

THE BOSTON POST CANE TRADITION

How the Cane Tradition Began

The *Boston Post* was a famous Boston newspaper institution. As the leading Roman Catholic newspaper of the community, the *POST* enjoyed a handsome circulation and one by no means diminished when it began its celebrated cane legend. Boston Post Cane tradition was the idea of Edwin A. Grozier, for many years editor-in-chief of the *Boston Post* newspaper.

Apparently, Mr. Grozier got a good deal when he had successfully bid on an unclaimed consignment of gold-headed ebony canes and wanted to boost readership. The custom began as a circulation advertising gimmick in 1909. Then, as now, a good local story about the secret to longevity was good for circulation.

With the compliments of the paper, Mr. Grozier distributed a gold-capped ebony cane to 431 mayors and selectmen of towns of any size throughout the New England states where the *POST* had a rural circulation. Those states included Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island. Mr. Grozier wrote: "The idea is that the cane shall always be owned and carried by the Oldest Citizen of your town, and that upon the decease of the present Oldest Citizen it shall be duly transferred to the then Oldest Citizen, remaining always in possession of whoever is the Oldest Citizen of your town".

The idea was a huge success. Even though today, in a day of high-pressure promotion, it may seem a naive one. Eventually, throughout New England, the bearer of the *POST* cane was a distinguished codger and much admired at the cross-roads.

About the Cane

The canes were made of imported "Gaboon ebony" from the African Congo. The heads are of rolled, 14-carat gold crown suitably inscribed at the editor's direction and indicating which town the cane belongs to. Some canes are inscribed "to the oldest citizen of (town name)". Canes were distributed to 431 New England towns with the directions that the cane was to be given by the Selectmen to the town's oldest male resident. The paper asked the towns to send a brief biography about the man and his secret to longevity which might be used in the paper. The first recipient to be reported on was Solomon Talbot, age 95, from Sharon, Massachusetts.

Irwin D. Smith, author of the *Boston Post's* "Observant Citizen" column researched the canes and disclosed that the material for the canes was actually shipped to America as seven foot logs, then cut into stick lengths, after which it was allowed to dry for six months. The best of the material was then turned on a lathe into canes, following which another three months of drying took place. Coated with shellac, rubbed down with pumice, the canes were then given a finish of fine quality French varnish, hand polished, and oiled. The canes were a full year in the making.

Who Was Eligible to Receive the Cane:

The canes were designated for the oldest male citizen. Women were not allowed to hold the cane when it was first awarded. The cane was given only to men, probably because women were not considered citizens then because they couldn't vote. Most towns presented their canes to the eldest male resident, but by 1930, the women's equality movement had reared its head and a woman wrote a letter to the editor of the *Boston Post*. The tradition was amended to allow women to accept the cane and in most communities, officials began presenting their cane to the oldest citizen, male or female.

The *Boston Post* newspaper ceased publication in 1957 but the tradition of the Boston Post Cane is still carried on in many New England towns. Many towns still follow the custom which recognizes the elderly. Other towns have retired the cane from circulation and retained it at the town hall. In some towns the canes have been lost over the years and are gone for good. It was reported in 1983 that six (6) had burned in fires. Officials from 27 towns have reported losing their canes.

According to Irwin D. Smith, by the 1930's some towns were faced with a decision. Should they restrict the presentation of their canes to a native, or to give it to anyone residing in the town, for no matter how short a time? When one citizen held the cane and an older person moved into town, difficulties sometime arose. Usually, the cane was left with the person to whom it had been presented until his or her death, rather than until someone older came along.

Honor or Hex?

Whether you consider the cane an honor depends on how you feel about growing old. Some feel it is quite an honor to have lived long enough to be considered the "oldest citizen". People react differently when they are presented with the gold-handled black ebony walking stick known as the Boston Post Cane. For some it is a dubious honor because it is awarded to the oldest citizen of the town. Not all women were thrilled about the honor when they did become eligible to receive the cane; they didn't want their age made public. Some feel the black stick is considered a "hex" or kiss of death. Like the lady who shrilled to the selectmen, "I don't want that thing! Everybody else who had it died!"

Cane's Value

The canes, valuable to their holders and their towns for their historical significance, are not worth a great deal at auction. Dealers put their value at between \$400 and \$700 -- a far cry from the \$48,000 paid at a recent Nantucket Island auction for a nautical cane with a carved whale's tooth ivory handle, in the form of a hand with a snake.

One recipient noted that "Mine's got a dent in it, so you know it's got a history -- like somebody walloped somebody".

Goffstown's Boston Post Cane Eligibility Guidelines:

To be eligible to receive the cane, recipients must be the oldest living citizen in the Town of Goffstown at the time of presentation, must be a residing member of the community of Goffstown at the time the cane is awarded to them. If the person is in a nursing home at the time the cane is presented, they must have been a resident of Goffstown prior to going into the nursing home.

This history has been compiled of information printed in newspaper articles and historical newsletters including: Ossipee Historical Society Newsletter, Wolfeboro Public Library, New Hampshire Sunday News, Concord Monitor, and the Union Leader.