

# How Sears Helped Make People of Color Feel More Like Americans

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The Conversation

Sears did more than pioneer the mail-order catalog over a century ago. The iconic retailer helped make America a more inclusive place at a time when Jim Crow was rampant and women couldn't even vote.

The news that Sears had filed for bankruptcy is a reminder of this history and the important role it played in changing the very fabric of American society.

Indeed, while it's only the latest in a growing list of retail institutions that have gone under in recent years, Sears's demise feels different to me — a U.S. historian who focuses on how consumer culture shapes gender and racial identities.

More than any of its other competitors, Sears — and its mail-order catalog — helped usher in the current culture of consumerism, which played an important role in making women, immigrants and people of color feel part of American life.

## Changing the way we shop

The Oct. 15 announcement that Sears — founded in 1893 by Richard Warren Sears and Alvah Curtis Roebuck — filed for bankruptcy did not come as a surprise. After all, the company, which began as a mail-order catalog and later developed into a department store chain, had been struggling for years.

For younger Americans — accustomed to shopping on the internet with a couple of clicks and getting virtually anything they like in a box at their doorstep within a day or two — the news of Sears closing might not seem like a big deal. The image of customers cramming downtown streets on their shopping sprees or the excitement of receiving the season's catalog in the mail is foreign to them.

Yet, in the late 19th century, as department stores and trade catalogs like Sears began appearing on the American landscape, they changed not only how people consumed things but culture and society as well. At the same time, consumption was starting to become crucial to Americans' understanding of their identity and status as citizens.

In particular, for marginalized groups such as women, African Amer-

icans and immigrants, who were often barred from positions of power, consumer culture gave them a way to participate in American politics, to challenge gender, race and class inequalities, and to fight for social justice.

## Opening doors to women

The establishment of the department store in the mid-19th century facilitated the easy consumption of ready-made goods. And because consumption was primarily associated with women, it played an important role in shifting gender

norms.

More specifically, department stores disrupted the Victorian "separate spheres" ideology that kept women out of public life. The new stores allowed them to use their position as consumers to claim more freedoms outside of the home.

The first department stores catered to these middle-class women and were very much dependent on their dollars. They were built as "semi-private" spaces in which women could enjoy shopping, eating and socializing without

transgressing sexual respectability norms — yet providing women with the opportunity to expand "the domestic sphere" into the city.

## Horseshoes, gramophones and dresses for all

Department stores mainly welcomed middle-class White shoppers. Barriers of race and class prevented working-class women or non-White women from participating fully in commercial life.

Yet, if the tangible space of the store proved to be exclusive, the mail-order catalog — a marketing

method that Sears perfected and became most famous for — offered a more inclusive vision of American democracy.

Beginning in 1896, after Congress passed the Rural Free Delivery Act, Sears catalogs reached all across the country, offering everything from a dress and a drill to a horseshoe and a gramophone, all at prices many could afford. The colorful illustrated catalogs were especially attractive to rural consumers, who despite many of them not knowing how to read could still participate by looking at the

pictures.

Taking advantage of the ready-made revolution, Sears catalogs offered women from different classes, races and regions the possibility to dress like the fashionable women in Paris or New York, turning consumption into an agent of modernity as well as of democracy.

For immigrant women, the "American Styles" sold at Sears enabled them to shed their "foreignness" and appear as an American with all the privileges of citizenship.

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