



What Will They Think of Us 1000 Years from Now?

A thousand years from now, when scholars and archeologists in some future civilization want to know what America was like, they could do no better than dig up a stash of Montgomery Ward catalogs, from 1900 to when it was discontinued in 2001. First, they will find depicted thousands of products available to the general public at very moderate prices. They will find that most of these products were made in the U.S.A. They will find a nation with a very high standard of living, continually improving its technology in all fields of endeavor.



The beauty of the catalog is that it will provide the future researcher with a pictorial view of a society and all of the objects it used in its daily life during a specific year of its existence. And behind all these objects were thousands of factories that manufactured all the products Montgomery Ward was selling. The future investigators will not realize from the pictures that the catalogs from 1930 to 1945 depicted a nation during a great economic depression. The only thing that indicates something about the general condition of the economy is the number of pages of each year's catalog. For example, the 1906 catalog has 1148 pages, while the 1933 catalog has only 494 pages. You can easily trace the condition of the U.S. economy by simply making a graph of the number of pages in each year's catalog.

The catalogs also show us the continued improvement in the products being offered. One can see the evolution of the washing machine and refrigerator, the cooking stove, and home heater, radios and phonographs, television sets. It shows capitalism at work, constantly making life easier and better. And the process never ends even though the economy goes through its ups and downs.

Another revelation is that prices were pretty stable from 1905 to the early 1950s. In 1904-1905 a Remington Derringer sold for \$5, a Colt Pocket Revolver for \$11, a work shirt for 50 cents, shoes for \$2.75. In 1933, a bath towel was 18 cents, work pants 69 cents, a mattress \$5.95, a woman's coat \$7.94, a sewing machine \$19.95, and rifles sold from \$5.65 to \$26.98. In 1936-37, refrigerators cost from \$96.50 to \$139.95, women's stockings 33 cents, dresses \$3.98, a housecoat \$1.00, a boy's shirt 59 cents, Ward's Aspirin 19 cents for 100 tablets. In 1941-42 hunting rifles cost from \$8.45 to \$68.20, dresses from \$1.98 to \$2.98, and refrigerators from \$103.50 to 146.95. By 1958 refrigerators had gone up to from \$279.95 to 399.95. Inflation was beginning to raise the price of everything.

By 1962, the catalog had 1488 pages, and the consumer economy began to take off. One of the ways that Montgomery Ward was able to offer its products at low prices was a COD, cash-on-delivery system. The company was able to buy huge quantities of products at the lowest cost by paying cash and selling them to the customer for cash.

Naturally, the local merchants in the small towns and farming communities were as much opposed to catalog selling as many of today's local merchants oppose WalMart. Their prices were high because they could not buy in quantity and often had to use credit with high interest rates. But Montgomery Ward was able to make a good profit by selling at the lowest possible prices.



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Creating the catalog itself was a giant undertaking. The 1933 catalog described the process:

Six thousand tons of paper, whirling through great power presses, using 750 pounds of ink an hour. More than a thousand printers working night and day. Machines with great mechanical fingers sorting, gathering and binding pages into books. Four hundred artists and cameramen making thousands of illustrations. Skilfully perfected printing processes that show you merchandise in natural colors. A great battery of 200 typewriters clicking out the true story of value you read on these pages.

This is the story behind this Catalog — the expenditure of time and effort and millions of dollars. These labors have only one aim, to illustrate and describe our merchandise with absolute accuracy and truth, and by carrying this conviction to you, to win the privilege of serving you. To serve you and satisfy you, and failing to satisfy you, to return your money. That is the only salesmanship we know.

Such is the dynamism of the capitalist spirit, based on trust and honest dealings, which made America the richest, most productive nation in the history of mankind. And it was individual freedom that allowed this happen. Note that when the government ruins things nobody gets their money back.

It was Aaron Montgomery Ward who, in 1872, founded the world's number one mail order business. Its first "catalog" consisted of a single sheet listing their offerings and how to order them. By 1874, the catalog had grown to an 8-page booklet. Later that year it expanded to 72 pages. Obviously, customers in rural communities, far from the great cities, were responding to the ability to buy quality merchandise at low prices. Goods were sent by express, subject to examination, customers paying the shipping expenses and the cost of goods "only if satisfied."

By 1895, sales had reached the four-million mark and its catalog now consisted of 600 pages. The company's success was due to its policy of buying and selling for cash, guaranteeing the quality of the merchandise, advertising, and a huge assortment of goods in virtually every category of daily use. The company built huge distribution warehouses and employed thousands of people.

In 1926, Montgomery Ward opened its first retail outlet store in Plymouth, Indiana. Two years later it opened 244 stores, and by 1929, it had more than doubled its number of outlets to 531. Its flagship retail store in Chicago was located on Michigan Avenue.

Its catalog business weathered the Depression rather well, with the number of pages increasing from 496 in 1934 to 1488 in 1962. By the 1940s, with a liberal President in power, Montgomery Ward, which had been founded during a period of great economic freedom, now had to deal with the new power of labor in cahoots with the federal government. According to Wikipedia:

In April 1944, four months into a nationwide strike by the company's 12,000 workers, U.S. Army troops seized the Chicago offices of Montgomery Ward & Company. Montgomery Ward refused to comply with a War Labor Board order to recognize the unions and institute the terms of a collective bargaining agreement. Eight months later, with Montgomery Ward continuing to refuse to recognize the unions, President Roosevelt issued an Executive Order seizing all of Montgomery Ward's property nationwide, citing the War Labor Disputes Act as well as his power under the Constitution as Commander in Chief. In 1945, Truman ended the seizure and the Supreme Court ended the pending appeal as moot.

But the ability to make a profit, which is the only way a company can stay in business, is not guaranteed. Times change; the buying habits of customers change; new competition and new



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technology can always undermine the profitability of an existing company. And so, declining sales toward the end of the 20th century forced Montgomery Ward to close all its retail stores and catalog operations by early 2001. This once great company filed for bankruptcy, and thus ended one of the great dynamic engines of retail business in American history.

That is the story of capitalism. And with America's gradual transition to socialism, the federal government has not only become the enemy of capitalism but also the enemy of individual freedom that made free enterprise possible.

Of course, advances in technology have changed our economy dramatically. The computer has created a host of new businesses and industries. And while the cost of a computer has gone down, the cost of government has gone up. And today, the private sector is trying to do business in an atmosphere of more and more government regulation while Americans try to earn as much as they can while supporting the increasingly heavy burden of government.

Do we need all this government? Is it making our lives better or worse? Capitalism made our lives better, but government is making it worse.

Which way, America? More government — or more freedom? That's the choice for 2012.



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