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Cash conveyors a delight of youth

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One of the unfailing pleasures of my childhood was to accompany my mother when she shopped in the larger stores in Santa Cruz and Watsonville. Not that I was an ardent shopper, but that I found the overhead cash conveyors fascinating.

My favorite was the one in the old Daly Brothers' store, across Main Street from Ford's, chiefly, I suspect, because the clerks usually saw to it that I could pull down the cord that sent the tiny trolley hurtling along its wire rails to the cashier's office at the far end of the store.

Of course, the larger stores had more complex systems, three wires, supported by light steel frames, carried and guided the little tubes hanging from tiny trolleys as they zipped around corners and on long straight-aways at unvarying speed to come to rest, with a series of sharp clicks, in two banks above the cashier's desk. I stared through the brass bars that screened the desk to watch the cashier unscrew the bottom of each tube, take out the sales slip and the money, and send the receipt and proper change hurtling back.

I have just happened upon the history of those intriguing cash conveyors. A prosperous Massachusetts merchant, Lamson by name, obliged to move his store to a new location, found only one store building available — a long, narrow building.

Despite the modern myths about the superior quality of early schools, merchants of the 19th Century had difficulty in finding salesmen whose arithmetic was good enough to avoid costly errors in making up sales slips and making change. To lessen the chances of customer complaints and outright losses, merchants therefore hired expert cashiers to check all slips and to make change.

The only logical location for the cashier's desk in Mr. Lamson's new store was across the rear end of the building. But this imposed an inordinate amount of walking through crowded aisles upon his salesmen.

One busy day when Lamson himself was waiting on customers, he became so

frustrated in trying to reach the cashier that he pulled a clean handkerchief from his pocket, tied the sales slip and gold and silver coins in it, and threw it to the cashier's desk. Soon all his salesmen were following his example.

The novel procedure drew crowds to the store, among them boys, impelled by mischief or larceny, who would leap up to intercept the cash missiles. Losses grew by the day. He had to do something.

Of inventive mind and with a mechanical bent, Lamson hit upon a solution. He took the wooden balls from the family croquet set, cut them in half, hollowed them out, threaded them to make one half a screw top and provided slanting rails of thin wood for them to roll on. His system was so successful that soon merchants all over the state were begging for duplicates.

So the Lamson Cash Conveyor Systems was born.

The engineers hired by the new firm were not long in developing a much more efficient system, a screwtop tube on a trolley that ran on a taut wire within a protective wire frame. The impetus that moved the little conveyors was a catapulting device activated by a pullcord. The salesmen and the cashier could send the conveyor back and forth over the same wire. These systems soon became standard store equipment in the United States and Great Britain. Dozens are still in use in both countries.

Lamson's engineers kept up with the times. By 1904 they had come up with cash tubes topped with felt pads that travelled through vacuum tubes. These made possible the delivery of cash and sales slips to a central cashier's desk for an entire building.

With enlarged vacuum systems, postal services here and in England sent mail between postoffice branches all over big cities.

Still, I miss the clicking and whirring of the overhead cash railways, when I visit the old familiar stores, and I'm always sorry for the youngsters shopping with their parents; for there can be little interest or excitement for them in the sales desks that now dot the floors of bigger shops.