

Teacher Resource Information: **1917 Mail-Order Catalogs**

The postal system progressively developed along with innovations in transportation. Increased settlement throughout America created the need for postal delivery to rural and urban areas alike. Mail-order businesses were made possible in America with the assistance of the postal system. In 1879, “postal regulations classified mail-order publications as aids in the dissemination of knowledge” (Emmet). This allowed catalogs to be sent at the postal rate of one cent per pound. Catalogs provided rural areas contact with the American market place.

Montgomery Wards was the first mail-order business that sold a variety of items. Ward was a farmer who catered his products to rural Americans and he provided benefits to members of the grange movement or farmers alliance. In the early nineteenth century, mail order companies existed by selling only a few items. Montgomery Ward’s catalog began by listing their product offerings on one typed sheet. By 1890 their catalog had expanded to 540 typed pages.

Sears was another mail-order business in the 1880s that sold a variety of goods. There were other mail-order companies, but by 1900, Sears had taken the lead from Montgomery Wards. Both Sears and Wards continued as the largest mail-order companies.

Source: Emmet, Boris and John E. Jeuck. *Catalogs and Counters: A History of Sears and Roebuck and Company*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago. 1950.