

Contemporary Collectibles: Old Sears catalogs appeal to collectors

by *Linda_Rosenkrantz*

At this time of year you probably roll your eyes when you encounter all the catalogs squeezed into your mailbox. But there was a time when people eagerly awaited the arrival of the catalog that for many was a lifeline to the wider world of merchandise.

That was, of course, the Sears, Roebuck and Co. catalog, vintage examples of which provide collectors with a fascinating view of the staples and trends of the past, from furniture to fashion, playthings to plumbing.

The birth of the mass mail-order phenomenon took place in 1894 with the publication of the first Sears general merchandise catalog. Previously, Sears had issued small ones focused on watches.

In the late 1800s, the majority of the U.S. population was rural, for the most part farmers whose only access to basic goods was the local general store, which often overcharged them to an exorbitant degree.

Richard W. Sears and partner Alvah C. Roebuck recognized a gap in the marketplace and jumped in. They were so successful that the company became one of the largest corporations in the world.

Who were Sears and Roebuck? Richard Sears was a Minnesota railroad station agent and the driving force of the company. One day, a shipment of watches arrived at his North Redwood station that the local jeweler didn't want, Sears bought them himself and sold them to other station agents along the line. The outcome was so profitable that Sears ordered another shipment.

To increase his profitability, he began selling them by mail order in 1888 as "The R.W. Sears Watch Company," guaranteeing their accurate timekeeping for six years. It was when he later moved to Chicago that he met Alvah C. Roebuck, who became his partner in the growing business.

A master of promotion, Sears designed the cover of his 1894 catalog himself, calling it the "Book of Bargains: A Money Saver for Everyone" and "The Cheapest Supply House on Earth." He also wrote most of the copy for the baby buggies, toys, musical instruments, saddles, guns, sporting gear and clothing.

Two years later Sears added a spring and fall catalog, and for the first time he charged for them (25 cents). Soon, he was offering separate books focused on such items as pianos, books, groceries and bicycles. A color section was added in 1897, and also a "club order program," encouraging customers to combine their orders with others to share in discounts.

Every year, more innovations were added - textured wallpaper and men's suit sample swatches, a Builders Hardware and Material section offering everything needed for constructing a building, items shown as they would look in home and office settings, clothing modeled by such celebrities as Gloria Swanson, Roy Rogers and Gene Autry.

Of course, Sears, Roebuck and Co. was not the very first trade catalog. As far back as 1744 none other than Benjamin Franklin was offering books in catalogs, while others sold medicines, silverware, jewelry, garden items and dry goods. Mostly these consisted of a listing of the products without price markings or illustrations.

A. Montgomery Ward is credited with establishing the first mail-order business around 1872. He, and later Sears, Roebuck, offered rock-bottom prices, along with the attraction of money-back guarantees, thereby removing the risk of buying items sight unseen.

The advent of Rural Free Delivery in 1896 made distribution of the catalogs more economical, and the introduction of parcel post service in 1913 facilitated the shipping of both heavier goods and heavier catalogs. By 1915, the Sears catalog boasted 1,600 pages that included a variety of items ranging from toupees to tombstones.

Sears opened its first retail store in 1925, and in 1993 discontinued the big catalog, which was replaced by thousands of others.

Linda Rosenkrantz has edited Auction magazine and authored 15 books, including "The Baby Name Bible" (St. Martin's Press; www.babynamebible.com). She cannot answer letters personally.

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