

Industrialization and Consumer Culture

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Although some Americans were concerned about the rise of big business in the United States, they could not deny that these industries provided greater access to goods, including goods that they had not been able to access previously. Railroads and other big businesses contributed to the rise of a consumer culture in the United States during the late 19th century, driven by a desire for time-saving and leisure products. Gone was the era of the household economy. The days of the small general store were also disappearing rapidly. Americans were finding new ways to consume.

This tutorial examines industrialization and consumer culture during the late 19th century in three parts:

1. Rural America and Mail Order Catalogs

Continued expansion of the railroads, combined with the consolidation of manufacturing in Northern and Midwestern cities, enabled families in rural America to increase their consumption. They had access to a greater variety of products than ever before, and could purchase them at decreasing prices.

A new way of offering good for purchase—**mail-order catalogs**—enabled rural Americans to order goods from merchandising companies located in big cities. Two companies based in Chicago, Montgomery Ward (formed in 1872) and Sears, Roebuck & Company (founded in 1886) pioneered this method of conducting transactions between producer and consumer.



TERM TO KNOW

Mail-Order Catalogs

Enabled rural Americans to order goods manufactured in urban centers.

Though revolutionary at the time, the concept behind Montgomery Ward and Sears was simple. Both companies purchased manufactured goods at wholesale prices, then advertised them to consumers via the catalog. This process eliminated middlemen, enabling rural consumers to purchase goods directly from Montgomery Ward or Sears at lower prices than were charged by local stores.

By the end of the 19th century, the success of these companies could be measured by the size of their catalogs and the scale of their operations.

➔ **EXAMPLE** By the late 1880s, the Montgomery Ward catalog contained over 500 pages and

offered approximately 24,000 different items for sale. By 1900, the same catalog contained approximately 1,200 pages and offered at least 70,000 products for sale.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Sears distributed over 300,000 catalogs in 1897, and more than one million in 1907. Richard Sears, the founder of Sears, Roebuck & Company, referred to his catalog as “the consumer’s bible.” It offered products ranging from farm supplies to bicycles, and from toilet paper to parlor organs. A page from the catalog is shown below.

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DESCRIPTION OF OUR ACME QUEEN ORGAN

Med. Sci. 1974; 19: 109. Wilson, R. and G. H. 1974. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 67: 109. Wilson, R. and G. H. 1974. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 67: 109.

WILFINGTON WILGHT—The wily, old-time organ, bound for shipment, is about \$50 pounds. It's torn and jacked up every-where with great care, paying special attention to the bellows, so that the instrument will reach you in perfect condition, not mangled in any way, shape or fashion.

[illegible]

ACTION.—The action of this high grade Acme Green Organ consists of the celebrated Russell vents, which are said to be the highest grade instruments. This organ is fitted with Hammond's Complete and Van Horns, and the best Organ Case, located etc.

[illegible][illegible][illegible]

THE WILLOWS.—The willows grow by the water, are made up of the same material as the grasses, and are very common in the lowlands.

THE TOWN—The town is one of the most important symbols in any novel about American life. The town is the center of the community. It is the place where people live, work, and play. It is the place where they find their identity and their purpose in life.

We now have to argue that the ad-
ditional argument is not a counterexample. The
proper disjunctive form is "either the
symbol is true or the symbol is false."
The symbol is true or the symbol is false
is a tautology. The symbol is true or the
symbol is false is a tautology. The symbol
is true or the symbol is false is a tautology.

\$27.45
BUTS THE ORGAN

and we are happy to
please you on the right
be shipped back to us
and you are
**ALL YOUR
MONEY RETURNED**

25 YEARS' GUARANTEE. FREE...

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As seen in the lower left corner of the catalog page, Montgomery Ward and Sears backed their products with guarantees. Their prices were cheaper than what many rural consumers paid in small-town country stores. Catalogs like this enabled rural residents to consume the goods that the modern industrial economy offered.



Compare the emergence of mail-order catalogs in the late 19th century with the rise of e-commerce in the late 20th century. What similarities do you see? What effects has e-commerce had on local business owners? Which technological developments made e-commerce possible?

2. Interacting with the Market

The rise of consumerism, resulting from mail-order catalogs and an expanded railroad network, shows how the new industrial economy connected country and city, and East and West, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Distribution companies like Montgomery Ward and Sears provided a new way for consumers to interact with the market. In the early 19th century, relationships with the market were personal: customers physically interacted with local shopkeepers and wholesalers.

Personal interaction was not involved in transactions conducted across a distance, like those that took place through mail-order catalogs. As the advertisement above shows, Montgomery Ward and Sears clearly stated the prices for their products. Both companies offered money-back guarantees if customers were not satisfied. These guarantees, intended to reassure customers and to encourage purchases, are an example of how the new industrial market economy replaced personal relationships with impersonal, long-distance transactions between the country and the city.

Consider the advertisement above. Note how the parlor organ stands alone as a finished product. Thanks to the industrial economy and the mail-order catalog, consumers no longer considered where the organ came from, how it was made, or who made it. Ads and catalog entries caused customers to think less about the labor that produced the goods they consumed.

3. Advertising and the Emergence of the Middle Class

The tremendous variety of goods for sale required businesses to compete for customers in new ways. Instead of a single option for clothing, shoes, or parlor organs, rural and urban customers faced dozens of choices, and could find the products they wanted in a number of ways.

In addition to mail-order catalogs, consumers could take a train to the city and shop in large department stores like Macy's in New York, Gimbel's in Philadelphia, and Marshall Field's in Chicago. Chain stores like A&P and Woolworth's, which both opened in the 1870s, offered options to a range of customers, not only the wealthy.



A photograph of Marshall Field's Wholesale Store in Chicago, ca. 1890. From this building, Marshall Field's sold much of its merchandise to smaller merchants and distributors throughout the United States.

Like the new inventions and organizational methods that contributed to the rise of big business, certain industrial advancements helped department stores and chain stores to capture customers' attention.

➔ **EXAMPLE** By the late 19th century, new construction techniques enabled the building of stores with higher ceilings for larger displays. The production of larger sheets of plate glass led to the development of big store windows, glass countertops, and display cases in which shoppers could observe a variety of goods at a glance.

The growth of new stores and distribution centers made advertising a vital component of many businesses.



DID YOU KNOW

Professional advertising agencies emerged in the United States during the 1880s. Competitors promoted “new and improved” models as often as possible to generate interest. New goods, from toothpaste to books on entertaining guests, were continually offered.

Newspapers accommodated the growing demand for advertising by including full-page ads like the 1892 typewriter advertisement provided at right.

Many of the elements developed in late 19th-century advertisements are familiar to us today. The ad above

relies on the allure of new-and-improved technology. Companies also promoted luxury and safety benefits in their advertisements to boost sales.



DID YOU KNOW

The typewriter was invented in 1867.

Another important advertising tactic that emerged during this period was the option to purchase on credit. This tactic was aimed almost exclusively at the emerging middle class, particularly farmers, merchants, small business owners, foremen, and other managers. Stores also extended credit to entice working-class shoppers, many of whom earned wages in factories and strove to improve their societal status.

To encourage consumption, department stores, chain stores, and mail-order companies encouraged people to open accounts and purchase on credit. This tactic secured business and enabled customers to buy products without cash.

Using the credit offered to them, middle-class Americans could now purchase items that were previously only available to the wealthy. Although there was a stigma attached to the use of credit to buy everyday goods, as well as to falling into debt through the misuse of credit, middle-class shoppers saw the purchase of luxury items like fine furniture and pianos on credit as good investments.

Farmers and housewives purchased farm equipment and sewing machines on credit. They considered these items necessary investments, not luxuries. The purchase of a Singer sewing machine meant that a farmwife could make a shirt in an hour. Previously, the chore would have taken all day.

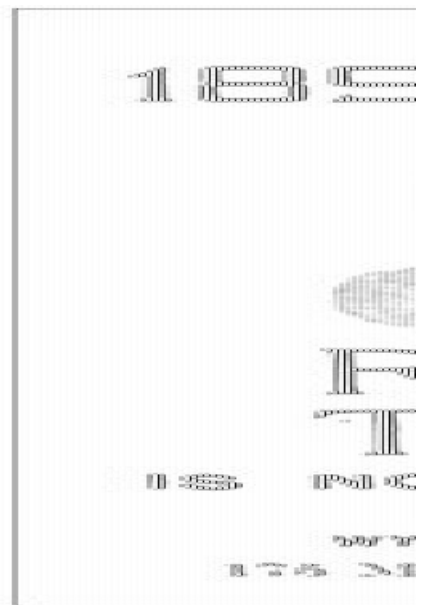


DID YOU KNOW

The Singer Sewing Machine Company was one of the most aggressive promoters of the purchase-on-credit option. Their widely-advertised “Dollar Down, Dollar a Week” campaign made them one of the fastest-growing companies in the country.

The availability of store credit meant that goods associated with a middle-class lifestyle were within the reach of working-class consumers. Workers earned low wages. Reductions in wages, illnesses, and unexpected expenses could wreak havoc on the finances of a working-class family, causing them to go into debt. However, the opportunity to own new, luxurious products was one that many Americans, aspiring to improve their place in society, could not resist.

Then, as now, the risk of buying on credit led many into debt. However, in an era when access to goods became more important than knowing their origins, many Americans believed that they could live a better life by purchasing the right products, regardless of their economic status. For better or worse, modern American consumerism had begun.



This typewriter advertisement, like others of the era, was designed to attract customers by offering a new model.



SUMMARY

Economic changes in the United States during the late 19th century contributed to changes in American consumer practices. Greater choice, easier access, and improved goods at lower prices

meant that even lower-income Americans, whether rural mail-order shoppers, or urban department-store shoppers, had more purchasing options. More options led to more advertising, as businesses competed for customers. The ability to buy on credit meant that Americans could acquire goods without ready cash. The result of these changes was a population that had a better standard of living than ever before, even as they went into debt or worked long hours to pay for it.

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TERMS TO KNOW

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