Let's Shop!
How the mail order catalog united American culture
Workshop

Resource: 1895 Montgomery Ward & Co Catalog

With the Gilded Age in the United States, products became much more widely produced as the tools to create them were industrialized for high volume production. Urban residences were introduced to the department store. Other rural communities were introduced to the mail order catalog. Pioneers like JC Penny, Montgomery Ward, and Sears & Roebuck developed catalogs in order to reach the still large rural population, unable to shop in department stores. These catalogs were quite important to these communities. Most families would only travel to their general store once a week. Mass production helped to unite a shared shopping experience no matter the location and thus standardize American culture. This also helped to Americanize new immigrants.

Objective: Learn about the effects of mass production and how catalogs and their shared shopping experience standardized American culture and helped Americanize new immigrants. Discover and discuss items manufactured in Binghamton in the late 19th century and its impact on the local economy. (i.e. the revival of the Lester Boot & Shoe Company brought an increase of orders from national retail outlets such as Montgomery Ward). Work with a standard wage based on an employment option in Binghamton in the late 19th century and develop a budget for necessary items from the 1895 Montgomery Ward & Co Catalog.

Activity

Part 1

Catalog items are divided into 5 categories
1. Health & Beauty
2. Recreation
3. Household
4. Men’s Fashion
5. Women’s Fashion

Divide into 5 groups (1 group for each category)

Each group will rotate until they have gone to each category.
For each category, discuss the following questions:

1. What’s familiar and unfamiliar?
2. What would we use or what would we not use today?
3. What is different about this catalogue than the ones we have today?
4. What can you learn about the people who lived in 1895 from the items that were sold in this catalogue?
5. Can you find any of the objects from the catalogue in the Phelps Mansion? What are they?
6. Discuss the different roles between men and women and everyday life.
7. What medical issues did people care about?

Part 2

Each student is given a new identity from the late 19th century. Each identity will be given an employment position found in Binghamton at this time, and their role within their community and family. Based on their new identity, each student will be given their monthly wage. From this wage a budget must be created to purchase items from the mail order catalog. Students must purchase items appropriately and necessary for their person all while making the most of their monthly budget.

Students will use fake 19th century American currency and “purchase” items that have been photocopied from the 1895 Montgomery Ward & Co Catalog. At the end, students will then present the items that they purchased, why they purchased them, how the items are important, and discuss any difficulties creating a budget from their monthly wage to purchase certain items (i.e. was there an important item needed but out of budget? Were there any alternatives? How did they cope?)

Conclusion

Discuss the overall cause and effects of the rise of industry in the United States compared to Binghamton. What was produced in Binghamton, what affect it had on the economy and further development? What comparisons can you make to the change in industry in Binghamton over the past decade?

Grade 4 Common Core Learning Standards
4.1, 4.6 Social Studies
4.MD.2, 4.OA.2, 4.OA.3 Mathematics