Good afternoon. My name is Emily Guthrie. I work at the Winterthur Library in Delaware, where my duties include managing a growing collection of trade catalogs.
As a means of providing context, let me tell you a few facts about the Winterthur Library. The library saw the research value in trade catalogs at the time of its inception in the early 1950s. In the decorative arts, pattern books and early trade catalogs are seen as essential primary sources.

As a former staff member noted, catalogs “can provide a scholar with more images of thoroughly documented artifacts than he could hope to gather in years of scouring museums, historical societies, and private collections.”

As a result, the Winterthur Library presently has over 5,800 trade catalogs ranging in date from ca. 1760 to 1999. Outside of the circulating collection, it is our fastest growing area.

If one were to describe the overall theme of our trade catalog collection, you could say “American decorative arts.” But a more accurate description would be “American material culture.”
But what exactly is material culture? Is it the study everything ever made by human hands? Former Winterthur curator emeritus John Sweeney likened material culture to an umbrella, under which historians, archaeologists, anthropologists, and art historians gather to identify and interpret man-made objects. Museums contribute to this effort by collecting, preserving, exhibiting, and interpreting materials deemed worthy of the effort. These are the practitioners of material culture.

John Sweeney, Material Culture and the Study of American Life

Materials...Man-made objects: these are broad and far-reaching terms. So let’s get more specific by looking at a few reference questions that Winterthur’s material culture trade catalogs have been able to answer.
QUESTION #1: A church librarian discovers that the church’s lectern was made by a firm called R. Geissler, and that we’re the only library to hold a trade catalog from this firm. Was her eagle shaped lectern and its matching baptismal font in the catalog?

Q: I am a church librarian and chair of my church’s archives...Someone in the congregation turned our wood eagle lectern upside down and discovered that the lectern was made by R. Geissler, ca. 1895... You are the only library with a copy of a Geissler catalog, Can you search your catalog for the lectern and a matching baptismal font?
It certainly was. In looking through our circa 1900 Geissler catalog, I found one page of carved eagle lecterns. The church librarian was then able to identify her lectern as the eagle in the center. After that, she was hooked! She followed up by asking for scans of pews, benches, chairs, altars, and communion sets, and we followed up by sending her a pdf of the entire catalog so that she could compare its contents with her church’s inventory. She was thrilled!
QUESTION #2 : A graduate student is helping the Lower East Side Tenement Museum to determine what styles of linoleum might have been available to the tenement residents in the early 20th century. She asked, Do you have any resources that show period linoleum?
Well, linoleum is material culture. A search for linoleum within our trade catalog collection returns 25 results, dated between 1898 and 1940, The golden age of linoleum, if you will.
Beyond providing the reader with an understanding of the breadth of choices that were available in the world of floor covering in the early 20th century, many of these linoleum catalogs include actual samples, possibly broadening their range of interest to conservation science.
Some catalogs show only illustrations of the linoleum itself, while others show it in the context of a room, revealing more information about the scale of the patterns, and providing greater interest to historians of interior design.
Q: I am a PhD student in American history... I am studying the way hiking and backpacking gear was bought and sold from the late 19th to the late 20th centuries...

QUESTION #3: a PhD student in American history wants to know what we have on the history of hiking and backpacking gear from the late 19th into the late 20th centuries.
A full chronology of sporting goods, including hiking and backpacking gear, can be found in trade catalogs.

Here we have a 1908 catalog from the New York Sporting Goods Co.
The illustration on the left is from a firm called Harry Goldfish & Sons. Their 1924 catalog offered a range of tent options that satisfied the public’s interest in motor camping.

On the right is an early 20th century sleeping bag from a catalog of camp outfits by the firm of John C. Hopkins. Vaguely reminiscent of an MRI scanner, it came equipped with a pneumatic pillow, mosquito-proof gauze veil, and rifle holster. Only $17.00 for the longer model.
On the left we have another tent for “the auto tourist”; 

And, on the right, from a 1920s catalog of women’s athletic wear, the “Miss Saratoga Knockabout knicker suit...for the out of doors girl, for hiking, motoring, golfing, camping, etc.”
But these three reference questions only begin to introduce the breadth of trade catalogs used to study material culture. As material culture envelops all of the subjects addressed by my co-presenters – Americana, glass, fine printing and design, and architectural materials -- I thought I’d highlight some of the other, more unusual, subject areas that fall under the banner of Material Culture.
Animal husbandry. The material culture of animals and animal-keeping is well-represented within trade catalogs. Here we have illustrations of saddles and elaborate bridles from an early 19th century catalog of horse furnishings.
Printed around 1810, the horse furnishings catalog was recently studied by an archaeologist trying to date and identify remnants of bridles, saddles, and horseshoes from an early 19th century site on Maryland’s eastern shore. Although likely the catalog of a British firm, early hardware catalogs such as this are known to have been available to Americans as well.
This late 19th century catalog of dog collars is a personal favorite. The hundreds of styles of dog collars offered within its 147 pages give modern readers a sense of the value of dogs in society at the time. On the lower left, we see a celluloid necktie collar with bell. Other collars within the catalog were named after celebrities of the day.

But the catalog is more than just an illustrated inventory for the Medford Fancy Goods Co. As is often the case with trade catalogs, illustrations of the manufactories and retail establishments are included. On this cover, we can see the factory employees working in the trimming room; views of the show room and first-floor office; and the front façade of the company’s store on Duane Street in Manhattan. Provided that these views were accurate, they serve to elevate research value above and beyond the history of pet-keeping.
The sale of display stands indicate that the catalog would likely have been used by retailers stocking their own stores, rather than individual consumers.
The jewel-toned illustrations made possible by chromolithography were embraced by catalog printers as a way to spotlight special items. This late 19th century folio-size catalog of equestrian gear features four chromolithographs among its 303 pages.
While not quite a resource for those interested in keeping pets, this circa 1890 catalog features electrotypes of all sorts of fancy chickens. The ready-made illustrations might have appealed to newspaper and magazine publishers who allowed readers to advertise goods for sale, allowing them to offer illustrations for an added fee.
Some catalogs advertised the sale of live animals. This early 20th century catalog from a Pennsylvania firm charged 50 cents for a pair of Japanese Waltzing Mice (a type of mouse that would be in a near-constant whirling motion due to a neurological disorder).
Trade catalogs can also answer questions on the material culture of mourning and death rituals.
In this 1882 catalog, the Columbus Coffin Company offered everything from horse-drawn hearses,
To coffin hardware and dresses in which to clothe the deceased. We’ve received a few reference inquiries in recent years from archaeologists who have excavated coffins, and use the coffin hardware catalogs to help date the artifacts they’ve found.
Among the more surprising catalogs are those that supplied so-called secret societies – Masons, the International Order of Odd Fellows, and the like. Many surprises lie within their pages. The firm of DeMoulin Brothers & Co provided costumes and equipment for lodge rituals, and uniforms for their more public functions.
The Winterthur Library digitized over 900 of its trade catalogs a few years ago, and this 1908 catalog of lodge supplies was among them. Here we see that the DeMoulin Brothers offered a spanking machine. Shall we take a look inside to see what else the secret society members were buying?

(OPENS INTERNET ARCHIVE, SEARCH FOR CAMEL)
Lodge members also had special needs when it came to furnishing their lodges. This 1910 catalog from a Boston firm offered many throne-like seating options.
Also well-represented under the banner of material culture are goods relating to food, its preparation, and its consumption. Who knew that both Sears, Roebuck & Co., and Montgomery Ward offered mail-order groceries?
Once the food was purchased, it had to be prepared and served. This catalog of tableware is one of the earliest catalogs in the Winterthur Library. Printed in 1789, it includes dispensers for condiments such as Soy Sauce and Ketchup, serving utensils,
...Teapots, and flatware. We are fortunate that the catalog came with a price list tipped in. The price list gives the period terminology for each item, along with its price in options of plated metal or silver, and its weight in silver. For example, the item to the left of the tea pot is described as an “oval tea caddy with chased mosaic garter and shield. In silver, it would have weighed 12 to 14 ounces and cost 28 shillings. If you plug that amount into a historical Currency Converter, you’d find that the tea caddy would cost about $246 today.

The spoons shown on the lower left were only offered in plated metal, and ranged in price from 12 to 42 shillings per dozen.
Cooking, and cleaning up afterwards, became much easier with the introduction of appliances such as gas stoves, electric refrigerators, and dishwashers. Scores of appliance options from various manufacturers, along with technical specifications and pricing, were advertised in trade catalogs, making it easy to track the ways in which domestic tasks such as cooking and cleaning became more efficient in the 20th century.
As delightful as trade catalogs are, collecting them and making them accessible to patrons presents certain challenges. From my angle, the challenges can be put into three categories: Cataloging, Interpretation, and Collection Development.

Cataloging the catalogs is probably our biggest challenge—while they are readily available in the marketplace, so many of them require original cataloging. Cataloging the catalogs demands a certain set of skills, including the ability to approximate dates for undated catalogs (of which there are so many).

Accurately describing the content of the catalogs within the constraints of note fields and LC subject headings requires some creative thinking. There’s the obvious content, such as a catalog of bathroom fixtures falls easily under the subject heading “Plumbing – Equipment and supplies”. But so often there is added content such as customer testimonials and illustrations by important early 20th century artists that can become hidden when not added to the records. We’re adding notes about testimonials and building views to records that we’re creating now, and considering doing a survey for this type of content in our older materials.