening in a time period where we're looking at a post WWII story really, you have suburbs that are popping up, there's a huge housing boom, there's a need for larger grocery stores for refrigeration is coming into the home people can go out and buy more groceries and they're going to bring them home but when they go to the store they want to fill the basket and it just wasn't working, so the cart becomes very important and it really is the ultimate self-serve vehicle and it really is even today.

MR = How did people react to these carts at first? It was probably something they hadn't seen before.

AO = No, they didn't. It took Goldman, I think, and Watson as well in trying to introduce them into the stores actually hiring people to push them around to sort of say, look, my hands are free, I have children with me, you know, I can easily get the goods off the shelf and that kind of thing. So, yes, there was a real need to get the word out and then stage people actually in grocery stores.

MR = When you say telescoping, you mean....like the ones we see today they go into.

AO = Yes, they nest and fit into each another. Correct.

MR = So, Watson, did he originally create something like Goldman's at first, something that was just a cart?

AO = His cart originally was two baskets one on top of the other, but they always had the hinged aspect of it that went in and it was ultimately patented that way as a store basket. You know, Watson was a machinist, so he was doing other things as well. He had a strong interest in valves and he had a number of other patents to his name but this is the one that really went the furthest. It came to be. It was manufactured.

MR = Right. Is he credited, is he known as the inventor?

AO = No, I think both Goldman and Watson work in relative anonymity. I think that this is a really good story of where people, we use these things every day, but they really don't know the true story behind it. They both should be credited. Goldman for coming up with the idea of creating this self-serve vehicle to push around the store and then Watson for making it more efficient for giving the store more floor space by telescoping, by nesting them. Nesting was a big word that both of them used.

MR = I used to be a cart boy at a grocery store in Western New York. I used to have to go out and corral them. Is that what you call it?

AO = Oh. Yeah. Corral them. Yeah. I would say corral them. That's really an interesting kind of idea this sort of cart retrieval and sort of the issue of sort of abandoned shopping carts and things. When you start getting into all this you find that different stores have different policies about how you can maybe get them out of the shopping parking lot area or you can't or you need to use a coin to retrieve them or well there are a lot of abandoned carts.

MR = Yeah they're all over the place.

AO = Think about it. We see shopping carts everywhere and they become repurposed for so many things whether it's somebody who's homeless pushing their stuff around or

they're used to hold materials perhaps even on a factory floor and [can] be easily pushed around because they can actually handle a lot of weight.

MR = That's interesting that something that's this quirky invention that came out of many different factories including post WWII and consumerism and the rise of suburbia has kind of pervaded all these different areas of different types of society.

AO = Yeah, and the carts too come in so many different typologies now; they're either nickel or chrome-plated, they're plastic, they're small, they're large, they're mid-size. You can put a child in them now. You couldn't previously do that. Goldman, too, introduced this idea of the seat for the child. So, even after Watson's telescoping cart is taking off, he's still continuing to add and refine things to the cart like the child seat. And, I noticed recently when shopping with my children that shopping carts have now cup holders so that you put a drink, right? and they also have a spot for a handheld scanner (at least they do at my local grocery store) so this idea that you go out, you scan your own groceries, the bar code, you put it in the cart and bag it sort of to make your trip perhaps a little faster you don't have to put it all up on the conveyer belt. The cart is actually designed to handle both things, do those things.

MR = You said that it's the ultimate self-serve vehicle.

AO = Right. It is the ultimate self-serve vehicle. It really is and they're ubiquitous. They're just everywhere.

MR = Yeah. And, what did people do before the carts were invented? What did they do with their groceries?

AO = From what I've been able to see in terms of Watson's collection here is they were using small, hand-held baskets, the kind that we would pick up today when we enter the door when we're just trying to get maybe one or two items to carry but they were never affixed to something that would roll or could be pushed.

MR = Right, and then once people started buying more groceries...

AO = Correct. And they needed to bring them home. And, now shopping carts, some of them are just huge for some of the big box stores because we're consuming more or we're encouraged to buy more. You know, a fill the cart up kind of idea so you see a little bit more of that.

MR = So, do you think that the carts are bigger because people need more space to buy things or they're saying, look at this, look how much room you have. You can buy more.

AO = Yeah. I think it's the psychology to fill it up and but you can today buy shopping carts in all different types of sizes and color and materials for that matter so the typology is pretty wide.

MR = What can the development of the shopping cart and this story teach students about American history that they might not be learning about in their textbooks?

AO = Well, it's such a huge part of sort of post WWII story it's a response to the boom in population in the suburbs. It's all kind of tied to that. There's such a need coming out of people and sort of the rise of the grocery store, for that matter, and the grocery store is no longer really this sort of corner, ma-pa kind of outfit. It's a bigger store, square footage is starting to increase. How are you going to navigate that kind of square footage and needing a cart to put it in to push it around for doing that and it's also in the larger narrative it's a story about manufacturing, industry and materials, and that kind of thing because Watson certainly isn't able to make the cart to such quality standards because he had a small company; a machine company. So he contracts with other people and so you get within this larger framework you start to see where other players and partners are starting to come in and take an active role and he's assigning the patent which he has a right to do as an inventor but, I mean, it's certainly something we all use and we can certainly identify with it and it always nice to know where this comes from.

It comes from a very personal story from these two guys in the middle of the country sort of just seeing a problem and solving it.

MR = That was archivist Allison Oswald talking about the history of the shopping cart. For the History Explorer Meet Our Museum Podcast, this is Matt Ringelstetter. Join us again next month as we take a look at what goes on behind the scenes here at the National Museum of American History. Funding provided by a grant from the Verizon Thinkfinity Foundation. Creative Comments Music from Lee Rosefine? To hear more, go to freemusicarchive.org