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SEMPERIT



JEAN SHEPHERD

• During the last few years, the Underground press has become big business. Why it's called "Underground," nobody quite knows. After all, you can buy 'em on practically every newsstand, they're hawked on street corners and their editors have become major talk show blabberstars. Now a true underground press is not obtainable on newsstands, nor is it sold on street corners. Classically, it is read by a silent mob which passes each issue from hand to hand until the paper is tattered and worn. A true underground press is never discussed, nor even recognized, by the likes of James Reston or even Hugh Hefner.

Do we have a true underground press? You're damn right we do. Allow me to celebrate one of the great unsung American institutions—as American as Norman Mailer. I am speaking reverently and even passionately of the great institution known generically as The Mail Order Catalog.

Whether or not you know it, the mail order business has boomed fantastically in the last few years, for a number of very good reasons—not the least of which is the general decline and standardization of retail outlets. Take the radio parts business. Not long ago, every major city had great parts houses which carried every damn thing from the most obscure double-tapered attenuator to mighty 10-kilowatt transmitter tubes. Today they have a few sad little "components" sealed in plastic cards hanging on hooks from the wall and, of course, a vast array of "police radios," pocket calculators and shoddy CB walkie-talkies.

By dramatic comparison, the radio parts mail order catalogues are absolute havens of necessary gear, calculated to stimulate even the most jaded electronics nut. Who among you has not felt a thrill of excitement when the new Heath catalog arrives? I particularly like the totally confident and euphemistic headlines of their captions: "A few nights of exciting work and you can build your own 25-inch VHF/UHF remote control

color TV." The blurb is accompanied by a warm, homey illustration showing a blue-haired granny and a 13-year-old apple-cheeked kid happily building a TV set.

Getting a new catalog through the mail has a curious excitement all its own, unlike any other experience. When I was a kid, the day my Allied Radio or Lafayette catalog showed up was a major moment of the year. In fact, for at least three weeks after getting the new one, I was totally out of circulation. I would be missed at my old haunts and, day after day, I would arrive at school, my eyes bleary and red-rimmed from peering at tiny print most of the night. I memorized whole pages of esoterica such as "assorted rubber grommets and ceramic feed-through insulators pages 108-123." I could describe minutely every permutation of endless varieties of spaghetti insulation, including size, flash voltage capacity, the price per foot as well as the catalog number itself. Other catalog freaks such as my friends Schwartz and Flick would do likewise and, naturally, competition inevitably resulted.

Schwartz: "How 'bout that new UTC power transformer with the 750-volt secondary?"

Me: "You mean the 300 ma one?"

Schwartz (moving in for the kill): "Nah, stupid, the 400 ma with the 22-volt and one 10-volt primary."

Me: "Oh yeah. You mean the one with the 6.3-volt filament winding. The one with the vibration-free core. Hell, it's on page 94."

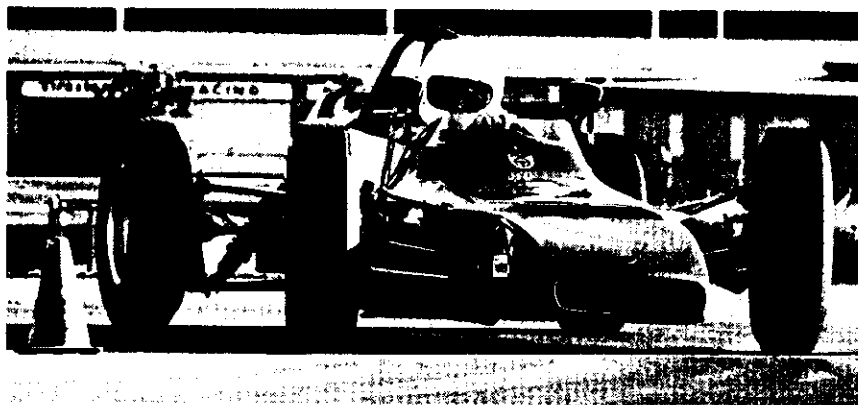
Schwartz (lame): "Yeah. It looks pretty good, don't it."

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The Mail Order Catalog
is one of our
nation's great
contributions to
world literature . . .
as uniquely American
as Norman Mailer

One of the most exciting moments of my late kid-hood came on the day when I actually met, in the flesh, a guy who wrote captions for the Allied Radio catalog. I was with Schwartz, and we were on a pilgrimage to the Vatican itself, the Allied Radio store on Jackson Boulevard on the west side of Chicago. Like most genuine moments of ecstasy, it was totally unexpected. We were at the counter along with dozens of other devotees, hunched over a catalog which was chained to the counter, preparing to order a truly major purchase, a 40-meter Bliley x-cut crystal, when Schwartz, peering at the description in the book, said, "I can't figure out what kind of current this thing can handle. It's blurred here."

Clerk: "Yeah, I know. It was the printing. Wait a minute . . . HEY, ART. Come on over here and straighten us out."

(CONTINUED)



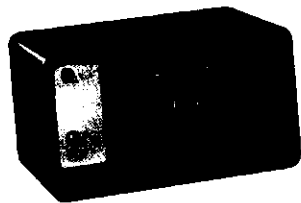
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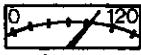
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And then he said to us, "If anybody knows, Art does. He wrote the damn thing." Great Scott!

Art was not a disappointment. Wearing a heavy tweed jacket, smoking a meerschaum pipe, peering through horn-rimmed glasses, he looked exactly the way a great author should look. He autographed our copies of the catalog and to this day I still have mine. Catalog writers are a special breed. They are masters of brevity, the quick pungent phrase mingled with a subtle euphoric optimism. It is not easy, believe me, to make skid chains exciting. In less than twenty words, yet.

I think that catalog addiction, like most important characteristics of the human animal, is fundamentally hereditary. If you grow up in a house where your Old Man flips over seed catalogs, the chances are you in your turn will start bugging the mailman for your copy. The Sears crowd must have nineteen generations of fans in their archives. Naturally, the catalog has more uses than to order merchandise. It settles arguments, starts plenty and for a hell of a long time in certain parts of the country was a highly essential accessory to the plumbing facilities. It is a medical fact that the Sears catalog contributed as much to the success of Preparation H as truck-stop chili ever did.

My Old Man read, year after year, the J.C. Whitney & Company catalog the way a virgin spinster reads Dr. Reuben. He carried the Whitney catalog around with him and read it continually. He'd sit at the kitchen table after supper, drinking his beer and just leafing through it, because there is no way you can read a J.C. Whitney catalog without seeing something that you missed the last time—no matter how many times you read it through. Page after page of tiny print containing everything conceivable and a hell of a lot more. If you don't know about the J.C. Whitney catalog and you are a car nut, you are going to regret all the years that you lived without holding one in your hand, fat and heavy and ripe with promise. "Repair worn sloppy tie rods. Restore steering performance to like new!" Believe it or not, they are talking about a 1956 *Gordini*. This on page 124, if you doubt me. And that's only the beginning.

"Cracked skull gas tank for your motorcycle. Newest style! Also coffin model available." That's not bad reading for the john. The picture with it is fairly graphic, too.

Do you need a running board for a 1935 Chevy truck? It's on page 160, along with a couple of million more, including such esoterica as a 1932 Dodge running board. On the same page is listed Fender Welt for a 1930 Plymouth as well as a magnificent collection of antique grilles including such rarities as a 1939 Mercury.

When all the dust has settled, it will probably turn out that America's single greatest contribution to the world's stockpile of literature is the Mail Order Catalog. Thank God for J.C. Whitney & Company. ●