

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, December 31, 2018

Sears, Roebuck and Company: Richard W. Sears founded the Sears Watch Company in Minneapolis in 1886. The next year, he took on a watch repairman in Chicago, Alvah C. Roebuck. Moving his company to Chicago, Sears put out a small catalog, advertising his large line of watches. In 1887, Sears published a much larger catalog for the first time, featuring a more varied and larger line of merchandise. In 1895, Julius Rosenwald bought out Roebuck's interest, but the name Sears, Roebuck & Co. was maintained.

Sears himself liked to publish catalogs, which he did annually (and later semi-annually). Capitalizing on the millions of Americans living in rural areas without easy access to retail stores, the company expanded rapidly with its customers eager to buy good merchandise at reasonable prices. With the introduction of Rural Free Delivery in 1896 and Parcel Post in 1913, it became possible to ship most items fast and economically through the U.S. Postal Service. Expanding this business rapidly, Sears established branch warehouses in cities around the country, including a large distribution center on Roosevelt Boulevard in Philadelphia. My father was an enthusiastic customer of Sears through its catalog. An order mailed one day to Philadelphia would be delivered in less than 48 hours.

Sears never manufactured anything, but it would make deals with major manufacturers to sell their product under a Sears name for less than the retail price in a conventional store. They sold a very basic 12-gauge single shotgun for \$9.99. Winchester, the manufacturer of this gun, sold it in sporting goods stores for \$11.50. Some of Sears trade names were: J. C. Higgins (sports equipment of all kinds, bicycles, etc.), Allstate (tires and insurance), Kenmore (kitchen utensils, vacuum cleaners, stoves and refrigerators), Craftsman (tools, small tractors, mowers, etc.), Velvo (shaving supplies), Die-Hard (auto batteries), Roebucks and Covington (clothing), and several more. In later years, Sears, like most other competitors, sold retail name brands, and down-played its own, with the exception of Allstate and Craftsman, and the clothing lines.

Sears attempted to branch out even further and was not always successful. When Henry Ford was selling new Model Ts for under \$300, Sears wanted to sell them through its catalog for probably \$249.95 (or something like that), but Ford did not go for it. Sears bought Encyclopaedia Britannica in 1920 and sold it in 1943. Robert E. Wood joined the company in 1924, and the first retail store was opened in Chicago in 1925. By 1931, retail sales exceeded catalog sales for the first time. Through the 1930s, the only Sears retail store in our area was at 63rd and Market streets in Philadelphia.

When I was about 11 years old, my father introduced me to the Sears catalog. What fun it was to peruse the hundreds of pages and occasionally buy an inexpensive item. I had J. C. Higgins baseball equipment, including a bat, fielder's glove, and catcher's mitt. Also, I had my eye on Sears' deluxe bicycle, complete with built-in speedometer, headlight, and tool box, for \$44.95 plus shipping. This beauty appeared under the Christmas tree on December 25, 1935. Once or twice each week, my father sent in an order for a special Craftsman tool he needed and kept himself supplied with Velvo Bay Rum Shaving Cream. Competitive with Sears in the years before World War II was Montgomery Ward & Company, also a Chicago corporation that had a shipping warehouse in Baltimore. Its catalog was 2/3 the size of a Sears catalog and very similar. Both Allstate and Ward's Riverside tires were helpful to the antique car hobby in the post-war years, as they stocked some obsolete sizes.

Sears opened a retail store in Wilmington at 7th and Shipley streets just before World War II. It was in an old 3- or 4-story building, with the first two floors devoted to display of items for sale. Clement A. Lippincott, a trapshooter, was a clerk, as this was not a self-service store. About 1950, this store was closed in favor of a new self-service store, many times larger, at 43rd and Market streets. When the Price's Corner Shopping Center was developed about 1960, Sears was one of the two or three cornerstone stores to open a large facility there. The Market Street store remained open. During this period, all employees were shareholders in the highly profitable company, a first in the industry.

K-Mart was another key chain with a large store at Price's Corner. By the 1980s, K-Mart topped Sears in overall sales nationwide. Eventually merging with Sears, Walmart topped them both by 2000. The last Sears catalog was published in 1993, and in 1995, Allstate Insurance was sold off. Sears tried to capitalize on their extremely popular Craftsman tools by opening separate Sears Hardware stores. We had one in Newark and one in Kennett Square. Both closed their doors before the large Price's Corner store was emptied out and locked up in 2017-18. Only the automotive store selling tires and batteries remains. Nationally, the company is downsizing rapidly. Being a product of the 20th century, I hate to see the demise of a giant in American merchandising.