

Custom Of Driving To Right In U. S. Started In Colonial Days When Conestogas Hauled Freight

By DAN MURDOCH

Once in the last war the Americans were moving out of a Pacific airbase and the Australians were moving in. So the Americans thoughtfully learned to drive to the left in order not to confuse the Australians. The Australians had the same idea: they learned to drive to the RIGHT to make it easier for the Americans. You can guess what happened. Not just an ordinary traffic-jam, but a super-duper mix-up.

Why do people in America keep to the right while in England and many other countries they keep to the left?

It all goes back hundreds of years to wagon-driving days.

England was a small country, with many little villages not far apart. Farmers drove a wagon that was just a box on wheels, pulled by one or two horses. The driver sat on a board across the front end of the wagon with his load of hay or vegetables piled high behind him.

If you were the driver, where would sit on the board? If you sat on the LEFT end, the load behind you would get in your way every time you lifted your RIGHT arm to handle your whip. But if you sat on the RIGHT of the board, you'd have plenty of elbow-room for your right arm and whip.

What would you do if you met another driver? Roads in those days were narrow and slippery. If the two drivers didn't pass carefully, there'd be a collision, and perhaps a spill. If you kept to the RIGHT, you'd be on the OUTSIDE of the road. You couldn't see the space between the two wagons. But if you kept to the LEFT, you'd be closer to the center of the road and could watch the other fellow carefully and avoid trouble.

That's how the custom of driving to the left started in England. It was a different story in

colonial America. Here was a big, sprawling land, with large, heavy loads going long distances. The colonists used long, narrow wagons, shaped something like a boat, and pulled by six or eight horses. These wagons were called Conestoga wagons, because the farmers of Conestoga Valley, Pennsylvania, first used them to ship wheat to Philadelphia. Later this kind of wagon was used by west-bound pioneers—the famous "covered wagons" of fact and fiction.

The Conestoga wagon driver sat on one of the rear horses, and drove the entire team from that position. This is called "postilion" driving. Sometimes the driver walked alongside a rear horse instead of riding him, and drove the team that way.

Which rear horse would you sit on if you were the driver—left-hand or right-hand horse? If you sat on the RIGHT-hand horse, you couldn't use your whip very well on horses to your left. But if you sat on the LEFT-hand horse, or

walked beside him, you could easily reach every horse. They'd all be in front and to your right.

When you met another Conestoga wagon on the road, what happened? How would you prevent a collision on a narrow, muddy road between these two big, heavy, swaying "boat-wagons"? Keep to the left and you can't see the middle of the road, because you would be on the LEFT side yourself, with your wagon between you and the other fellow. So you'd keep to the right, which

puts you in the center of the road where you can watch the other wagon and avoid a spill.

Every kind of wagon in the colonies had to follow Conestoga rules. The wagons were big and heavy and fast, and their drivers were tough and toughy. If you passed a Conestoga on the wrong side, you generally found yourself pushed off the road or maybe defending yourself in a fight.

And that's the way the custom of driving to the right started in America.

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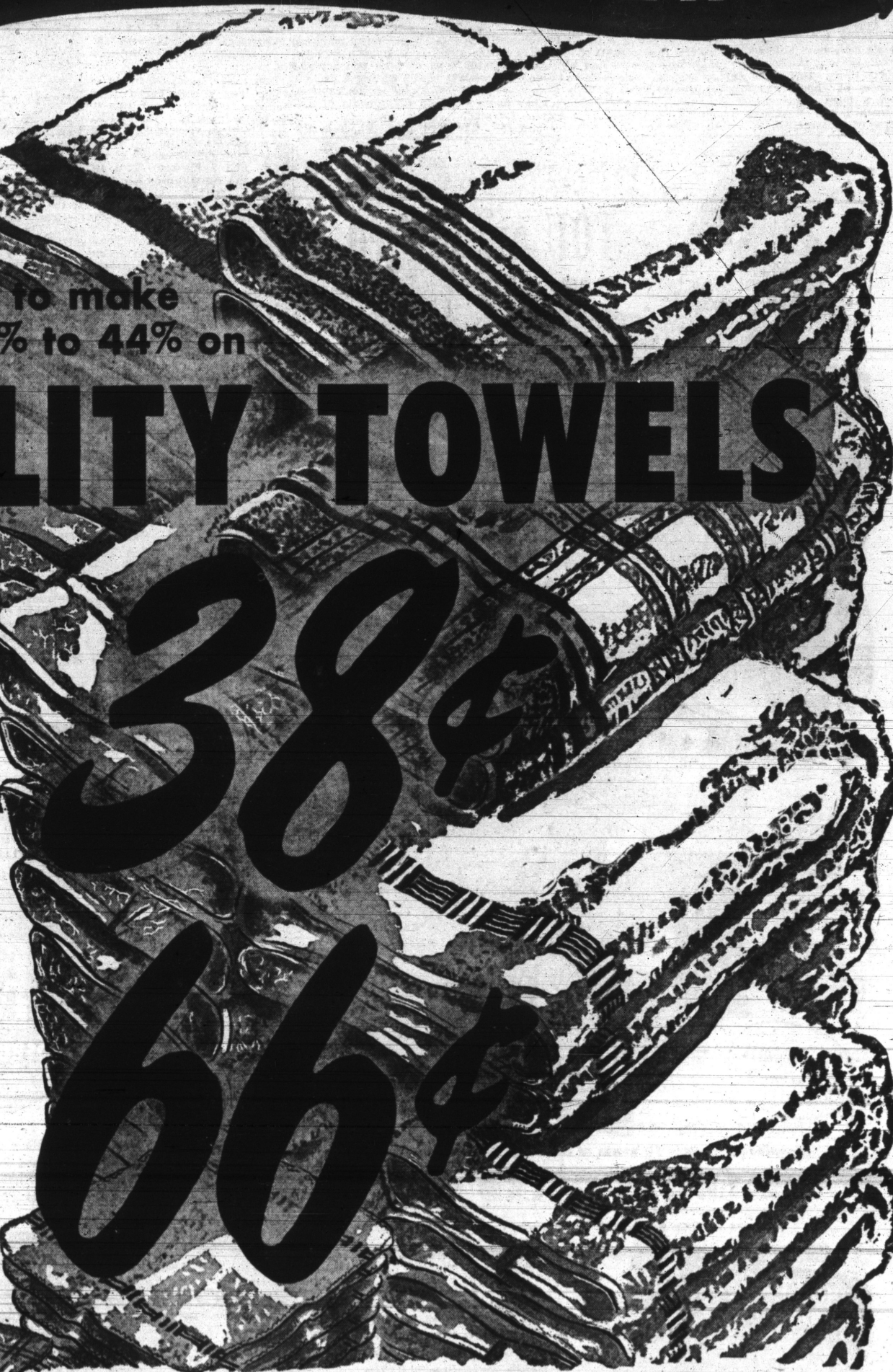
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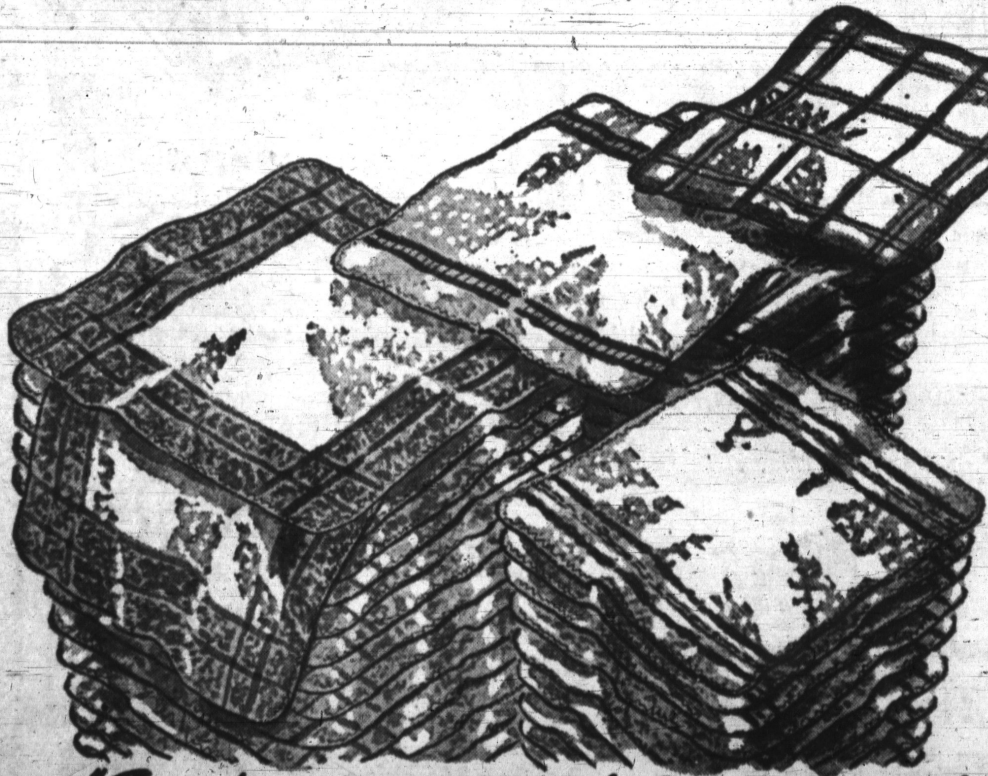
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