

*AALL Centennial Feature**

The Victorian-Era Law Office: How to Furnish Your Workplace for under \$100**

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Mr. Podvia speculates on how lawyers at the turn of the nineteenth century might have equipped their law offices from the products advertised in the mail-order catalogs of the day.

¶1 While perusing the offerings at a local public library used book sale recently, I happened upon three very interesting mail-order catalog reprints. The books that I found—the 1895 Montgomery Ward & Company catalog,¹ the 1897 Sears, Roebuck & Company catalog,² and the 1902 Sears, Roebuck & Company catalog³—contain an assortment of products not seen in today’s catalogs. While examining these reprints of relics from a bygone age, I realized that late nineteenth- or early twentieth-century lawyers could have—and most probably did—equip their law offices using the various items advertised in these three volumes.

¶2 The 1897 law office was a far cry from the ultra-modern facilities occupied by many of today’s law firms. Devices such as the photocopier or the IBM electric

* *Editor’s Note:* The American Association of Law Libraries was founded on July 2, 1906, by a handful of law librarians who met during the Annual Conference of the American Library Association at Narragansett Pier, Rhode Island. To commemorate the AALL Centennial that will be celebrated with a yearlong series of events and activities in 2005–06, culminating at the 2006 Annual Meeting in St. Louis, *Law Library Journal* is including an “AALL Centennial Feature” article in each issue published through 2006. While the focus common to each article is the history of law libraries, law librarianship, and AALL, the specific topics vary according to the interests of authors and readers. Individuals interested in contributing a “Centennial Feature” article should contact Frank G. Houdek, Editor, *Law Library Journal*, Southern Illinois University School of Law, Lesar Law Bldg., Mail Code 6803, Carbondale, IL 62901-6803, (618) 453-8788, houdek@siu.edu.

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1. MONTGOMERY WARD & CO., CATALOGUE AND BUYERS’ GUIDE (New York, Dover Publications 1969) (1895) [hereinafter MONTGOMERY WARD CATALOGUE].
2. SEARS, ROEBUCK & CO., CONSUMERS GUIDE (New York, Chelsea House Publishers 1968) (1897) [hereinafter 1897 SEARS CATALOGUE].
3. SEARS, ROEBUCK & CO., THE 1902 EDITION OF THE SEARS, ROEBUCK CATALOGUE (New York, Bounty Books 1969) (1902) [hereinafter 1902 SEARS CATALOGUE].

typewriter—the latter now seen as outdated technology—were still decades in the future. The microcomputer, with instant access to online legal databases such as LexisNexis and Westlaw, could not have been imagined by the lawyer of 1897. Even something as basic as the ballpoint pen would have been a source of amazement.⁴

¶3 However, by 1897 several important nonlegal developments allowed the profession to take its first steps toward the modern law office. Christopher Sholes invented the first practical commercial typewriter in 1867; gunsmith Philo Remington manufactured his first manual typewriter seven years later in 1874.⁵ The telephone was patented by Alexander Graham Bell in 1876 and 1877, although Pennsylvania inventor Daniel Drawbaugh had devised a working telephone several years earlier.⁶ Thomas Alva Edison developed the first practical incandescent lamp in 1879 and installed the first electric-light power plant in New York City in 1881–82.⁷

¶4 The changes brought by these new inventions were recognized as nothing short of revolutionary by the attorneys of the day. In 1901, Pennsylvania attorney C. Larue Munson told the York County Bar Association:

Let us consider for a moment how differently we do our work now, than we did in the seventies. Then, for example, our correspondence was done wholly with the pen. Now we call our stenographer or expert typewriter to our elbow and he—more frequently she, for the average lawyer is a man of good taste—relieves us of the physical labor of committing our correspondence to paper, requiring us only to append our names, often translatable only by the business card at the head of the sheet. Formerly we wrote out all our legal documents, a most laborious task, now we accomplish the work by dictation, and are able to deliver our clients legible copies of their agreements, with as many duplicates, by carbon, as may be desired.⁸

William Penn Lloyd, an attorney from Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, agreed: “The present rapid mail service, the telegraph, and the telephone have reduced the time required for transactions from weeks formerly, now often to the fraction of a day or even an hour.”⁹

¶5 The practitioner using the catalogs issued by Sears, Roebuck & Company or Montgomery Ward & Company to furnish the “modern” law office, circa 1897, would probably want to begin by ordering stationary, needed both for informal note-taking and for formal correspondence. The 1897 Sears catalog offered a wide

4. The ballpoint pen was invented in 1938 by Laszlo Biro, a Hungarian journalist. Mary Bellis, *A Brief History of Writing Instruments—Part 3: The Battle of the Ballpoint Pens*, at <http://inventors.about.com/library/weekly/aa101697.htm> (last visited July 30, 2004).

5. THE CONCISE COLUMBIA ENCYCLOPEDIA 896–97 (Paul G. Legassé ed., 3d ed. 1994).

6. The Supreme Court of the United States, in a four to three decision with two justices abstaining, upheld Bell’s patents. *The Telephone Cases*, 126 U.S. 1 (1888).

7. THE CONCISE COLUMBIA ENCYCLOPEDIA, *supra* note 5, at 259.

8. C. Larue Munson, John Marshall Day Address to the York County Bar Association (Feb. 4, 1901), *quoted in* William Penn Lloyd, *A Glimpse at the History of the Law, Suggestive to the Young Lawyer of To-Day*, 6 FORUM 170, 173–74 (1902).

9. Lloyd, *supra* note 8, at 174.

variety of tablets “from the cheapest to the best” that ranged in price from \$.40 per dozen to \$1.40 per dozen.¹⁰ “Excellent quality, fine paper for personal and commercial correspondence” was available for prices ranging from \$.55 per ream to \$1.85 per ream depending on the size of the paper.¹¹ Envelopes of the “highest grade, best quality of paper” ranged in price from \$.70 to \$1.90 per 1000.¹²

¶6 Blank books, which would have been suitable for law office record keeping, were available from the Montgomery Ward catalog for prices ranging from \$.18 to \$5.60 depending on the size and quality of the book.¹³ Letter files such as the “Boss” file, precursors to the modern filing cabinet, sold for \$5.40 per dozen; the cheaper “Chicago” file sold for \$2.75 per dozen.¹⁴

¶7 Fountain pens, pencils, ink, erasers, paper fasteners, and rubber bands were all available through the mail-order catalogs. These ranged in price from the Correspondent Fountain Pen, “absolutely perfect, guaranteed non-leakable” for \$1.10,¹⁵ to Faber’s Comet Eraser, \$.95 per dozen.¹⁶

¶8 One piece of office equipment not included in the 1897 Sears catalog was the typewriter. However, typewriters could be found in the 1895 Montgomery Ward catalog. The Edison Mimeograph Typewriter, “a practical working machine” with steel type and a heavy manifold, was available for \$22.¹⁷ Others, such as the American Typewriter, “a serviceable machine at a price far below other makes,” were available as cheaply as \$5.70.¹⁸ The catalog also featured such items as typewriter oil, type-cleaning brushes, typewriter ribbons, and carbon paper. Typewriters did appear in the 1902 Sears catalog, including the Visible Writing Machine for \$22.50, “perfection, perfectly perfected, but simplicity, simply simplified.”¹⁹

¶9 Along with the typewriter came the typewriter cabinet, saving the typewriter from “being constantly tipped over and so getting out of order.” The cabinet, “well made of solid oak, and highly *hand-polished*,” cost \$16.25.²⁰

¶10 Polished oak office desks, tables, and bookcases were also available, ranging in price from \$7.50 to \$23.²¹ A flat oak desk, five feet long and two feet six inches wide, cost \$11.70; the same sized roll-top desk, “perfect in every respect,” cost \$25.²²

¶11 One necessary office fixture was a steel safe. “You must want a safe,” decreed the 1897 Sears catalog. “Farmers, merchants and all business men require

10. 1897 SEARS CATALOGUE, *supra* note 2, at 349.

11. *Id.* at 350.

12. *Id.*

13. MONTGOMERY WARD CATALOGUE, *supra* note 1, at 40.

14. *Id.*

15. *Id.* at 266.

16. 1897 SEARS CATALOGUE, *supra* note 2, at 354.

17. MONTGOMERY WARD CATALOGUE, *supra* note 1, at 224.

18. *Id.* at 40.

19. 1902 SEARS CATALOGUE, *supra* note 3, at 273.

20. MONTGOMERY WARD CATALOGUE, *supra* note 1, at 609.

21. 1897 SEARS CATALOGUE, *supra* note 2, at 652–54.

22. MONTGOMERY WARD CATALOGUE, *supra* note 1, at 609.

safes.” The largest safe in the catalog—the number nine fireproof safe, “made of the best material” and “handsomely decorated”—weighed 2100 pounds and stood forty-six and one-half inches high, thirty-two inches wide and twenty-nine and one-half inches deep.²³ It was available at a cost of \$82.50, plus shipping. A smaller safe, the number two and three-quarters, which weighed 300 pounds and stood twenty-four inches high, was available for \$13.25.²⁴

¶12 The 1897 Sears catalog noted that “the demand for telephones has so largely increased of late that we have been induced to give the matter special attention with a view to selecting a phone which is strictly up-to-date, and at the same time one which can be furnished at a moderate cost.”²⁵ Telephones offered ranged from the Improved Long Distance Battery Telephone for \$13.50 to the Desk Phone with Magneto Call Bells for \$16.50.

¶13 Although none of these mail-order catalogs listed law books for sale, several of the books they did include would have been of great value to the practicing lawyer. A full set of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, “a complete library in itself,” could be purchased for \$19.95.²⁶ A twelve-volume set of the *Universal Encyclopedia*, “pre-eminently the encyclopedia for the businessman,” was available for \$9.98.²⁷ *Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary*, which included an index of patents, cost \$3.25.²⁸ Sears’ mail-order competitor, Montgomery Ward, sold *Caskell’s Compendium of Business Forms*, “educational, social legal and commercial,” for \$2.80 plus \$.48 for postage, and *Parson’s Laws of Business*, “for all the States and Territories of the Union and the Dominion of Canada, with forms and directions for all transactions,” for \$2.30 plus \$.30 postage.²⁹

¶14 Although the catalogs being examined included only a few law-related books, the Victorian lawyer could have easily purchased legal publications via mail-order from several national publishers, including Little, Brown & Company, Boston Book Company, Lawyers Co-operative Publishing Company, and West Publishing Company. These publishers regularly advertised in law reviews and legal magazines³⁰ and published their own catalogs.

¶15 *Black’s Law Dictionary* was available from West Publishing Company at a cost of \$6.³¹ Little, Brown & Company offered *Elements of American Jurisprudence* by William C. Robinson, “one of the most useful guides on the general principles of law,” for \$3.³² The same company advertised John H. Wigmore’s four-volume *Treatise on the Law of Evidence*, “a case winner,” for \$26.³³ Another

23. 1897 SEARS CATALOGUE, *supra* note 2, at 97.

24. *Id.*

25. *Id.* at 472.

26. *Id.* at 337.

27. *Id.* at 248.

28. *Id.* at 337.

29. MONTGOMERY WARD CATALOGUE, *supra* note 1, at 243.

30. Unfortunately for the legal historian, the advertising was often removed when the law reviews and magazines were bound.

31. Advertisement, 5 FORUM n.p. (1901).

32. *Id.*

33. Advertisement, 10 FORUM n.p. (1906).

multivolume work, *A Treatise on Criminal Law, 10th Edition*, by Francis Wharton, could be ordered from Kay & Brother in Philadelphia for a cost of \$12.³⁴

¶16 Legal periodicals were available for equally reasonable prices. A subscription to *The Green Bag*, “recognized as the first luxury a lawyer can allow himself when his income begins to exceed his expenses, a luxury so stimulating and educational as to be ranked almost among the necessities of civilization,”³⁵ was available from the Boston Book Company for \$4 per year. Lawyers who ordered the full set of six volumes of *The Green Bag* at a cost of \$30 received a set of four engravings of such legal luminaries as Chief Justice John Marshall and Senator Daniel Webster to “adorn the walls of either office or study.”³⁶

¶17 No Gilded-Age lawyer could go into court without wearing suitable attire. “Professional Mens Suits for Ministers, Doctors and Lawyers made in either the single breasted Prince Albert style or the standing collar clerical style” were available for prices ranging from \$18 to \$23.³⁷ Men’s derbies, “very nobby in appearance,” were an “extragood value” at \$.98 each.³⁸

¶18 There were, as Mr. Munson’s remarks quoted earlier indicate, relatively few women engaged in the practice of law in 1897. However, those who had entered the field could also obtain suitable courtroom attire through any one of the three catalogs. A “Very Stylish Ladies’ Suit, Bolero style, made of blue or black cheviot, newest sleeves, outer jacket trimmed all around with black mohair and silk, mixed gimp and lined with changeable silk” was available for \$8.50.³⁹ Ladies Minerva Undressed Suede Mousquetaire Gloves, “the finest gloves of the kind ever brought to this country,” cost \$1.88 per pair.⁴⁰

¶19 As amazing as many of these prices look to us today—particularly the prices for the solid oak furniture—it is necessary to place them in the proper context. The average annual income for a nonsalaried lawyer in 1929 was \$5534.⁴¹ Salary figures for lawyers are not available for 1897; however, based on the Composite Consumer Price Index, the value of the American dollar more than doubled between 1897 and 1929.⁴² Assuming that salaries kept pace with the Price Index, the average yearly lawyer’s salary in 1897 would have been less than \$2700.

¶20 Despite the low catalog prices for goods offered by Sears and Montgomery Ward, our 1897 lawyer would still have needed to watch his or her pennies!

34. Advertisement, 3 FORUM n.p. (1899).

35. *A Necessary Luxury*, 1 LEGAL BIBLIOGRAPHY (n.s.) 5, 5 (1894).

36. *The Green Bag*, 1 LEGAL BIBLIOGRAPHY (n.s.) 7, 7 (1894).

37. 1897 SEARS CATALOGUE, *supra* note 2, at 171.

38. *Id.* at 212.

39. *Id.* at 279.

40. *Id.* at 230.

41. 1 BUREAU OF THE CENSUS, U.S. DEP’T OF COMMERCE, HISTORICAL STATISTICS OF THE UNITED STATES: COLONIAL TIMES TO 1970, at 176 (Bicentennial ed. 1975). This figure is apparently pre-Depression; by 1933 the average nonsalaried lawyer’s income had sunk to \$3868. *Id.*

42. THE VALUE OF A DOLLAR: PRICES AND INCOMES IN THE UNITED STATES, 1860–1989, at 2 (Scott Derks ed., 1994). Based on the Consumer Price Index, one 1897 dollar would be equal to \$2.05 in 1929 dollars.