

Making Home: Chicago and the Mail Order & Advertising Industries

Today, the Chicago headquarters for Groupon are at 600W Chicago Ave in a large industrial building facing the North Branch of the Chicago River. A century earlier, this 1.25 million square foot building was constructed as the Catalog House for Montgomery Ward.

After the Chicago Fire of 1871, A. Montgomery Ward began publishing illustrated catalogs with product testimonials. A decade later, his catalog advertised a stock of goods worth a half million dollars.

Activity:

1890 marked the “Closing of the Frontier.” For nearly forty years, settlers had moved westward following Lincoln’s passage of the Homestead Act, and communication over long distances had made it easier with the invention of the telephone in 1876.

By 1900, Chicago’s Montgomery Ward and Sears had catalogs and goods traveling all over the continental United States.

1) Examine the [advertisement for a free catalog](#) from Montgomery Ward in 1905.

-What kind of goods are being advertised in the margins?

-Who would have been the target audience for these ads? What evidence do you see to support that?

-One dollar today was approximately worth \$25 in 1905. Calculate the cost for three items still available today. Is that item cheaper or more expensive today? Why do you think so?

Cost (1905)	Cost (2015)	Difference	Comment

-What does this tell us about the culture of 1905 America? How is it different from today?

2) Next, examine the advertisement for the "[Greatest House in the World](#)."

-Who is the audience for this advertisement? What evidence do you see to support that?

-Find three examples of rhetorical/language tools the writer uses to describe Montgomery Ward in a noble light. Why was this language used?

Example	Reason

-Today, companies use social media, including Twitter, to help get their messages out to the public. Imagine you are the advertising manager for Montgomery Ward. Create three different tweets (140 characters) that you might use in lieu of running this ad:

[Log in to [twitter.com](#) as **dputps**, password **depaultps** to post your tweets]

3) Read the [price comparison](#) advertisement.

-What is the main argument by Minot Drug Company?

-Would this ad be successful on a national level like Ward's? Why or why not?

4) Read the [anecdote on labor](#) and wages.

-List three things that stood out to you about labor conditions for the girls working for Montgomery Ward in 1913. How are conditions different today?

1905 Life	2015 Life

5) Further thoughts:

Why do you think mail order catalogs revolutionized how Americans got their goods?

What might it have been like before then?

How do you acquire goods today? What are the similarities and differences compared to 1915?

Advanced, further reading (homebuying):

<https://archive.org/details/ReadyMadeBuildingsSearsRoebuckAndCo.Chicago>

<https://archive.org/details/MontWardBookofHomes19150001>