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# Spare Change and Sea Change

*John Friel*



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Two unrelated quotes—one from a famous author, one from a Depression Era song—collide in the mind with this issue's theme: Retail science.

This topic isn't exactly in my wheelhouse. I've toiled most of my life in wholesale. Worse, I'm an English major tiptoeing around scientific matters. But retail is such a capricious creature that "retail science" seems almost oxymoronic. Science makes predictions; human nature mocks them.

But retail sales are the headwaters of the cash flow that sustains us all. Wholesalers need to remember that, but not fixate on it. We're insulated from gardeners, and they from us, by retailers. We wish there were more

of you. Homeowners needn't concern themselves with what grows best by the acre; that's our gig. Breeders' dump piles are full of beauties that would thrill gardeners, but not mass producers. A complex winnowing process ensures a steady supply of garden-worthy plants.

I digress. First, the song lyrics:

"Once I built a tower up to the sun/ Brick and rivet and lime  
Once I built a tower, now it's done/ Brother, can you spare a dime?"  
—E.Y. Harburg and Jay Gorney

That song spoke to, and for, people discarded when their skills were no longer needed. But in 2017 it's not the laborer whose hand is out, it's the sky-high tower's erstwhile owner.

Once, Sears was a retail juggernaut capable of erecting the world's tallest building as a monument to itself. Their massive catalog sold seemingly everything—clothing, jewelry, tools, motorcycles, cars, even houses. Its arrival was eagerly awaited each year, especially by isolated households in the hinterlands.

Sears' dominance was fueled by sales to that agrarian population, to an America that no longer exists. I was

last in one of their stores shortly before Christmas and it was a ghost town. One employee seemed to be covering all departments in the entire lower level.

The irony is inescapable: The digital-age version of the very business model Sears rode to glory—send away for products delivered to your door, to the detriment of local merchants—is killing their brick-and-mortar locations and their neighbors. The mega-retailer is closing stores wholesale, over 500 as I type. They're still a force, with sales many companies would envy, but circling the drain in a spiral many analysts doubt they'll escape.

Which brings us to Quote #2, from novelist C.S. Lewis: "Isn't it funny how day to day nothing changes, but when you look back, everything is different."

Sudden radical change is rare. It's the creeping accretion of infinitesimal day-to-day changes, like a river carving its canyons grain by grain, that roils retail and wholesale alike. My employer's new wholesale catalog will soon be mailed. It still contains many plants we grew a quarter century ago, but many others are gone, replaced by varieties undreamt of then. Unlike Sears, we still print our book, but fewer than before. Growers, like consumers, have discovered online purchasing. It's pointless to bemoan that phenomenon; it's not going away. But neither is paper, completely.

I want to see Sears rebound from its woes and pull out of its death spiral. It's a nostalgic impulse, devoid of science, rooted in memories of that eagerly-awaited catalog and the wonders between its covers.

Other American touchstones—bald eagles, Canada geese, Richard Nixon—have turned back from the brink. This comeback will be tough, but not impossible. I think.

I want to hand over that Depression-era dime, which, by the way, commanded the buying power that \$1.50 has now. But will there be anyone in the store to take it? **GP**

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