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Sears Roebuck

By Donita Lucas Shields

Illustration by Chris Swanda



When we turn back the pages of time, we discover that three important events occurred in 1892 and 1893. First, the U.S. Government opened Cheyenne-Arapaho Lands and the Cherokee Strip to white settlers. Second, Congress passed legislation for Rural Free Mail Delivery throughout settled areas. Third, Sears, Roebuck, and Company began its mail-order business with a "Satisfaction or Your Money Back" guarantee to the isolated settlers of the Western frontiers.

By the time people began to literally pour into Western Oklahoma in 1902, the mail-order company was circulating "wish-books" containing 1,162 pages. Pioneers everywhere jumped at the opportunity to order merchandise, clothes, fabrics, furniture, two-seated hacks and four-seated surreys, baby carriages, musical instruments, and sewing machines. Many of these products were not available or were considerably less expensive than if purchased at mercantile stores in small prairie towns.

Before many families had enough extra money to order clothing, ingenious housewives designed their own and their children's apparel by studying the crude black and white drawings in the amazing catalog. After exceptionally good crops with good prices, pioneers frequently ordered numerous luxury items.

The decline of the American dollar since 1902 is clearly shown when a person studies the thousands of items available in an 82-year-old reproduction of the old Sears Roebuck catalog. A fine piano, guaranteed for 25 years, cost only \$98.50; a solid oak pump organ was just \$22.00; a drop-head sewing machine guaranteed for 20 years sold for just \$10.45.

The newly invented cream separator could be purchased for prices ranging from \$50 to \$75. The least expensive wallpaper could be ordered for as little as nine cents a roll to the most expensive 22-cent tapestry containing silver and green bronze scrolls. Simple "Rules for Measuring a Room" told how to order the exact amount of wallpaper--allowing for waste and matching.

Ordering furniture for the pioneer parlor must have consumed hours of dreams, planning, and budgeting. A Turkish three-piece parlor suite--containing sofa, arm chair, and reception chair--cost \$17.55 if upholstered in velvet. If upholstered in silk damask, its price jumped to \$23.65. The least expensive parlor suite with very little padding cost a mere \$9.95.

During early pioneer years, any item weighing more than four pounds had to be shipped by railroad. In the late 1890's, the nearest and least expensive rail point for Western Oklahoma people was El Reno. Freight rates from Sears, Roebuck, and Company's headquarters in Chicago were \$4.25 for each 100 pounds. If a person preferred that his shipment be sent to Canadian, TX, which was frequently done by early settlers in extreme Northwestern Cheyenne-Arapaho Lands, freight charges were \$1.00 more--\$5.25.

In order to provide incentive for shopping by mail, Sears Roebuck developed a certificate saving plan--the Green Stamps of yesteryear. The company sent catalogs in batches of 24 to individuals who agreed to distribute them in their home areas. Workers kept records of new customer orders and gave credit to each deserving distributor. With these savings certificates, the lucky distributor could order special, freight-prepaid premiums. ♣