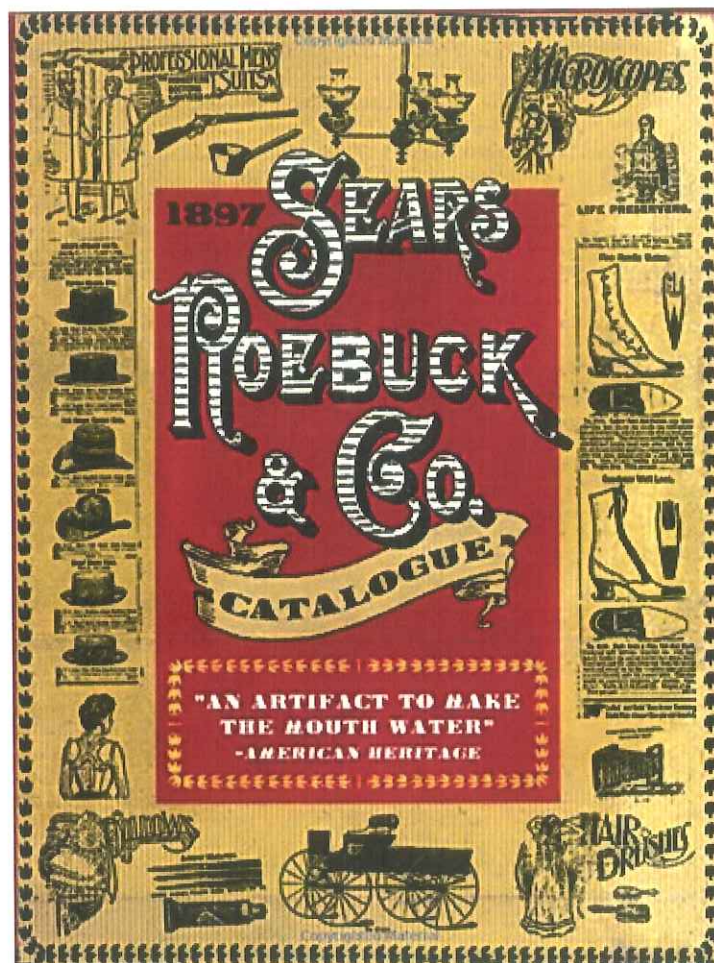


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Shop by Department ▾

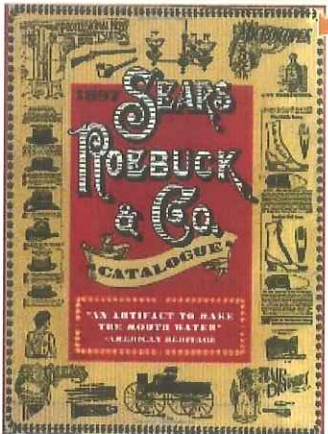
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Catalogs

Catalog History

- History of the "Wish Book"
- History of the "Big Book"
- Catalog chronology

Catalog Q&A

- Does Sears buy old catalogs?
- Does Sears sell old catalogs?
- Where can I find old catalogs?
- When did Sears begin distributing the catalogs?
- When did Sears stop distributing the catalogs?
- Will Sears give permission to reproduce catalog pages or images from its catalogs?

Current Online Catalogs

& Internet Sites

- Wish Book & Specialty Catalogs
- sears.com
- kmart.com
- thegreatindoors.com
- landsend.com

When did Sears start distributing catalogs?

The first general merchandise catalog was distributed in 1894. Previously, Sears and its predecessor companies produced only watch and jewelry catalogs.

Catalogs**Catalog History**

- History of the "Wish Book"
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Current Online Catalogs & Internet Sites

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- landsend.com

Chronology of the Sears Catalog

- 1888** The R.W. Sears Watch Co., the first catalog issued by Richard Sears featured watches and jewelry.
- 1889** Evolution of the company involved various catalogs including "The Warren Company" and the "A.C. Roebuck & Company." Catalogs produced for these companies.
- 1893** First Sears, Roebuck and Co. catalog.
- 1894** Catalog expands from watches and jewelry to include sewing machines, sporting goods, musical instruments, saddles, firearms, buggies, bicycles, baby carriages, and some clothing.
- 1896**
- Spring and Fall catalogs began.
 - First specialty catalogs appear.
 - Size of catalog increases from 6x9 inches to 8x11 inches.
 - Groceries introduced.
 - Hand cranked washing machines introduced.
 - Encyclopedia Britannica introduced.
- 1897**
- First color section appears. Features shoes in black, brown and red.
 - Edison's Graphophone introduced.
- 1904** Customer Profit Sharing program begins. Customer purchases are rewarded with a Profit Sharing Certificate, which was redeemed for selected items.
- 1905**
- "Iowazation" plan begins, Sears asked customers to distribute catalog to friends and neighbors.
 - School desks introduced.
- 1907** Customer Profit Sharing discontinued.
- 1908** Catalog homes introduced.
Richard Sears retires from company.
- 1909** Sears motor buggy introduced.
- 1910** Electric washing machines introduced.
- 1911** Sears Testing Laboratory begins operating.
Sears "Auto-cycle" motorcycle introduced.
- 1912** Silk stockings introduced.
Motor buggies (cars) discontinued.
- 1913** First specialty catalog for automobiles.
- 1914** Private Electric Lighting Plants introduced which provide electricity for the home or farm.
- 1916** Sears "Auto-cycle" motorcycle discontinued.
- 1925** First retail store opens.
- 1927** First of two Norman Rockwell paintings that appeared on the cover of Sears catalogs. The painting is on the Spring cover and features a couple looking for engagement rings.
"Satisfaction Guaranteed or Your Money Back" banner appears.

- 1928** Craftsman tools introduced.
- 1929** Kenmore laundry equipment introduced.
- 1930** Mail order chicks introduced.
- 1931** First and only year a paid advertisement appears in catalog. Two advertisements, one for Chevrolet motor vehicles and the other for the Curtis Publishing Company.
- 1932** Second of two Norman Rockwell paintings that appeared on the cover of Sears catalogs. This painting was titled, "At Work on his Washington Essay" which was made for the Washington Bicentennial.
- 1933** First Christmas Catalog.
- 1940** Easy Payment Plan introduced. An early buy on credit program.
- 1941** Sale of groceries discontinued.
Sale of items such as Coldspot Refrigerators and Silvertone Radios discontinued for the duration of the Second World War.
- 1942** Allstate Insurance company offers war damage insurance.
- 1948** Silvertone wire recorder, radio and phonograph entertainment system introduced.
- 1949** Television sets introduced.
Homart dishwasher introduced.
Silvertone hearing aid introduced.
- 1957** Automatic electric garage door opener introduced.
- 1966** The Sears Allstate Radial tire introduced.
- 1968** Phrase "Wish Book" first appears on Christmas catalog.
Diehard batteries introduced.
- 1969** Catalog selected as part of time capsule in Texas.
- 1971** Kenmore trash compactor introduced.
Kenmore Microwave oven introduced.
- 1985** Split catalog idea begins. Catalog split between soft lines, which are offered in Spring and Fall, and the Hardlines, which only are in one catalog.
- 1989** Toll free 1-800 number introduced.
- 1993** The "Big Book" catalog was discontinued. The Specialty Catalog Group was formed.

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& CO.

CATALOGUE

LARGEST MAIL ORDER BUSINESS IN THE U.S.

SUPPLIES FOR EVERY TRADE AND CALLING ON EARTH

BUYERS' GUIDE

1895



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Montgomery Ward

The World's First Mail-Order Business

Ann Kim

Carbondale Community High School, Carbondale

Today the mass-distribution mail-order industry is one of the nation's largest businesses in terms of employment, sales, and as a long-time partner in the development of the United States postal system. The mail-order industry started about a hundred years ago with Aaron Montgomery Ward, who tried out an idea and launched an industry that has influenced the lifestyles of millions of American families. Ward, a young traveling salesman of dry goods, was concerned over the plight of many rural midwest Americans who he thought were overcharged and underserved by many of the smalltown retailers on whom they had to rely for their general merchandise. Hence, he established the first mail-order business at Chicago in 1872.

Aaron Montgomery Ward began his successful retail dry-goods business as a mail-order company.



Aaron Montgomery Ward was born on February 17, 1844, in Chatham, New Jersey, to a family whose forebears had served as officers in the French and Indian War as well as in the American Revolution. When he was about nine years old, his father, Sylvester Ward, moved the family to Niles, Michigan, where Aaron attended public schools until he reached the age of fourteen. He was one of a large family, which at that time was far from wealthy. When he was fourteen, he was apprenticed to a trade to help support the family. According to his brief memoirs, he first earned 25 cents per day at a cutting machine in a barrel stave factory, and then stacking brick in a kiln at 30 cents a day. He noted that the experience greatly increased his knowledge. Energy and ambition drove him onward, and he left the confining bonds of the mechanic's work to seek employment for himself to give wider scope to his energy and ability. He followed the river to Lake Michigan, went to the town of St. Joseph, a market for outlying fruit orchards, and went to work in a shoe store. This was the initial step toward the project that later sent his name across the United States. Being a fair salesman, within nine months he was engaged as a salesman in a general country store at six dollars per month plus board, a considerable salary at the time. He rose to become head clerk and general manager and remained at this store for three years. By the end of those three years, his salary was one hundred dollars a month plus his board. He left

for a better job in a competing store, where he worked another two years. In this period, Ward learned retailing.

In 1865 Ward located in Chicago, and worked for Case and Sobin, a lamp house. He traveled for them, and sold goods on commission for a short time. Chicago was the center of the wholesale dry-goods trade, and in the 1860s Ward joined the leading dry-goods house, Field Palmer & Leiter, forerunner of Marshall Field & Co. He worked for Field for two years and then joined the wholesale dry-goods business of Wills, Greg & Co. In tedious rounds of train trips to southern communities, hiring rigs at the local stables, driving out to the crossroads stores and listening to the complaints of the back-country proprietors and their rural customers, he conceived a new merchandising technique: direct mail sales to country people. It was a time when rural consumers longed for the comforts of the city, yet all too often were victimized by monopolists and overcharged by the costs of many middlemen required to bring manufactured products to the countryside. The quality of merchandise also was suspect and the hapless farmer had no recourse in a *caveat emptor* economy. Ward shaped a plan to buy goods at low cost for cash. By eliminating intermediaries, with their markups and commissions, and drastically cutting selling costs, he could sell goods to people, however remote, at appealing prices. He then invited them to send their orders by mail and delivered the purchases to their nearest railroad station. The only thing he lacked was capital.

None of Ward's friends or business acquaintances joined in his enthusiasm for his revolutionary idea. Although his idea was generally considered to border on lunacy and his first inventory was destroyed by the Great Chicago Fire, Ward persevered. In August 1872, with two fellow employees and a total capital of \$1,600, he rented a small shipping room on North Clark Street and published the world's first general merchandise mail-order catalog with 163 products listed. It is said that in 1880, Aaron Montgomery Ward himself initially wrote all catalog copy. When the business grew and department heads wrote merchandise descriptions, he still went over every line of copy to be certain that it was accurate.

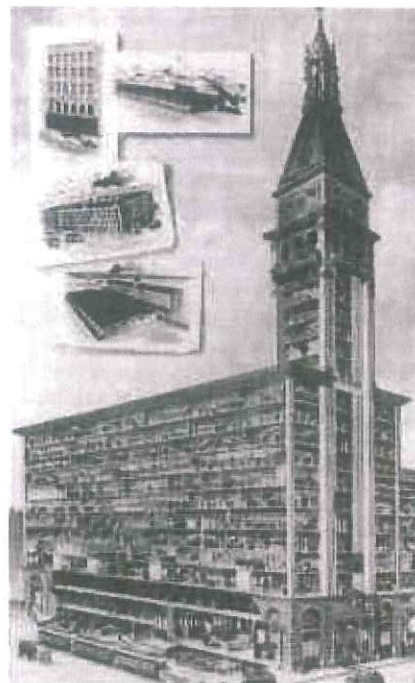
The following year, both of Ward's partners left him, but he hung on. Later, Thorne, his future brother-in-law, joined him in his business. This was the turning point for the young company, which grew and prospered. Soon the catalog, frequently reviled and even burned publicly by rural retailers who had been cheating the farmers for so many years, became known fondly as the "Wish Book" and was a favorite in households all across America.

The Montgomery Ward catalog's place in history was assured when the Grolier Club, a society of bibliophiles in New York, exhibited it in 1946 alongside Webster's dictionary as one of one hundred American books chosen for their influence on life and culture of the people.

Ward's catalog soon was copied by other enterprising merchants, most notably Richard W. Sears and Alvah C. Roebuck, who mailed their first general catalog in 1896. Others entered the field, and by 1971 catalog sales of major U.S. firms exceeded more than \$250 million in postal revenue. Although today the Sears Tower in Chicago is the world's tallest building, there was a time when Montgomery Ward's headquarters was similarly distinguished. The Montgomery Ward Tower, on the corner of Michigan Avenue and Madison Street in Chicago, reigned as a major tourist attraction in the early 1900s. Aaron Montgomery Ward, who was called "one of the nation's

first environmentalists," said that he "fought for the poor people of Chicago, not for the millionaires. Here is a park frontage on the lake, comparing favorably with the Bay of Naples, which city officials would crowd with buildings, transforming the breathing spot for the poor into a show ground for the educated rich."

Montgomery Ward died December 8, 1913, at the age of 69. His wife bequeathed a large portion of the estate to Northwestern University and other educational institutions. Today, more than a century later, Montgomery Ward & Co. adheres to the philosophy of "satisfaction guaranteed." This was an unheard-of policy when Ward announced it in 1875. Ward has been called "the first consumerist" 100 years before Ralph Nader" for his firm stand on behalf of the rights of the consumer to a fair deal. [From The American Historical Society, Ward and Allied Families; "Aaron Montgomery," <http://www.mward.com/HTML/AaronHistory.html>; miscellaneous items concerning Aaron Montgomery Ward and Montgomery Ward & Co. on file at the Illinois State Historical Library; Montgomery Ward & Co. *The Backpage*, Jan., Nov. 1980; *The Backpage: Looking Backward*; "Ward," *Historical Encyclopedia of Illinois*.]



Montgomery Ward eventually established retail locations, and the flagship store was located on the block of Michigan Avenue between Madison and Washington streets.

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Montgomery Ward, Sears, Roebuck and Company, and Mail Order Catalogs

Advertising also took a major leap forward when Aaron **Montgomery Ward** published the nation's **first catalog** in 1872. **Ward** directed his brilliant advertising to farmers angry over falling crop prices and railroad monopolies (see Chapter 1). **Ward** created an entirely new industry and form of advertising with his **first catalog**, which was 100 pages long and filled with listings of several hundred goods, descriptions, and prices. **Ward's** association with the Grange proved instrumental to his success. His **catalog** offered much lower prices to beleaguered farmers suffering from an economic depression, and in fact followed the efforts of grocer Z. M. Hall & Company who supplied many Granges. Rural Americans were eager to tap into a consumer market that could provide them with less expensive goods. The **first Ward catalog** in 1874 consisted of one sheet, grew to 238 pages in 1882, and ballooned to in excess of 1,000 pages by 1900. **Ward** was so successful in aiming his advertising at rural Americans that soon other mail order companies published their own catalogs, which became increasingly specialized in the 1890s. Sears, Roebuck and Company started its **catalog** business in 1893, joining the other



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The Gilded Age

By Joel Shrock

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