



Meals on Wheels - Old Ipoh Style

By Ian Anderson

Meals on wheels is a UK Social Services programme that delivers cooked food to old people or invalids who cannot cook for themselves. However, in recent months here in Ipoh the term has been used for a sudden influx of mobile snack bars plying the streets and parking at key office areas to serve all manner of food and drinks. Although popular with the people they have drawn the wrath of the City Council and have now almost disappeared. But mobile food is not something new to the city as under the collective name of "hawkers" a wide variety of multi-racial sustenance has been delivered around the city, for longer than anyone can remember, first on foot, then bicycle and finally the motorcycle.

Indeed it is true to say that for those in their late 30's and beyond, mobile hawkers have played an important role in their lives and the history of Ipoh. Once they were a key part of life in the town providing the daily needs to people young and old. A truly door-to-door service, they are still missed by many of our senior citizens who at one time never had to leave their home to get piping hot food delivered to them. Understandably, legend has it that they provided the freshest and tastiest food that you could ever wish for!

Now, some of our younger readers who spend their leisure moments in expensive international branded coffee shops and restaurants may find the above paragraphs a little overdone with nostalgia, but here, straight from the horse's mouth, so to speak, is a first-hand account of those halcyon days of the mobile hawker:

"Early in the morning the sound of a bell would be heard. It was the roti man on his bicycle announcing that fresh bread was for sale. His cry "Dah, Dah" reinforced his message. Next came the children carrying rattan baskets filled with cakes and pastries, ceaselessly crying out their wares in sing-song Cantonese. Then a youth on a bicycle would appear shouting out "Veggies, Veggies".



"Dah, Dah"

He would be closely followed by the Pork butcher. These peddlers of basic commodities saved many housewives a trip to the market and the 60 cents return trip by trishaw.

Then at noon a scrawny little woman would arrive with two large baskets on her "Coolie Pole". As she walked she cried out in melodious Malay "Kueh Kuchee... Bubur Hitam... Mee Siam-...". She would be closely followed by the Tok Tok Mee seller, making his distinctive sound of wood on bamboo. Alerted to their arrival, housewives on the upper floor would lower down a basket and plate with 30cents to secure their lunch. Hauling it up carefully afterwards. In contrast the Indian milkman only delivered to order.



Beef Noodles at Theatre Street, Ipoh

Apart from the truly mobile hawker who at one time would travel many miles on his daily circuit there were of course those who set up stalls on certain street corners at different times of the day, often on tricycles or push carts, adding colour and variety to the town. These have long been moved to Hawker Centres by the City Council, where, in the main, they still serve the same food, food that has earned the credit as being invented by the hawkers themselves. Hainanese chicken rice, chendol and otak-otak are good examples of these.



Chendol at the Ipoh Padang



"Vertical Shopping"

In the afternoon and early evening more calls could be heard echoing along the street, "Chee Cheong Faaaahn", "Laksa, Laksa" and "I see, I see" from the Ice Cream seller. When the "Ting Ting Man" arrived the children would all dash down the stairs in the hope of catching him for a piece of his hard, sweet, toffee-like candy that he broke out of the metal bowl with a metal spoon making the traditional sound.



"Chee Cheong Faaaahn"



"Laksa, Laksa"

"Ting Ting, Ting Ting!"



Most evenings more hawkers would arrive, some on tricycles or bicycles selling all manner of foods, drinks, goods and services. There was a barber on a bicycle, the candy floss man who powered his spinner by pedaling hard. Then from time to time there was the oil seller, the scissor sharpener, the clog maker, the needlework lady, the cigarette tricycle and more. The list is endless.

I remember my father would only buy one cigarette stick at a time. He said he could not afford more, but in fact it meant he did not have to offer one to his friends, He was an economic man! This was convenience shopping at its best!"

Although far from a glamorous existence, being a hawker was a simple way to set up your own business and although their food was cheap, so were the overheads and there are many successful shops today that three generations ago were nothing more than a man with two baskets over his shoulder.

Inevitably there were health concerns although generally not referring to the mobile hawker who cooked everything fresh and did not return home until everything was sold. One elderly lady summed it up as "you can see what goes into your char kueh tiaw right in front of your eyes. What could be healthier than that? Having said that there have been a few outbreaks of food poisoning at hawker centres where maybe some of today's hawkers are not as fastidious as their predecessors once were.

So where are they now? Naturally, as technology thundered on the mobile hawker disappeared little by little although just last year there was a "Tok-Tok" Mee seller in Ipoh Garden. Unfortunately he declined to have his photograph taken! Eventually the bicycle and tricycle gave way to the motorcycle and then the government-inspired hawker centres. However if you are lucky you will still see a motorized Roti Man ringing his bell in the street in the outlying housing estates that surround Ipoh. We still have three or four who are just as popular as they always were. One wonders how long they will last.



Motorised Roti Man

But, lest we forget, there is still one popular form of mobile food that has taken over where the traditional hawker left off. We call it "Catered Food" and, believe it or not, in Ipoh, it is still delivered by a bicycle loaded with stainless steel tiffin carriers. Old habits die hard!