From The Grove Archives

A Short history of Sugar

"The necessities of civilized life- cotton, coffee and sugar"
Dr. John Albert Kennicott to Professor JB Turner

In the Fall 2017, issue of *A Leaf from The Grove*, I challenged our readers to identify an artifact from The Grove Archives. One astute reader identified it and I thank her very much for her expert research! The item was a sugar nipper. What is a sugar nipper? Let us begin by first discussing sugar.

Do we ever really think about sugar? It is inexpensive and plentiful and if you need it for baking or cooking, you simply go to your local grocery store and it is always on the shelf. White sugar, brown sugar, granulated, cubed, confectioners or powdered sugar, it is always available at reasonable prices.

However, that was not always the case. For many years, sugar was a precious commodity not readily available. One of the main characters in Charles Dickens' book, *Bleak House*, was Esther Summerson, a governess/housekeeper working for a wealthy family. Esther was trusted enough by the family to carry the keys to the spice cabinet. That is how valued spices and sugar were in Victorian England.

According to *Sugar in the Atlantic World*[1]

> In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, European powers established sugar colonies in the West Indies and along the Atlantic coast of South America. The first British sugar island was Barbados, followed by St. Kitts, Nevis, Antigua and Jamaica. In the nineteenth century, Grenada and Trinidad were added to the empire. Sugar dominated production on the islands: there were always some other crops grown, but after the plantation system was in full swing the planters frequently preferred importing provisions to producing them locally so as to have the maximum amount of land planted with sugar cane.
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> The trade in sugar was important to Britain's development as a trading nation and as an empire. Throughout the eighteenth century, sugar from the colonies was England's most important import. It was the driving force in a network of trade that spanned the Atlantic, touching three continents. Historians debate whether and how

[1] Introduction to the exhibit, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.

> much the capital accumulation made possible by the sugar industry was instrumental in financing the industrial revolution. However, expanded networks of trade, such as those in which sugar was a force, certainly played a role in stimulating industrialization.
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> Sugar was originally known to Europe as a rare and costly spice, but the growth of sugarcane production, first in the Mediterranean and then in the Atlantic, made sugar ever more available. Between the middle of the seventeenth century and the middle of the nineteenth, sugar was transformed from a luxury to a widely consumed commodity in Great Britain and the United States. By the late nineteenth century it was a thoroughly common article of diet, even a necessity, for all classes.
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> Sugar was an exorbitantly successful commodity. Although the market was extremely volatile, with regular swings from scarcity to glut throughout the plantation era, production and consumption increased steadily.

Cubed or granulated sugar was not introduced until the second half of the 19th century. According to author Elizabeth David:

> Households bought their white sugar in tall, conical loaves, from which pieces were broken off with special iron sugar-cutters (sugar nips). Shaped something like very large heavy pliers with sharp blades attached to the cutting sides, these cutters had to be strong and tough, because the loaves were large, about 14 inches in diameter at the base, and 3 feet tall. In those days, sugar was used with great care, and one loaf lasted a long time. The weight would probably have been about 30 pounds. Later the weight of a loaf varied from 5 to 35 pounds according to the sugar molds used by any one refinery. A common size was 14 pounds but the finest sugar from Madeira came in small loaves of only 3 to 4 pounds in weight. Up till late Victorian times, household sugar changed very little, and sugar loaves were still common until well into the twentieth century.[2]

The sugar cones or loaves, with their rounded tops, were the end-product of a process in which the dark molasses-rich raw sugar was refined into white sugar. This was imported from sugar cane growing regions, such as the West Indies, along the Atlantic coast of South America, the Caribbean and Brazil.

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[2] [2] *English Bread and Yeast Cookery* (Viking Press, 1983),

Imagine, if you can, the scarcity and cost of sugar in Chicago in the 1830s, when the Kennicotts first arrived here. We know the Kennicotts had sugar in their household. The Grove Archives contains a bill dated 1854, to John A. Kennicott from a shop called Gray, Densmore & Phelps located at 87 South Water Street and 11 Dearborn Street, both in Chicago, Illinois. Two items are on the bill: coffee and sugar. While the bill is difficult to read, what is clear is the following notation: "Sugar 11 ¾ $28.21."[3] Dr. Kennicott charged $5.00 to deliver a baby. $28.21 appears to be a great expense for a large family struggling to make ends meet.

Sugar is mentioned in Kennicott correspondence a number of times. In a letter dated July 16, 1862, Alice Kennicott writes to her brother, Bruno Kennicott, from Charlie's Hope[4] that she "went with [their brother], Charlie to Sandoval to get butter and sugar. They are so slow in the stores that no wonder Charlie dislikes going to town. It took at least two hours." Cora Kennicott Redfield made a note in her pocket diary that she needed to purchase "Jar 40 lbs. sugar and mending pins." There is no indication what she paid for 40 pounds of sugar. Finally, writing from Columbus, Kentucky on July 10, 1863, Alice Kennicott told her mother that she and husband, Frank, are eating potatoes, beets, squash and cucumbers from the garden and they have milk, ice, butter and eggs. They also have baker's bread and meat from the grocery and sugar, coffee and tea. "They manage quite well" she declared. Finally, she describes "milk toast" which they have for breakfast. This is toasted bread in warm milk, typically with sugar and butter.

Undoubtedly, the Kennicott family liked sugar! That is why their household had a sugar nip to break pieces of sugar off their sugar cone. Is this a 19th century custom we should bring back? Let me know what you think!

What in the World is this?

Can you recognize this winter item? The Kennicott family must have been delighted to own one. (We all could have used one in the last few weeks!) Let me know what you think by emailing me at Elizabeth.kopp@glenviewparks.org and if you cannot guess what it is, I will reveal all in the next issue of the *Leaf*.

[3] According to an inflation calculator, $28.21 in 1854 amounts to $777.79 in 2017.
[4] This is the name of Charles Kennicott's nursery in Sandoval, Illinois.

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