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Abstract

For nearly a century, mail order catalogs were a major segment of the American retail business. After the arrival of radio in the 1920s, catalogs provided consumers with compelling descriptions and detailed illustrations of the sets and parts available for purchase. This paper draws upon the radio pages of the Sears, Roebuck and Montgomery Ward catalogs during the period 1920-1950 to examine the evolution of the home radio receiver and the marketing strategies employed to sell sets to mainstream consumers.
Introduction

The arrival of radio in the early 1920s was a sensation. From a handful of experimental transmitters in 1921, the number of licensed broadcasting stations in the U.S. grew to over 500 in just three years. The magic of picking up distant signals through the airwaves fascinated Roaring Twenties America, and consumers lined up to purchase receivers (Barnouw, 1966, p. 71). By 1930, nearly 46% of U.S. homes had a radio, a figure that would steadily increase to 95% by 1950 (Sterling & Kittross, 2002, pp. 827, 862). The manufacture and sale of receivers evolved into big business as radio technology steadily improved and sales of new sets continued to boom. By 1929, 4.4 million new sets were being sold each year, and a decade later that number reached 10.5 million (Maclaurin, 1949, p. 139).

Most American families bought their sets at radio shops or department stores, but a significant number purchased them from mail order catalogs. Several companies, such as retail giants Montgomery Ward and Sears, Roebuck, included radios, tubes, and batteries among the thousands of household items described in their extensive catalogs. Many families, especially those in rural areas, found the catalog radio pages a convenient and reliable way to shop.

During the three decades it took for the United States to fully adopt radio, the pages of the mail order catalogs pictured and described a huge variety of sets, with each new issue updating consumers on the most recent technical and design innovations. This paper describes some representative entries in the radio
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pages of the Ward and Sears catalogs during the period 1922-1950, examines the features of the radio sets available, and analyzes the marketing strategies employed in their design and promotion.

**The Mail Order Business**

By the time radio arrived in the early 1920s, mail-order was already a well-established part of retail sales. The two dominant firms, Montgomery Ward and Sears, Roebuck, had been in business for decades, having prospered mainly through sales to rural customers. However, the transformation of America’s heartland was beginning to change the catalog business. The migration of rural dwellers to the city meant a steadily diminishing proportion of Americans lived in the countryside.¹ For those who remained, better roads and the increasing availability of automobiles made frequent shopping trips to town routine. In the mid 1920s, both Sears and Ward responded to these trends by opening retail stores in cities and small towns. This move proved so successful that by the late 1930s, most of the two companies’ income came from store sales rather than mail order.² Even so, mail-order remained a significant part of the business and the catalogs continued to be published for several decades.³

During the years of radio’s adoption, the Sears and Wards catalogs were popular fixtures in many American homes. In 1936, *Time* pointed out that with an estimated combined readership of 14,000,000, the Fall/Winter editions of the “big books” constituted “the two periodicals with the greatest circulation on earth.”⁴ In that year, the Sears and Wards catalogs had 1,062 pages and 794 pages respectively (Ward’s pages were dimensionally larger) (“Bulk,” 1936). The books
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were published in different editions tailored to different parts of the country, and merchandise and prices varied somewhat from edition to edition.\textsuperscript{5}

The catalogs featured a huge range of products including clothing, household furnishings, automotive supplies, hardware, building materials, and farm equipment. They were heavily illustrated and had an uncluttered layout so that readers could compare different product features and varying levels of quality. Sometimes, extensive consumer education sections were included that defined terms, introduced new features, and suggested the appropriate merchandise for various situations. A comprehensive index permitted the rapid location of a particular category of merchandise, and a special section described shipping options and costs.

Ordering and paying were made as simple as possible, and both Sears and Ward offered time payment plans. While the specifics changed over the years, the plan described in a 1936 Sears catalog is typical. Customers could finance any order totaling $20 or more with a monthly payment based on the amount financed. For example, a $100 order could be placed with $9 down and $8 a month. The finance charge (in this case, $9.50) was added to the total (Sears, Roebuck and Company, 1936, p. 979). Ward allowed the financing of even smaller amounts on some items such as a 1938 radio priced at $12.95, which could be purchased for $2 down and $2 a month (Montgomery Ward and Company, 1938, p. 351).

Over the years, the companies experimented with other purchasing enticements such as no-money-down, fifteen-day free home trials, free shipping,
and no-questions-asked return policies. For a time, Sears even allowed customers to pay for items with credit certificates issued when they sent in old gold jewelry (Sears, Roebuck and Company, 1936, p. 981).6

Even before the arrival of radio, both Sears and Ward catalogs offered a variety of communication and entertainment goods, such as wired and wireless telegraphy sets, telephones, and phonographs. When the new fad of radio broadcasting arrived, both companies were quick to add receiving sets. At first, this meant only a single page in the catalog, with one receiver and a few parts, but as demand for sets boomed, the offerings quickly expanded. Within a few years, both Sears and Ward catalogs contained radio sections of ten pages or more. In addition, both companies began publishing separate radio catalogs with specialized parts and supplies for the hobbyist and repairman (Montgomery Ward and Company, ca. 1923).

The economic success of Sears and Ward was due in large part to the special purchasing and marketing strategies they used. By selling direct via mail, the companies eliminated middleman profits and were able to reduce prices substantially. At the same time, their huge volume allowed them to strike special deals with manufacturers for custom-made items at bulk rates.

These same strategies were applied when radios appeared. Rather than offer the same name brand sets available in specialty and department stores, Sears and Ward produced receivers under their own house brands—Sears’ “Silvertone” and Ward’s “Airline.”7 These sets used components and circuit designs that were virtually indistinguishable from those used in the name brands
sold in retail stores, but catalog prices were almost always lower for comparable models. The competition thus offered by Sears, Ward, and other mail order houses was a factor in holding down set costs throughout the industry (“Radio III,” 1938). Maclaurin estimates that by 1941, Montgomery Ward was selling 900,000 radios annually and Sears 700,000, representing a significant percentage of the total of 13 million sets sold in the U.S. that year (1949, pp. 139, 148).

The First Mail-Order Radios, 1922-1929

The first decade of broadcasting's history was characterized by the introduction of expensive but crude receivers. In 1929, when a new car could be bought for less than $600, the average price for a radio was $136 (Maclaurin, 1949, p. 139). Despite this, customers flocked to buy new sets.

The first broadcasting receiver to be offered in a Ward mail order catalog appeared in 1922 (See Figure 1). It was a basic one-tube model manufactured by the Tuska company, and the price of $49.50 was for an entire outfit that included receiver, tube, battery, headset, antenna, and hook-up wiring. The catalog promised that the set was “so simple in operation, a child can handle it.” Sears’ first radio appeared a few months later in the Spring 1923 catalog. It was the Westinghouse Aeriola, Senior, another one-tube set, and sold for $65, less tube and batteries. A loudspeaker was a $39 option (p. 807).

These first one-tube sets were quickly supplanted as more sophisticated receivers came on the market. Better circuits and more tubes gave sets greater volume and sensitivity. Just five years after the first set appeared, the Sears
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catalog dedicated a full ten pages to radio, offering consumers a choice of several five and six tube sets under the “Silvertone” brand name.\textsuperscript{13} Prices ranged from $63.95 for a basic five-tube table model to $149.50 for a top-of-the-line six-tube console (Sears, Roebuck and Company, 1927).\textsuperscript{14}

Like virtually all early radios, these sets used vacuum tubes that required substantial amounts of electric power to operate. As more tubes were added, the power requirement grew. At first, electricity was supplied by a clumsy arrangement of batteries supplying as many as three different voltages (called “A,” “B,” and “C”). A “B” battery had to be especially powerful and often consisted of heavy, acid-containing wet cells that had to be recharged every few weeks. By the end of the 1920s, technological innovations permitted the design of sets with “A-B-C eliminators,” which could be plugged into a wall outlet and operated without the need for batteries. This technical breakthrough was an instant success and began to be incorporated into the design of many new radios.

In 1928, the first Sears sets appeared incorporating the new battery-free design. Several models of six-tube receivers were offered in the customer’s choice of either battery powered or house current (AC) design, but the latter option was initially expensive. The Sears top-of-the-line “Model XX” was priced at $98.50 in its battery configuration and $153 for the AC-powered version (pp. 616-617).

Yet few families living outside the cities could benefit from the new no-battery designs. While 85% of urban homes had electric service by 1930, only 10% of farm homes did, and it would not be until the mid-1940s that even half of
U.S. farm homes were electrified (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1975, series 108-119). Radio manufacturers, recognizing this need, continued to build battery-operated sets and began marketing them to rural consumers as “farm radios.” Battery-powered radios thus remained an important part of the Sears and Ward inventory, and every catalog issued in the 1930s and 1940s featured a choice of several farm radio models.

**Sears and WLS**

Sears, Roebuck’s involvement in radio extended beyond the sales of receivers to the creation and operation of a company broadcasting station. Some of the firm’s executives saw the new medium as an ideal way to reach rural customers, and in 1923, Sears launched station WLS in Chicago (the call letters stood for “World’s Largest Store”). The radio pages of the Sears catalogs during the 1920s regularly carried promotional features detailing the station’s programs and personalities. Although direct advertising on radio was generally frowned upon during these early years, Sears believed (as did many other early radio retailers) that the station’s programming would both sell more receivers and promote the company’s image. The Sears name was constantly mentioned on the station and descriptions of catalog items were often heard on the ostensibly advertising-free programs. Sears also began using the “WLS” name on its house brand of radio tubes.

By 1925, WLS was broadcasting at a relatively-powerful 5,000 watts, and its nighttime signal was heard in several states. The Fall 1925 Sears catalog contained a multi-page promotional feature on the station, featuring photos of
WLS personalities and summaries of its major shows (See Figure 2). Programming was diverse and included everything from opera and drama to educational, religious, and children’s programs. The feature included a short essay describing why farmers needed to buy radios and included the story of an Illinois man who made an additional $500 a year thanks to being able to hear the agricultural market reports on WLS (1925, p. 547). Despite the station's apparent success, Sears sold it in 1928.16

Radios in the 1930s

Every aspect of American life in the early 1930s was affected by the economic woes of the Great Depression. After the stock market crash of 1929, thousands of businesses failed, and incomes and prices plummeted. The impact on the fledgling radio manufacturing industry was pronounced, and the demand for new sets dropped dramatically. This forced a lowering of retail prices, with the average cost for a new radio falling from $136 in 1929 to just $47 by 1932. As the economy began to stabilize, the industry began a slow recovery, and by 1935 annual set production was back to pre-crash levels (Maclaurin, 1946, p. 139).

One way manufacturers were able to lower prices was through the introduction of “midget” sets. Midgets were relatively small table-top radios with inexpensive cabinetry, simplified circuitry, and small loudspeakers. They were powered by AC power from a wall socket. This bare-bones design lowered prices, but it also restricted the sets’ suitability to urban areas where strong signals and electrical power were available. The new lower prices meant that, despite the Depression, radio was now within the reach of virtually every urban
family and many could consider buying a second or third set for the bedroom or kitchen ("Midgets Make Big Change," 1930). By 1938, both Sears and Ward were offering a wide selection of budget-priced midgets. The Ward catalog featured a "beautiful molded plastic radio" for $12.95, and even at this low price offered a "15-day no-risk home trial" (See Figure 3). With time payments, the set could be purchased for as little as $2 down and $2 a month (Montgomery Ward and Company, 1938, p. 351).

For rural customers, both Ward and Sears continued to provide a wide selection of radios designed to operate with various power sources. Battery-powered radios were still essential outside the cities, but sets began to appear that were convertible from battery to AC so that rural consumers could easily switch once rural electrification reached them. A few 32-volt models were also available, designed to run directly off the generators installed on some farms.

The design of battery-powered sets dramatically improved during this period. Newly-developed vacuum tubes required far less power than earlier types and batteries became longer-lasting and more compact. Radios built around the new "low drain" or "low voltage" tubes could operate for long periods on the relatively small current supplied by disposable batteries tucked away inside the radio cabinet. The result was a series of new farm radio models that eliminated the need for constant recharging of wet-cells (See Figure 4).

Retailers also began selling a wide range of improved dry-cell batteries. By 1936, Sears was offering five different quality levels of "B" battery, each rated in terms of the number of hours of "dependable service" that were guaranteed.
These ranged from a 675-hour top-of-the-line battery priced at $1.89 down to a 315-hour budget unit for $1.09. Most sets also required a separate “A” battery that came in a similar range of qualities (Sears, Roebuck and Company, 1936, pp. 602-603).

Even though more compact and longer-lasting than earlier designs, 1930s radio batteries were still large and heavy. The 1936 receiver shown in Figure 4 was fairly typical in requiring three “B” and one “A” battery for proper operation. Although dimensions varied somewhat, the typical “B” battery measured about 7x4x8 inches while an “A” battery was around 16x10x 3. The combined weight for a typical set of one “A” and three “B’s” could easily exceed 50 pounds.

As set costs fell during the 1930s, retailers began exploring new ways to increase their profit margins. One strategy was the introduction of the large, highly-crafted, luxury console radio. With elaborate wooden cabinetry, top-of-the-line circuitry, and a huge loudspeaker, the console set was typically marketed as a status symbol, meant to occupy center stage in the parlor and conspicuously demonstrate the family’s affluence to visitors. The 13-tube set sold in the 1938 Ward catalog is a good example (See Figure 5). Priced at $89.95 (or $98.15, if bought on time), it was the most expensive receiver offered by Ward that year. This 105-pound behemoth featured “Electric Touch” tuning, a 20-inch loudspeaker, and multi-band reception. The cabinet was made from “selected walnut woods hand crafted by master cabinet makers,” and was “smartly modern in design” so that it could “harmonize with any period of furniture” (p. 355).
Another marketing strategy was the introduction of novelty cabinets. Radios were disguised as lamps, bookcases, and even grandfather clocks (See Figure 6). More practical was the chairside set, which had a low cabinet designed to serve as an end table and bookcase (See Figure 7). Tuning and volume controls were placed on top so the unit could be conveniently controlled from the listener’s easy chair. Unfortunately, the loudspeaker on this model was necessarily located in such a way that it directed sound away from the person doing the tuning.

Variations on methods of tuning the radio offered a seemingly endless variety of design innovations during the 1930s. Dials began to appear that were larger and easier to read; some were tilted and backlit for better visibility. The dial shape also began to change, first with the introduction of the “airplane dial,” a large round face containing a pointer that went around in a circle as the set was tuned. Another variation was the “slide-rule” dial, a long rectangular face with a vertical needle that moved across the scale (Johnson & Johnson, 1995).

Electrical and mechanical devices were added to simplify tuning even more, and the catalogs promoted “automatic,” “electric,” and “push button” tuning. Once the family’s favorite stations had been preset on these devices, a single touch would retune the set. A variation of this was the “telephone dial” in which preset stations were selected by dialing them like a telephone (See Figure 8). One year, Sears even offered a set with a built-in clock and wired remote control. Listeners could tune the radio from their easy chairs and preset the clock
to turn the radio on in time for a favorite program (Sears, Roebuck and Company, 1930, p. 910).

About 1935, a special vacuum tube was developed containing a neon indicator that reacted to the strength of incoming signals. As the listener tuned the radio, the neon pattern changed, giving a visual indication of signal strength (See Figure 8). Retailers, including Sears and Ward, promoted the “tuning eye” or “magic eye” as a revolutionary technical innovation, but listeners soon found that it had little practical value since stations could be tuned just as well, if not better, by ear.

Another marketing strategy of the 1930s was the expansion of the tuning range of home radios beyond the frequencies of the traditional broadcast band. Multi-band sets began to appear that could pick up police, amateur and foreign shortwave frequencies in addition to local broadcast stations. Events in Europe and Asia were beginning to heat up, and radio retailers exploited the growing interest in overseas news to promote this feature. As early as 1932, most of Sears' higher-end radios featured so-called “all-wave” reception that included the foreign shortwave broadcast bands. However, as Berg (1999) argues, most pre-war consumer radios did not have the necessary sensitivity and selectivity for serious shortwave listening (119). While they could receive a few of the more powerful overseas stations (atmospheric conditions permitting), these sets were probably unsuitable for more than casual shortwave use. The addition of multiple bands to consumer sets was more a marketing ploy than anything else, and most
owners probably found listening to shortwave or police bands to be nothing more than a short-lived novelty.

Another development was the introduction of the radio-phonograph combination. This innovation first made a brief appearance in catalogs of the early 1930s, but Sears and Ward customers were evidently slow to purchase the units, and they disappeared from the radio pages for a decade. Geared toward the high end of the market, the early combination sets were expensive, with a 1931 Sears model selling for $185 less tubes (Stein, 2001, p. 37). With the onset of the Depression, such sets were probably beyond the reach of most catalog shoppers. Wind-up phonographs were much cheaper and remained popular throughout the 1930s, and it wasn’t until about 1940 that radio-phonograph combinations gained a permanent place in the Sears and Ward catalogs.

The early 1930s also saw the brief appearance of portable radios in the catalogs, with Sears introducing its first portable in 1933. Evidently, few were sold since portables disappeared from the catalog for several years. Early portable radios were burdened with the technology of the time, especially the need for heavy batteries. The 1933 model from Sears weighed in at a hefty 32 pounds, with more than half of that weight attributable to the batteries (See Figure 9). By the end of the decade, technology had made great strides and portables reappeared in the catalogs, having slimmed down to a somewhat more practical size. A 1941 Sears portable weighed only 11 pounds and was priced at less than $17 (Stein, 2001, pp. 69, 224).
A much more successful innovation of the 1930s was the automobile radio. With more vehicles crowding the roads, the market for car radios boomed. Although fewer than 1% of U.S. cars had a radio at the beginning of the 1930s, that figure reached 25% by 1939. Auto manufacturers began offering factory-installed sets as new-car options, but the after-market add-on unit was also popular (See Figure 10). The earliest car sets used a standard rotary tuning dial similar to those on indoor radios, but by 1938, Sears was offering a “safe tuning” push-button model (Stein, 2001, p. 149).

By the end of the 1930s, the progress of radio technology could be measured by the lower prices and higher quality of the radios displayed in the Sears and Ward radio pages. By 1940, Sears’ best 13-tube, 7-band console could be purchased for $69.95, just a few dollars more than the price of the first one-tube Westinghouse Aeriola offered 17 years earlier. The same catalog also featured a basic 4-tube midget in a plastic case for as little as $6.45 (Sears, Roebuck and Company, 1940, pp. 541B, 545).

The Early 1940s

The decade of the 1940s saw new challenges for radio marketers. For one thing, the supposedly impending arrival of television left both retailers and their customers uncertain about radio’s future. RCA had announced the beginning of the nation’s first regular electronic television service at the 1939 World’s Fair, and many consumers were eagerly awaiting its arrival. Although television sets themselves would not appear in the catalogs until much later, in 1940 Sears announced that several of its high-end radio consoles were “built for television,”
with the following explanatory note: “When television comes, you can use this radio for television sound. Just buy Picture Receiver and plug it into radio” (Sears, Roebuck and Company, 1940, p. 541A). The Ward catalog was a bit more circumspect in its description of radios with TV inputs. It explained the feature was to be used “if television becomes a reality in your community” (Montgomery Ward and Company, 1940, p. 442).

Despite such uncertainties, the radio pages of the early 1940s continued to reflect the robust health of radio retailing, with Ward devoting 17 pages of its Fall 1941 big book to a huge variety of sets and accessories. The model choices had become so bewildering that both Sears and Ward dedicated substantial catalog space to consumer education features (See Figure 11).

Radio-phonograph combinations reappeared in the form of expensive consoles, even though the low-fidelity 78 rpm record remained the industry standard. A set featured in the Fall 1941 Sears catalog was perhaps the height of pre-war radio design. Described as “The Silvertone That Has Everything,” this console featured not only a multi-band radio receiver and a phonograph with record changer, but also a recording device that allowed owners to cut their own discs. The set was enclosed in a handsome wooden cabinet and sold for $122 (Sears, Roebuck and Company, 1942, p. 833).

FM radios also began appearing in catalogs of the early 1940s. FM was a struggling new service developed during the 1930s as a high fidelity, static-free alternative to traditional AM broadcasting. By the end of 1941, some 40 FM stations were on the air and Ward’s first FM sets appeared in that year’s Fall
catalog. The new technology was available both as a table-top FM-only model for $29.95 and as a top-of-the-line AM/FM console receiver for $86.50 (Montgomery Ward and Company, 1941, p. 774). Customers who bought these first FM sets were to be disappointed. Not only did the U.S. entry into WWII put a halt to the construction of new FM stations, but in 1945, the FCC changed the frequencies on which FM could operate, making all existing FM receivers obsolete (Sterling & Kittross, 2002).17

The War Years

The U.S. entry into WWII at the end of 1941 had an immediate impact on the radio industry. Critical raw materials, including those needed to build radio components, were diverted to the war effort, curtailing the production of consumer radio sets for the duration. However, the manufacture and sale of a limited number of replacement radio tubes and batteries continued as government officials recognized the importance of maintaining a viable civilian radio service.

Consequently, wartime versions of the catalogs contained few radio items. The Fall 1942 Ward big book had only two pages of left-over radio sets, down from the 10 pages typical in prewar catalogs. By the following issue, only replacement tubes and batteries were offered, and even these were described as in short supply. Customers ordering tubes were limited to one set and were required to submit a signed statement certifying that the parts were required to replace those in an existing receiver.
Instead of descriptive accounts of merchandise, readers of the radio pages were urged to buy war bonds and given suggestions about how to make their set last longer. The Fall 1942 Sears catalog contained a full-page essay titled “Your Silvertone Radio: Take Good Care of It:"

Today more than ever a good radio is essential in every home . . . a fast, reliable communication system that helps keep you alert and informed. With production of radios for civilian use completely curtailed, it is important that you keep your radio operating at peak efficiency. . . . Keep checking your radio from time to time to prolong its useful life. Make it last until new and still better Silvertones are again available. When that time comes, Silvertone will be back again to offer you all the quality and features of fine radios at the same low prices as in the past (emphasis in original). (Sears, Roebuck and Company, 1942, p. 552)

What followed was a list of practical suggestions for keeping radios working properly (e.g., "check the aerial").

The Post-War Era

The war ended in August, 1945, but shortages continued into 1946 as factories re-tooled for peacetime production. Although radios reappeared in the Spring 1946 catalogs, Ward told its customers that “some items are still not available” and indicated that many of the featured sets could not be ordered until late spring. But by fall, Ward was able to fill 11 pages with a variety of new radio items, including a full page dedicated to shortwave receivers.

Large consoles reappeared in the form of radio-phonograph combinations in sleek new cabinets designed to hide dials and knobs from view. Some of these high-end sets featured AM, FM, and shortwave bands. In 1948, CBS introduced its new microgroove recording technology that made high-fidelity 33⅓ rpm record albums possible, followed shortly thereafter by RCA’s introduction of the 45 rpm
disc (Sterling & Kittross, 2002, p. 273). By the next year, the catalogs were featuring a wide range of AM/FM radio-phonographs that could play any of the three common record speeds (See Figure 12).

Wartime technological progress was reflected in several new electronic consumer products. The wire recorder, which used a spool of steel wire to record sound, appeared in the 1948 Ward catalog. Another innovation was the subminiature vacuum tube, which made possible ultra-small battery-powered radios. A portable tube set featured in the 1950 Ward catalog weighed only 3 ½ pounds, including batteries, and sold for $19.95 (Montgomery Ward and Company, 1950, p. 601).  

The postwar era also saw renewed interest in television receivers as broadcasters rushed to put new TV stations on the air. By 1948, all three major networks were offering a full prime-time schedule of TV programs and progress toward the national interconnection of stations was well under way. Ward's first television set was a black and white portable priced at $159.95 that appeared in the Spring 1949 catalog (See Figure 13) (p. 699).

Many people thought that television would soon make radio obsolete, and as the new medium began to catch on, consumer interest in buying radios waned. By 1950, Ward had only two pages of radios in its catalog, and the Golden Age of mail order radios had all but ended.
Conclusion

During the years 1922-1950, America’s mail order catalogs served as important resources for consumers seeking information about home radio receivers. The evolving fads, fashion, and technology of the industry were displayed in the wide range of models offered for sale. Catalogs, with their terse descriptions and carefully-staged photographs, provided a simple way to compare prices and features without the pressure of the retail store environment. Perhaps more importantly, the mail order catalog served as a focus for the aspirations of those striving to share in the American Dream. Countless families, strapped by hard economic times, picked out their first radio from the Sears or Ward big books and chose to dedicate hard-earned cash to the purchase of this new wonder. In so doing, they were able to join the invisible community of listeners in all parts of the country who shared the same news, sports, programs, and advertising.
References


Sears and Ward: Watch them run (1939, April 1). *Business Week*, 34-35.


Notes

1 In 1920, at the dawn of the radio age, nearly 32 million Americans lived on farms. Thirty years later, that number had fallen to 23 million, a decline of nearly 30%. The migration of rural dwellers to the cities was a by-product of increased mechanization on the farm coupled with a booming demand for labor in city factories (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1975, series C76-80).

2 By 1939, 62% of Sears' retail income was from its retail stores and only 38% from mail order. For Ward, the figures were 55% and 45% respectively (“Sears and Ward,” 1939).

3 The companies believed that besides serving the still-significant number of rural customers, the catalogs were also used by consumers as shopping guides prior to making purchases at the retail stores.

4 By the mid 1920s, both Sears and Ward were publishing two major catalogs a year: Spring/Summer and Fall/Winter. In this paper the names have been shortened to “Spring” and “Fall” for stylistic reasons.

5 I have not been able to determine whether radios were among the merchandise that varied in price from region to region.

6 Aware of the large number of immigrant families living in rural areas during the 1930s, Sears told customers to “write your orders and letters in any language.” This statement was then repeated in nine other European languages (Sears, Roebuck and Company, 1936, p. 980).

7 In 1924, Sears built its own manufacturing plant in Buffalo, NY, to produce Silvertone radios, but sold it a few years later and instead contracted with other companies (mostly Colonial Radio Corporation) to produce sets. Ward also contracted out its production with various companies. In 1940, for example, “Airline” receivers were being produced by Wells Gardiner (Stein, 2001, 7, 231-239; Maclaurin, 1949, 146).

8 This was especially true during the 1920s and 1930s, since RCA controlled virtually all the major radio circuit and tube patents. Every radio manufacturer had to either use RCA parts or manufacture them under RCA license. Later, competitors (such as Hazeltine) developed their own tubes and circuits to circumvent the RCA stranglehold (Maclaurin, 1949; “Radio III,” 1938).

9 However, as suggested above, many, and perhaps most, of these sales were at the retail stores rather than through the catalog.
The notable exception was the crystal set, which used no tubes and so was much cheaper than other radios. But crystal sets had no means of amplification and could only pick up a strong signal from a nearby station. The resulting audio was so weak that the sound could be heard only by using headphones. Although crystal sets provided a relatively inexpensive introduction to radio for hobbyists and some consumers, they were quickly eclipsed by newer technologies. In 1928, one survey found that fewer than 3% of radio homes had crystal sets (Steffler, 1928).

Radio equipment price figures of the era can be confusing. Some sources cite wholesale prices, while others retail. In addition, until about 1935, receiver prices were often quoted without tubes and batteries—essentials that added substantially to the set’s price. The price quoted here was the average retail price without tubes and batteries.

The Aeriola was manufactured by Westinghouse under RCA-GE-Westinghouse cross-licensing agreements. By 1925, Sears had begun to sell sets only under its own brand name, Silvertone.

Sears offered the two basic radio designs in three different cabinet styles, giving customers a choice of six different models. One other set, a two-tube $19.95 unit, was sold on a back page. It carried the “Meteor” name—a Sears house brand associated with economy and lower performance.

The prices for individual sets quoted hereafter include tubes and all other necessary accessories except where otherwise noted.

Sears, through its Agricultural Foundation, also worked with other stations such as WFAA in Dallas and WSB in Atlanta to have its farm and homemaking programs air on those stations as well (Evans, 1969, 168).

The decision to sell was influenced by the death of a key Sears executive who had been the station’s most ardent supporter. In addition, costs were rising and the company was reluctant to sell advertising that would promote competitors’ products. The station was sold to the farm magazine, Prairie Farmer, in 1928 for $250,000 (Evans, 1969).

The post-war arrival of television and an expansion of the number of available AM frequencies slowed the further development of FM until the 1960s.

The solid-state transistor was developed by Bell labs in 1948, but did not appear in consumer electronics until several years later.
Figure 1. In 1922, Montgomery Ward featured its first mail order radio, a one tube set built by Tuska (Montgomery Ward and Company, 1922, p. 540).
Figure 2. 1925 Sears catalog page promoting station WLS (Sears Roebuck and Company, 1925, p. 702A.)
Figure 3. 1938 Montgomery Ward Midget Radio. Even at this low price, Wards offered at “15-day no-risk home trial” and easy payment terms (Montgomery Ward and Company, 1938, p 351).
Figure 4. 1936 Sears Silvertone Farm Radio. The introduction of low drain tubes allowed farm radios to be powered by self-contained disposable batteries. Even so, the batteries still occupied a considerable amount of cabinet space (Sears Roebuck and Company, 1936, p. 593).
Figure 5: A 1938 Montgomery Ward Airline 13-tube console. It featured a 20-inch speaker and tuned broadcast and shortwave bands. It was priced at $89.95 (Montgomery Ward and Company, 1938, p. 355).
Figure 6. A 1931 Sears Grandfather Clock Radio (Stein, 2001, p. 42).
Figure 7. The 1938 Montgomery Ward catalog featured this chairside model that could be conveniently tuned while seated, however, the loudspeaker directed the sound away from the listener. It could tune three bands and sold for $39.95 (Montgomery Ward and Company, 1938, p. 353).
Figure 8. 1937 Sears catalog illustration showing tuning innovations, including the telephone-style dial, the tilted panel, and the “tuning eye” display tube (Stein, 2001, p. 122).
Figure 9. A 1933 Sears Silvertone “portable” radio that weighed “only 32 pounds.” About half the weight was due to the batteries (Stein 2001, p. 69).
Figure 10. A 1938 add-on car radio from Montgomery Ward (Montgomery Ward and Company, 1938, p. 354).
Figure 11. Both Sears and Wards provided extensive consumer education information concerning radio. This page from the 1941-42 Wards Fall and Winter catalog suggests the wide range of choices that would soon disappear as WWII ended the production of consumer radio sets (Montgomery Ward and Company, 1941, p. 770).
Figure 12. By late 1949, Wards was offering AM/FM radio-phonographs that could play any of the three common record speeds. A wide range of cabinet styles were available (Montgomery Ward and Company, 1949b, p. 777).
Figure 13. The first television set to appear in a Wards catalog was this black and white portable in Spring and Summer, 1949. It was priced at $159.95. With the coming of TV, progressively fewer radio models were offered (Montgomery Ward and Company, 1949a, p. 699).