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INTRODUCTION

Why Big Box and Environmental History?

BART ELMORE, RACHEL S. GROSS, AND SHERRI SHEU

To drive across America on an interstate is to relive a certain sameness. Whether you navigate through West Texas on I-10, along the West Coast on I-5, or through the Southeast on I-85, familiar names with bright signage punctuate these national arteries. Walmart, Target, Costco, Staples, Dick's Sporting Goods, and other stores dot the landscape, with promises of linoleum floors and fluorescent lights that will be the same from Des Moines, Iowa, to San Bernardino, California. They are seemingly timeless, untethered to any particulars of geography. Yet, it was not always this way. The rise of the big box store has dramatically reshaped the American landscape in the last half century.

This volume focuses on the rise of big box retail in the United States beginning in the 1960s and the radical ways industry retailers transformed local and global environments. Historians have previously studied big box stores in relationship to the rise of the Sunbelt, the evolution of a service economy, and the transformation of consumer culture.¹ While big box stores are now a feature of international commerce,

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this volume focuses more narrowly on the United States to make a case for understanding the big box as an environmental force with the power to reshape ecologies and cultures on multiple scales.

So, what is a “big box” store? The term *big box*, which first became popular in the 1990s, highlights many of the questions we address in this volume. The words are relational—“big” contrasts with the postwar stores with smaller footprints, often non-chain stores or small businesses. “Box” indicates a barebones design with few flourishes—no time wasted on velvet curtains or expensive holiday window displays here. “Big box” can be a celebration of a streamlined, efficient shopping experience or a critique of the soulless corporation, depending on perspective. While a business journal might offer a clear definition that specifies facility size or the range and turnover of products, we argue here that “big box” matters not because a facility fits those specific parameters but rather because it signals a new kind of story about American retail. Since the 1970s, the big box has made an emotional claim about corporations’ role in American life while erasing the link between corporations and the natural environment. The stores have offered comfort in their monotony and their bounty. From the geography of the facilities to the shopping experience inside, the big box has purported to be a ubiquitous provider of affordable goods. Even an anonymous corporation can prompt contentment and loyalty.

Historians have shown that the roots of the big box retail revolution extend back to the late nineteenth century, when the first big retail chain stores emerged. At that time, entrepreneurs such as New Yorker Frank W. Woolworth and Detroit-based S. S. Kresge introduced some of the first variety and “five-and-dime” stores that brought a wide selection of cheap mass-manufactured goods under one roof.² These businesses took advantage of new railroad routes and communication networks that helped usher in a flood of cheap goods produced by some of the first vertically integrated firms in the country. The new goods appealed to consumers, as workers in many parts of the United States were becoming wage earners in factories and therefore were less able to devote time to home production of necessities.³ By the early 1900s, Quaker and former mariner Rowland H. Macy in New York City and J. C. Penney in Wyoming launched the first department stores that at

first primarily served urban residents in cities in the American West and on the East Coast.⁴ Like the five-and-dime stores, Macy's and J. C. Penney's offered American consumers attractive retail experiences, abandoning traditional bargaining practices that had been the norm in the mid-nineteenth century and setting fixed prices on goods sold in stores. They also offered credit accounts to customers and implemented home delivery systems.⁵ Simultaneously, mail-order retail businesses such as Sears and Montgomery Ward became profitable by sending mass-manufactured goods on rail lines that radiated in every direction from cities like Chicago directly to consumers in more remote markets across the country.⁶ By negotiating directly with manufacturers, these firms developed advanced accounting systems and integrated distribution networks as well as money-back guarantee programs; they focused primarily on making large-volume sales of cheap, branded goods rather than relying on smaller-volume sales of high-dollar wares.⁷ By the 1910s, consumers throughout the United States had access to many cheap manufactured goods through a variety of retail outlets.

The grocery business also changed dramatically in the early 1900s, with firms such as the Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Company integrating management of distribution systems and pioneering ways of streamlining the flow of product inventories.⁸ In 1913, the Piggly Wiggly grocery chain in Memphis, Tennessee, introduced the first self-service grocery chain format, which later drew the attention of Michael Cullen, who worked at the Kroger Grocery and Baking Company in Ohio. Cullen left Kroger in 1930 to create his own grocery store chain in New York that took the self-service idea developed by Piggly Wiggly and added another ingredient to the mix: large-format store layouts. Cullen's creation, the King Kullen grocery store, was really the nation's first supermarket, and it emerged at a time when there was vibrant debate in the United States as to whether such big stores were good for society. In the 1920s and 1930s, "chain store wars" rocked the nation, as local merchants fought the expansion of department stores, mail-order companies, and supermarkets in states across America. Politicians sympathetic to local merchants sponsored anti-chain legislation that was designed to halt the growth of the big firms.⁹

But this resistance was ultimately unsuccessful at blocking the growth of department stores, supermarkets, and other big retail outlets. Especially in the lean years of the Great Depression, many Americans came to rely on the cheap goods these firms could provide. By the 1940s, it was clear that the new, large-format, self-service stores were here to stay.

Thus, when Detroit-born Kmart, Minneapolis-based Target, and Arkansas-founded Walmart first launched their big box retail stores in the 1960s, these firms built on innovations launched by Piggly Wiggly, King Kullen, and others that came before. But what made these firms different was the scale at which they operated. The stores often exceeded 50,000 square feet in size and offered the most barebones self-serve retail environments. Kmart and Target focused mainly on large suburban and urban markets. In contrast, Walmart sited its stores in towns of 5,000 people or less, which many people thought was ludicrous. How could a firm like Walmart expect to make profits with such big stores in such tiny markets? Walmart proved that big box stores could generate tremendous cash flow in even the most rural American markets, which ensured that in the second half of the twentieth century, big box stores redefined America's cityscapes and suburbs and became fixtures of the American countryside as well.¹⁰

Big box retailers also transformed cyberspace, serving as models for e-commerce companies like Amazon.com that emerged in the internet boom of the 1990s. When Jeff Bezos began building his business, he traveled to Bentonville, Arkansas, and courted the distribution wizards that had made Walmart one of the largest corporations in the world. Bezos also read Sam Walton's biography and built Amazon by drawing on the logistics techniques first perfected by the big box firm from Arkansas. It's convenient to label our modern marketplace the "Amazon" economy, but the truth is that Bezos's billions would not have been possible but for a logistics revolution led by a big box store based in the Ozarks.¹¹

As a century of evolution in retail suggests, the history of big box stores encompasses a wide range of characters and questions. The business-environment nexus in particular has been a thriving point of inquiry in recent years, and it is this cross-pollination of subfields we call attention to in this volume. Calls to combine the approaches

of business and environmental history more than twenty years ago yielded scores of dissertations, monographs, and edited volumes that engaged with the fruitful overlap between the fields.¹² Retail stores, especially big boxes, have remained largely out of sight from this work, however.¹³ Part of this omission is about time: recent retail histories often end their time line at the point when the big box came of age. For instance, an excellent recent tracing of the geography of American retail takes us from Main Street to the mall but stops short of the sprawling parking lots and brightly lit aisles of Walmart or Target.¹⁴ This volume uses the questions and tools of the business-environment nexus honed over the last two decades to interrogate the rise of the world's largest retailers.

The question of how capitalism reshaped ecosystems was foundational to the founding of the field of environmental history in the 1970s, and more recent works have added new layers to that question. What is the relationship between government policy and green development? How have corporations addressed past violence inflicted on bodies and landscapes? How skeptical or hopeful should we be about narratives of corporate environmentalism? Using the tools of environmental history, we will examine a quintessential business history topic: big box stores and their development in the last fifty years. We frame this discussion by invoking “big” and “box” to interrogate what these institutions mean for their relationships to the natural world. How have these mega-stores changed ecologies, including not only physical spaces and things but also a cultural ecology of how people think about the natural world?

When scanning a parking lot at Walmart or passing Target-branded semi-trucks on the highway, it becomes clear that big box stores have a major impact on the landscape. Locally, corporate headquarters dictate the construction of new superstores by paving land into parking lots and buildings. Manufacturers use petroleum millions of years in the making, refined and shaped into bobbles and gizmos in a factory before being shipped across the globe. We will look at both smokestacks and coat racks to assess this bigness at various scales. We ask what the impact of stores has been on the environment, in terms of both production and shipping and the local impact of individual retail

stores. We explore how these stores relate to surrounding landscapes. Importantly, we assess how corporations have attempted to address environmental problems from the inside. The pollution trails of corporate giants are vast, but so—potentially—are the solutions they have to offer. To assess the environmental impact of stores, we trace their ecological footprint and their relationship to local environments, from brownfields to wetlands.

The connections between big box retail and the environment continue inside the stores themselves. One recent phenomenon is that some of these stores have moved away from cold, utilitarian aesthetics to become destination shopping experiences and now play a pseudo-educational role regarding the American landscape, serving as vehicles of information. The big boxes have become didactic spaces. Taking chain stores in the outdoor industry as a case study, we examine how outdoor retailers began to present visions of the environments in which Americans play. The in-store environment offered technological wonders, cheap goods, and narratives about the American past and future. Stores achieved this through product arrangement, decoration, building displays, and even museums to teach some of these lessons. The buildings have evolved as well. From the bright lights and plain metal shelving of the early days of Walmart, some specialty retailers now create lavish in-store environments that send messages about the products and ideas they want to promote. Far from plain boxes, these stores created new wrappings, even making the move from highway-adjacent fields of concrete to renovations of historic buildings closer to downtowns. The shape of the box and its contents, just like its size, provide a cultural education that also relates to the environment in particular. The emotional appeal of the big box has expanded from predictable contentment to being stimulating and even thrilling.

Of course, an examination of the physical building, its surroundings, and the retail experience it provides inside can hardly be neatly divided from the questions of scale and impact mentioned above. After all, from the 1970s to the 1990s, these retailers' store size grew from 50,000 to over 90,000 square feet. Many supercenters of the twenty-first century top 150,000 square feet. Quite simply, the boxes got bigger. But careful attention to the evolution of the shopping experience

and the building aesthetics and architecture reveals that we need to unpack this box more fully.

Many of these trends of the bigger box are not specifically American. Walmart and Target, born in Arkansas and Minnesota, respectively, are joined by counterparts overseas such as Carrefour, Tesco, and Ikea, although these international examples lie beyond the scope of this volume. With our balance between global and local impacts, we show how the American big box model is both an environmental and a cultural phenomenon.

In an America shaped by leisure, consumption, and mobility, big box stores reached a new kind of market. Like the suburban shopping malls that preceded them, big box stores became powerful during the rise of the Sunbelt. Within the walls of the big box retailer, individual consumers engaged with global commodities markets and supply chains, even as businesses prescribed their own ideas about resources, leisure, waste, and consumption. When Americans bought groceries, office supplies, and sporting goods, they encountered the same patterns of selling first established in big ways by corporate giants Walmart, Kmart, and Target. Mass distribution is one pattern. Other characteristics include self-service, a patriarchal organization of work, and an implicit celebration of free enterprise.

These stores, characterized by their large size—at least 50,000 square feet in the early iterations, or roughly the size of a football field—and variety of products, mark a turning point in American retail history. In the early twentieth century, Main Street and department stores set the standard for shopping in urban areas. After World War II, suburban shopping malls dominated. While none of these earlier models have disappeared entirely, big box stores such as Walmart and Target set a new standard for how Americans shopped and made shoppers think anew about their relationship with the natural world.

Like the Main Streets and malls before them, these austere institutions filled with everything from toilet paper to televisions highlight—or at times hide—the broader networks in which American shoppers in Everytown, USA, are embedded. These retail outlets touch almost every person in the country and connect individuals to a global economy. Yet only sometimes do customers recognize the impacts of the

physical buildings and the products in them on a broader landscape. This volume intends to build conversations between the worlds of business and environmental history and will present the opportunity to begin thinking through how big box stores permeate the ways we understand our relationships to the natural world.

The three sections of this volume highlight how an environmental history approach helps us understand the rise and impact of the big box store on American life.

Section I, “Welcome, Walmart Customers,” kicks off with Bart Elmore’s chapter, “Walmart World: The Ecological Roots of the Largest Corporation on Earth.” Elmore’s piece explores the ecological roots of the world’s largest corporation, Walmart. Elmore shows how the unique commercial ecology of the Arkansas Ozarks gave rise to Sam Walton’s business and explores how the firm’s rural roots shaped its global environmental footprint.

Section II, “Cleanup, Aisle 2: Managing Environmental Impact,” considers how big box stores have impacted the natural world and shaped environmental regulations. Johnathan Williams begins the section with a study of Target distribution centers in “‘Taking Paradise’: A Target Distribution Center and a Battle in the Midwest.” While grassroots resistance to big box store expansion became a common feature in the 1990s, Williams looks at a rare example of resistance against a distribution center in rural Wisconsin. The case study reveals how larger national forces converged on the small community and how, despite opponents raising sound arguments to classify distribution centers as a major polluting source, the massive buildings essential to modern retail proliferated in the following years while escaping environmental regulations. Aaron Van Neste takes this volume to the oceans in “Walmart’s Ocean: Certifications, Catch Shares, and the Ripple Effects of Corporate Governance on Marine Environments.” Van Neste examines how Walmart has profoundly shaped ocean environments. Through corporate environmental governance—including mandating sustainability certifications and helping concentrate fishing rights in the hands of large capital firms—Walmart alters which fish are caught, who catches them, and who profits. In doing so, Walmart and its

partners have redefined marine sustainability to be compatible with cheap commodity extraction and global supply chains, erasing the harm these changes (and Walmart's larger business model) have done to marine ecosystems and fishing communities. Laura J. Martin continues exploring the themes of regulation and environmental change in her chapter "‘Building Some Big-Ass Wetlands’: Big Box Retail and the Rise of Mitigation Banking." In the 1980s, federal regulations facilitated the conversion of wetlands to Walmarts through a process known as "compensatory mitigation." Wetland mitigation banking uncoupled sites of environmental damage from sites of environmental remediation, reconfiguring wetlands and retail districts at a national scale while paving the way conceptually and procedurally for carbon offsetting and other ecosystem services markets.

In Section III, "Attention Shoppers: Creating Consumer Mind-Sets," we head into the stores themselves to interrogate how consumers experience big box stores. In "Boxing in the Outdoors: Cabela's, REI, and the Growth of Specialty Retailers," Rachel S. Gross examines the outdoor industry's deep ambivalence toward the big box label. As retail stores selling camping and hiking equipment expanded from local specialty shops to national chains, Gross argues, the underlying debate in the industry was about just *who* the outdoors was for. Sherri Sheu ends section III with a study of how a retailer helped reify political conservatism and race through retail in "Bass Pro Shops: Selling Conservative Conservation." Through its retail stores, catalogs, and museums, Bass Pro Shops created spaces that fostered a particular relationship between nature and consumers.

Historian Shane Hamilton takes us home in the conclusion, helping us to see how these various stories about big box stores speak to one another. In addition, he offers ways to think about new research in the space of big box environmental history.

This volume is not—and should not be—the final word on big box stores in business and environmental history. We intend it as an invitation and an invocation for further discussions and research. This volume serves as a sampling of varied approaches and case studies for the future. In the years ahead, scholars may find much to cover at other locations, such as warehouse stores and non-American retailers

such as Carrefour. Internet shopping, whose footprint has rapidly changed shopping patterns among consumers, must also be studied in greater depth.

In many parts of the United States, deserted shopping centers dot the landscape—a parallel, ghostly universe of the costs of big box retail. Empty boxes and faded signs with exposed wiring show the remains of once bustling spaces, now silent but for the occasional scurry of rats and the cawing of birds. These are landscapes capital has mined and stripped of value, as surely as any abandoned quarry. Around the country, workers hobble with backs and spirits broken by years of labor at rock-bottom wages and the emotional toil of liaising between the vaunted global supply chain and the individual consumer. Social safety nets strain at supporting full-time workers paid so little that the costs of basic standards such as food and medicine are met by the government and not the paycheck. As we wrote this volume in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic, it became clear that the linkages between the big box and the environment are not timeless but fragile and friable.

Our call in this volume is for historians and others to pay attention to these landscapes of our everyday lives and to unearth the myriad ways nature links to the big box. For as surely as the big box has reshaped our relationship to consumer goods, the rise of the big box has remade our relationships with nature itself.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart*; Lichtenstein, *The Retail Revolution*; Strasser, “Woolworth to Wal-Mart”; Strasser, *Satisfaction Guaranteed*; Tedlow, *New and Improved*; Vance and Scott, *Wal-Mart*.
2. For the connections between Woolworth and big box stores that emerged in the 1960s, see, for example, Strasser, “Woolworth to Wal-Mart.” For a sweeping history of American retail and mass marketing, see Tedlow, *New and Improved*.
3. Strasser, “Woolworth to Wal-Mart,” 33.
4. Strasser, *Satisfaction Guaranteed*, 211.
5. Vance and Scott, *Wal-Mart*, 18; Tedlow, *New and Improved*, 293; Strasser, *Satisfaction Guaranteed*, 204.
6. Strasser, “Woolworth to Wal-Mart,” 39–43; Strasser, *Satisfaction Guaranteed*, 212–213.
7. Tedlow, *New and Improved*, 11, 259–274; Strasser, *Satisfaction Guaranteed*, 204, 206.

8. Ortega, *In Sam We Trust*, 38; Vance and Scott, *Wal-Mart*, 19; Strasser, "Woolworth to Wal-Mart," 45; Tedlow, *New and Improved*, 182, 189, 214; Thain and Bradley, *Store Wars*, 7–8.
9. Strasser, "Woolworth to Wal-Mart," 51; Vance and Scott, *Wal-Mart*, 22; Ortega, *In Sam We Trust*, 35, 43, 214; Thain and Bradley, *Store Wars*, 8; Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart*, 18, 64, 68; Hamilton, *Supermarket USA*, 12–14. Hamilton's book offers an excellent examination of how Cold War politics shaped the rise of supermarkets in the United States.
10. Vance and Scott, *Wal-Mart*, 14; Adams, "Making the New Shop Floor," 214; Strasser, "Woolworth to Wal-Mart," 52.
11. Stone, *The Everything Store*, 60–62, 72–75.
12. Rosen, "The Business-Environment Connection"; Rosen and Sellers, "The Nature of the Firm"; Berghoff and Rome, *Green Capitalism*; Elmore, *Citizen Coke*.
13. Stobart and Howard, *The Routledge Companion to the History of Retailing*; see especially Stephen Halebsky, "Big-Box Stores," 216–226, in that volume.
14. Howard, *From Main Street to Mall*.

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