

**THE STORY OF SEARS, ROEBUCK & COMPANY:  
History, and how a company aided World War II victory gardeners.**

**By Elizabeth Huwe, fall 2012**

**About the article.**

Sears, Roebuck and Co. during the late nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries served as the largest and most significant mail order retailer to rural America. It sold products from hosiery to houses, and reached even the smallest towns through the United States parcel post. This research considers the history of Sears, and using the catalogs themselves evaluates its activities in support of the government's World War II Victory Garden campaign.

**About the author.**

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America has long been a land of capitalism. Buying and selling products is perfectly normal. Nowadays, if people cannot find what they want or need locally, they order through websites like Amazon. In the years before the internet, mail-order catalogs were the day's "Amazon." This paper will look at the beginnings of mail order catalogs in America, and then examine how American victory gardens in World War II

were reflected in the products available for purchase through Sears, Roebuck and Company.

### **History of Sears, Roebuck & Company.**

Before the establishment and printing of physical catalogs, there were middlemen “buying agents” who served community general stores in the rural Midwest during the mid-1800s (Blanke, 2000). These buying agents would buy goods made in the East, “import” them to the Midwest, and distribute the items to general store owners to sell (Blanke, 2000). Generally, these middlemen would buy staple goods such as cloth and food, but they would occasionally bring new luxury items (such as a new style of hatchet) in hopes they would inspire some extra sales (Blanke, 2000).

If the goods didn’t sell, the middleman was left with the price of his unsold inventory. Rather than be left without profits, the buying agents learned to anticipate which products would sell best where and when. Agents also began to time shipments with the seasons and agricultural cycle of needs: seed came just before spring, equipment to cut grains and grass came in time for the harvest (Blanke, 2000).

Richard Warren Sears began his career of selling goods near the end of the buying agent era. In 1886, Sears began working for the St. Louis Railroad in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Before long, Sears transferred to the North Redwood station and began to sell watches, sent on the trains by Chicago jewelers, for profit (Weil, 1977). Sears would buy the watches from the jewelers, then turn around and sell the watches

for a few dollars more to locals or other rail workers through the post & freight system. This was also when Sears established his “satisfaction guaranteed or your money back” pledge (Weil, 1977). Sears’s pledge served to reassure buyers who could not see their salesperson.

Even with the profit-making markup, the “exotic” Chicago watches were less expensive than similar pieces being sold by area watchmakers. Six months after starting his plan, Sears had collected over \$5,000 (Weil, 1977, p. 7). Sears was fond of maintaining forward momentum, so he founded the “R. W. Sears Watch Company” and moved back to Minneapolis (Weil, 1977). Business kept booming, thanks to Sears’s innovative idea of advertising his watches in the newspaper. So, Sears expanded and moved his company again, this time to Chicago.

Sears’s reputation as a watch salesman continued to grow and grow along with his business. However, neither he nor any of his sales staff knew about the actual mechanics of watches. The lack in knowledge didn’t stop customers from sending their broken watches in to Sears (Weil, 1977). Instead of sending the watches back, still broken (and not gaining any revenue), Sears decided to find someone capable of repairing his customers’ property.

Alvah Curtis Roebuck repaired watches and sewing machines in Hammond, Indiana. He also knew telegraphy and was a small-scale printer. Roebuck responded to one of Sears’s ads for a watchmaker in the *Chicago Daily News*. A few days later,

Roebuck was making the trip from Indiana to Chicago, where he got the repair job (Weil, 1977).

Through a series of business transactions and sales over the years, Sears left his watch company, started a new company, sold the new company to Roebuck, and then returned and bought part of the “new” company back. In 1891, Sears and Roebuck created a 52-page catalog of watches for the Warren Company (Weil, 1977). The catalogs following that first grew bigger and bigger, until “In 1893, the book had expanded to 322 pages and included sewing machines and bicycles, organs and pianos, and men’s and boys’ clothing” (Weil, 1977, p. 10).

On September 16, 1893, the Warren Company changed its name to Sears, Roebuck and Company and the first Sears & Roebuck catalog, or consumer’s guide, was published (Weil, 1977, p. 11). The catalogs began to compete with the general stores and middleman sellers. In 1897 alone, “some 318,000 catalogs were sent across the Midwest” (Weil, 1977, p. 26). Goods passed through fewer hands when ordered from Sears & Roebuck, so the same product was often less expensive in the catalog than when purchased in a traditional store (Weil, 1977).

Richard Sears retired, for good, from the company in 1908. Julius Rosenwald, the new president, made the decision to change the firm’s outrageous advertising claims and “that henceforth the company would make only the most truthful statements about its goods” (Weil, 1977, p. 47-48). And so, Sears’s over-the-top hyperbole faded into the past, and Rosenwald’s informative descriptions became the norm.

The parcel post system was established in January 1913, and it created a rural ordering revolution. Previously, a person's order would arrive at the train station, and then the buyer would have to make the trip into town to retrieve it (Weil, 1977). For farmers, making special trips into town to pick up a few items would have been more trouble than it was worth, especially if there were other things that needed to be done at home. But when parcel post started, the packages could be delivered through the mail system, right to the buyer's home. Orders started to flood in from around the country and "within a matter of months after the introduction of parcel post, Sears, Roebuck and Company was its biggest single user" (Weil, 1977, p. 67).

The Great Depression hit Sears, Roebuck and Company hard, just like the rest of the country. In the building rush after World War I, Sears had started to sell kit-homes and financed mortgages. When people were unable to continue making payments because of the financial troubles, everyone's favorite company had to start foreclosing on bad loans (Weil, 1977, p. 69). The depression also forced Sears, Roebuck and Company to back off from its especially competitive shipping deals, and sales went down. However, the company continued to hold on, anticipating better days for business were not too far away.

### **Victory Gardens and Sears, Roebuck catalog offerings.**

When the United States entered World War II after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the country's mindset had to quickly switch over to that of a nation at war. Rationing

and conservation plans quickly went into effect to preserve materials needed for the war effort and “citizens were encouraged to become self-sufficient to benefit the state” (Miller, 2003, p. 395). Canned fruits and vegetables were some of the everyday items that were suddenly rationed. These foods were being diverted to the fronts in Europe and Asia to feed the soldiers. The federal government encouraged the establishment of “victory gardens” “planted by individuals and families in surplus space to offset food sent to Europe” through the Department of Agriculture (Miller, 2003, p. 395).

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) published many pamphlets and guides to urge citizens to grow their own foods and explain the best practices for growing. Even the media joined in the encouragement. “Household magazines such as *House & Garden* and *Better Homes and Gardens* encouraged the farming of victory gardens and distributed much information on their successful growth and planting” (Miller, 2003, p. 397). By 1943, the victory gardens across America were estimated to have produced somewhere around 8,000,000 tons of food and “approximately one out of every two families in the country had victory gardens” (Society for Science & the Public, 1943b).

Sears, Roebuck and Company played a unique role in the massive success of the victory gardens. While families on farms and in rural areas usually already had gardens and knew how to grow their own foods, those in suburban and urban areas had very little experience with getting into the dirt. This rapid change in the needs of most American families was reflected in the contents of the Sears, Roebuck & Company catalogs of the war years.

In the 1935 Spring & Summer Edition of the Sears & Roebuck catalog, there were only six pages of garden-related products. A separate, more in-depth catalog was available for more serious gardeners. Descriptions for the available fruits and vegetables focused on great taste and high productivity for market sales. Varieties were attributed as being sturdy, hardy, inspected, frost-proof, and ready to plant. Plant names were also more persuasive than descriptive, such as “First and Best peas” (Sears, Roebuck, & Company, 1935, p. 605).

However, by the Spring & Summer catalog of 1943, there were massive changes. Over 20 pages were dedicated to garden goods. The separate catalog had been eliminated; all of the information was efficiently located in one publication that would reach the greatest number of customers (and use fewer resources).

Grapevines were bundled into “red, white, & blue” packages (Sears, Roebuck, & Company, 1943, p. 959c). Descriptions of plants were much more concrete and helpful for gardeners who might not understand the jargon: quick-bearing, early, big crop. Some seeds were specially marked as being “best for beginners.” For ten cents, an inexperienced gardener could order the “Garden Master planting guide” to help plan the best garden. Specials were offered on large seed orders.

Advertising bits in the section focused in on the war effort: “Use Garden Master seeds ...it’s easy to grow a bumper victory garden” (Sears, Roebuck, & Company, 1943, p. 970). Special “victory garden seed packs” took up two pages in the center of the gardening section in the catalog. These packs matched up with recommendations from

the USDA about which vegetables were the most important and useful when grown in gardens.

The usefulness of tomatoes, beans, cabbage, carrots, onions, and turnips were repeated again and again: focus on vegetables that could be easily eaten fresh, or be stored to use later (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1942; U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1943). Measurements for gardens in Department of Agriculture publications and the Sears catalogs were also similar – 30 by 50 feet, 100 by 150 feet – which allowed citizens looking between the documents to plan their gardens and purchases much more easily.

While the government did not directly control businesses or publications in World War II, Sears, Roebuck & Company made an obvious effort to ensure its offered products and packages would coordinate well with the USDA's advice. This voluntary coordination would have made planning and planting gardens even easier for novice-growers working from USDA-made plans.

From the resources available now, it is not possible to prove whether any of these changes in the Sears, Roebuck, and Company catalogs were directly “encouraged” by the United States government, or if the Sears & Roebuck Company simply did their own research and acted accordingly to aid the war effort in its own way. However, it is quite apparent that the victory garden movement of World War II did, in some way, affect the offerings of the Sears catalog.



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